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The normative practitioner

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The normative practitioner

Adding value to organisational learning in
education NGOs in Uganda

Colophon

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university of
 groningen

The normative practitioner

Adding value to organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda

PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the
 University of Groningen
 on the authority of the
 Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga
 and in accordance with
 the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on

Thursday 4 November 2021 at 16.15 hours

by

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Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no individual can embrace it.

African proverb

For wisdom is far more valuable than rubies. Nothing you desire can compare with it.

Proverbs 8:11 NLT

Preface

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered mass reflection on the viability of our global economic and political models. Citizens, scholars, vloggers, activists, and policy makers were taking stock of what the neoliberal, turbo-capitalist global economy and society have achieved and for whom, as well as which problems it created. Confronted with a pandemic that took away certainties and paused day-to-day routines, people started dreaming of alternative futures that are greener, juster, and richer – looking beyond material wealth. Like many educationists, however, these questions were on my mind long before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the field of lifelong learning for development, my colleagues and I had often wondered: is this it? Is this all we can do for lifelong learners in Uganda?

When these questions came up early in my career a seed was planted for the PhD research that is documented in this book. My first official job was a leadership position in an education NGO in Uganda. With the little project management experience gained during a traineeship in South Sudan and a load of optimism about the potential of my 'book knowledge', I was very keen to jump into this new role and deliver education programmes to youth and adults in one of the most underserved regions of the country. However, the more I learned about the project, the more questions I had: during the three years of project implementation, why had the work plan never been adjusted to fit the realities on the ground? Why was there no conversation between the implementing partners and the multi-lateral donor about budget changes needed even though the grant contract allowed for these changes? I realised that the insights we gained on the ground did not 'travel up'. We simply continued ticking boxes following a project plan that had been set three years back. After ten months on the job and trying to lobby for change, I felt like I had reached a dead end. I was not able to act on the knowledge my team and I had accumulated, nor could I integrate innovations that had emerged in the field of lifelong learning. I also questioned why I, a white young woman with minimum relevant work experience, had been given this leadership role. Frustrated that we were not able to do the 'right thing' I left the role.

Through the various jobs I have held since, I realised that the limitations I had initially experienced were not unique to that particular NGO or to me as a person. Rather, what emerged were recurring patterns of NGOs' inability to act on knowledge or deepen

knowledge amidst the numerous conflicting demands and prescriptive funding requirements. These limitations frustrated me intensely, because like Edwards (1997) I had assumed that learning what works and what does not is a *sine qua non* for development organisations. It was perplexing that highly competent people and organisations were not always acting based on the knowledge available inside and outside of the organisation.

In 2015, I actively started engaging other practitioners from education NGOs in Uganda in investigating this problem. We quickly agreed that the way we learn can be improved. Practitioners shared how information does not always translate into learning, knowledge does not always move from the field to decision-makers, and there was a fear of making mistakes, among other issues. Within the context of my PhD research, a communicative space developed in which practitioners and scholars explored 'the way things are done'. Instead of looking at our programmes and their outcomes, we looked inside our organisations to establish how organisational learning is shaped and whether this could help explain gaps in lifelong learning programming. Our exploration turned into a five-year journey which involved several education NGOs in Uganda, as well as communities on the 'receiving end' of NGO programmes.

Our collaborative inquiry resulted in an intimate account of how practitioners collect, analyse and use information and knowledge from and with their learners and community actors in order to provide relevant lifelong learning interventions. We experimented with double-loop learning methods to explore how organisational learning could contribute to transforming not only the way things are done, but also why things are done a certain way. These critical reflections also revealed the limitations of dominant paradigms in the lifelong learning for development sector and the way aid and international development is organised. This work illustrates how these grand narratives interplay with the day-to-day decisions practitioners make when facilitating learning experiences for communities in Uganda. The work also contributes towards a contextualised theory of double-loop learning for education NGOs, but most of all aims at providing practical insights that inspire transformative change.

As I finalise this thesis, the world is imagining how we can #BuildBackBetter after the COVID-19 pandemic. Ideas are emerging to ensure social and economic systems are more resilient and more capable of securing the well-being of all citizens. Education and learning systems are also the subject of a bold re-imagining. When schools and education institutions re-open, should we go back to the 'old ways'? Or should we look for systems

that serve all and bring about more holistic learning outcomes to equip people to live together? At its core, organisational learning is about the capability to re-imagine what education and learning interventions could achieve and to identify action strategies to build better futures. In this thesis, I present normative perspectives on education and learning, as well as ambitions to be critically adaptive; I hope these will guide educationists, managers, funders, and community leaders on how to shape spaces to reflect continuously and critically and to identify what is right in the particular context they work in for all learners, including those at-risk.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Learning our way out

In Uganda, the promise of lifelong learning is yet to be fulfilled for many. Looking at educational research in Uganda, structural inequalities and mismatches are evident, showing that especially girls and people from rural areas and lower socio-economic backgrounds remain excluded from meaningful lifelong learning opportunities. There is a persistent bias towards university education and white-collar jobs, steering many away from other educational pathways such as vocational education and training (Blaak, Openjuru, & Zeelen, 2013; Van der Linden, 2016; Zeelen, Van der Linden, Nampota, & Ngabirano, 2010). This broken promise denies a majority of people from accessing and creating opportunities for livelihood development, meaningful civic participation and pursuing other life projects. Authors have associated these gaps with the effects of colonialism, neoliberal underpinnings of educational policies and funding mechanisms, as well as the youth bulge that is constraining the education system (Asiimwe, 2018; National Population Council, 2017; Tukundane, 2014; Tukundane & Blaak, 2010; Tumuheki, 2017). Organisations facilitating lifelong learning interventions are confronted with a complex task in a resource-constrained context where learning needs are vast, diverse and emergent, and there exists a tension between the different rationales for education (McGrath, 2018; Van der Linden, 2016). It is against this background that contemporary development approaches emphasise the need to be adaptive, responsive and flexible in order to solve the complex problems of the 21st century (Chambers, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013, 2014; Ramalingam, Laric, & Primrose, 2014). This adaptive development perspective points to the organisational lens as a promising angle towards improving lifelong learning and other development interventions. In this light, organisations are urged to find the 'best fit' rather than 'best practice', putting them to task to fine-tune and tailor solutions to local contexts and emerging developments (Ramalingam et al., 2014). Thus, to overcome barriers hindering large groups of Ugandans from accessing lifelong learning opportunities, organisations must generate knowledge about the complex realities, test innovations and tailor

activities to local conditions – and do so continuously and critically of underlying (power) structures.

The assumption that organisations should actively generate knowledge and respond to a changing environment is not new, it was a major argument contributing to the popularity of the concepts of the learning organisation and organisational learning popular in the 1990s (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2012). Despite its popularity, the idea of the learning organisation does not seem to have fulfilled its promise in the corporate sector, nor in the development sector (Edwards, 1997; Pedler & Hsu, 2019). Trends that have inhibited learning in other sectors have also affected development organisations. Research suggests that NGOs tend to act risk-averse due to competitive funding mechanisms that promote short-term targets and limited overheads (Edwards, 1997; Ramalingam, 2013). Rather than a transformational force, organisational learning has become a tool for accountability, putting local knowledge at the periphery and reinforcing blind spots as critical insights about the complexity of development do not 'travel up' (Chambers, 2010; Ebrahim, 2005; Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013). Therefore, if organisational learning is to become a means towards meaningful lifelong learning interventions, we must explore the paradigms underlying organisational learning practices critically to ensure they do not make organisations better at doing the wrong thing. To make a contribution to opening and improving lifelong learning interventions in Uganda, this research uses an organisational learning lens to explore how education NGOs could contextualise their interventions in a responsive and adaptive, yet critical manner. In particular, the potential of double-loop learning is explored as a critical learning project (Argyris, 1999; Bokeno, 2003). This concept was introduced by Argyris (1982) to differentiate whether organisational learning is more or less transformative. He stated that single-loop learning results in changes to action strategies and double-loop learning leads to change in underlying beliefs, assumptions or goals (Argyris, 1982, 1999, 2002, 2010). This research is further embedded in a critical analysis of the epistemology of practice shaping the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda. Field theory is utilised as a theoretical framework to examine the relational nature of social reality and the connection between agency and structure (Friedman, 2011; Friedman & Sykes, 2014; Lapidot-Lefler et al., 2015).

Using Participatory Action Research (PAR), I collaborated with several education NGOs based in Uganda to investigate their organisational learning practices. Our focus

was on how they could open up the space for adaptive programme delivery involving community actors. Specific objectives were:

- Analyse internal and external factors and actors shaping organisational learning in Ugandan education NGOs
- Contribute to a contextual theory on double-loop learning in education NGOs in Uganda
- Identify and test possible solutions to promote organisational learning in Ugandan education NGOs
- Facilitate a community of inquiry through a Participatory Action Research approach

The research questions were formulated collaboratively based on a participatory diagnosis of organisational learning issues in these organisations. In the first stage of this PAR, members critiqued their own learning practice for not being fully critical, it did not allow them to establish the actual needs and levers for change benefiting their learners and communities. Participants further problematised that those learning spaces occurring in the border area, where the NGO meets the target communities, do not always lead to authentic interaction as they noted several power dynamics and socially desirable narratives as well as limitations within their organisations to enact new insights. The main research question was formulated as: How can education NGOs in Uganda create space for double-loop learning involving external actors towards meaningful lifelong learning¹ for development interventions? Sub-questions were:

- a) Which organisational learning mechanisms are currently applied in education NGOs in Uganda?
- b) What are enabling and limiting factors for double-loop learning in education NGOs in Uganda?
- c) Who are the community actors involved and affected by the work of education NGOs?

¹ In the co-creation session, the use of lifelong learning vis a vis non-formal education was debated. I originally took up 'non-formal education' but later rephrased this closer to the participants' preference for 'lifelong learning' in this thesis.

4 The Normative Practitioner

- d) What spaces are currently created for double-loop learning involving community actors and how does this influence lifelong learning programmes?
- e) How can education NGOs in Uganda widen the space for double-loop learning to increase the relevance of lifelong learning programmes?

Three main assumptions underlie the work presented in this thesis:

- a) Lifelong learning interventions need to be flexible and tailored to their complex realities.
- b) Organisational learning has the potential to help NGOs design and deliver relevant lifelong learning initiatives in a contextualised manner.
- c) The practice and actions of NGO practitioners, and thus how they learn, is influenced by micro, meso and macro level dynamics (across time and place), largely dependent on the field of international development cooperation.

As such, this research can be positioned at the intersection between the fields of lifelong learning for human development, international development cooperation and organisational learning. Chapter 2 presents a more detailed portrait of the field of lifelong learning for development at this intersection and what this requires of organisational learning practices.

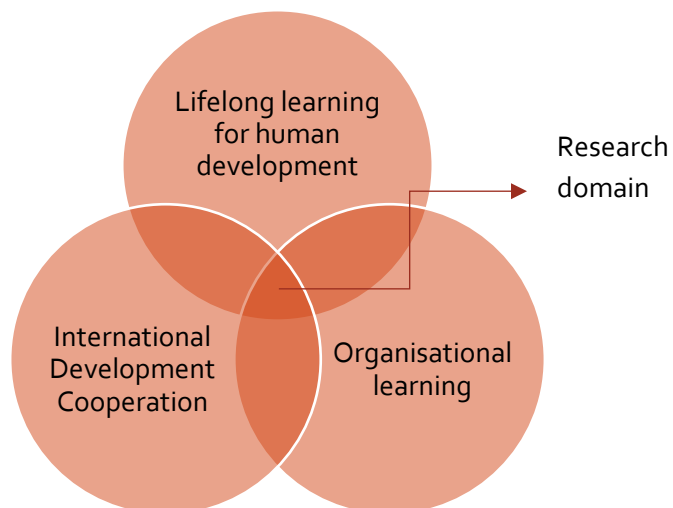


Figure 1 Positioning the research domain

1.2 Research approach

The phenomenon being studied - organisational learning - is a social and political process. Therefore, PAR was chosen to ensure epistemological consistency with the research topic. It offered an approach to develop a practical form of knowledge that does not only help solve problems but also identifies what is 'good' in a given situation (*phronesis*) (Carr & Kemmis, 2005; Eikeland, 2008). 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, Preece, Slagter, & Zeelen, 2008; Boog, Slagter, Jacobs-Moonen, & Meijering, 2005; McTaggart, Nixon, & Kemmis, 2017). 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 1). First, the orientation stage engaged NGO practitioners in informal conversations and dialogue to open the communicative space and establish an issue of legitimate concern. This resulted in the idea to run a multiple-case study to investigate current organisational learning practices which was executed in stage 2. 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 needs of their learners². To facilitate a deeper investigation and testing of organisational learning innovations, we identified one of the seven NGOs that were profiled in the diagnosis stage as a rich case study. Stages 3 to 5 were executed with this NGO, of which members became co-researchers in the process. After an orientation stage, a programme team was selected for a series of PAR cycles. This process was co-

² In this thesis I refer to the participants of lifelong learning interventions as 'learners', those participating in organisational learning will not be referred to as 'learners' but 'practitioners' or 'organisational members'.

designed during monthly PAR meetings, in which we set goals and inquiry questions, chose methodology, discussed findings, and brainstormed innovations. The research was closed in 2019 with team and management workshops.

Table 1 The research stages

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 practitioners' perceptions of meaningful organisational learning and broker connections towards a community of practice.	Identifying examples of and barriers to meaningful organisational learning, identify research direction.	Map organisational field and opportunities for mutual learning.	Deeper investigation and testing of organisational learning innovations.	Synthesise and disseminate findings.

1.3 Outline of the thesis

The thesis consists of a combination of chapters, (published) papers and intermezzos. This introduction framed the overall research and positioned it at the intersection of lifelong learning, development cooperation and human development. Chapter 2, a theoretical chapter, portrays the lifelong learning for development sector as a technically and normatively complex field and explores which epistemology of practice would be fitting to guide organisations and practitioners in navigating this field. Rooted in these epistemological premises, the theory and practice of organisational learning in development organisations are discussed as well as the gaps therein and the conceptual frameworks that guided our investigation. In particular, field theory is proposed as a framework to resolve blind spots in the mainstream organisational learning literature. Chapter 3 presents the methodology; it details the research stages and methods and

illustrates how adopting field theoretical lenses to study double-loop learning introduced layers-of-depth and layers-of-width to this PAR. These layers added a phronetic angle to this research – leading not only to the identification of practical solutions, but also a critical understanding of the value- and power-laden context of lifelong learning for development and how underlying structures shape agency in education NGOs. Intermezzo 1 presents an account of the lead co-researcher from the case study NGO, detailing her experiences during this collaborative research process.

The next four chapters and intermezzos present the findings of the research. Chapter 4 presents a mapping of organisational learning practices in seven education NGOs in Uganda. The findings illustrate the broad variety of organisational learning mechanisms and present the voices of NGO practitioners regarding the influence of organisational culture, leadership, policy and structure. Intermezzo 2 presents a map of the actor ecosystem surrounding the case study NGO and a self-assessment of their collective learning activities that engage these actors. Chapter 5, written as a journal article, illustrates a move from the internal perspective to the external. It presents experiences and findings of a participatory study of community perceptions of NGOs and their collective learning efforts. A detailed account of the interaction between community members, NGOs and local government is presented in the light of field theory to illustrate the role of positionality, power and emergence. Intermezzo 3 is written by a volunteer of the case study programme, describing the tricky position he was in ‘on the edges’ of partners – creating a sense of feeling stuck between the community actors and the organisation. Chapter 6, also written as a journal article, illustrates how the double-loop learning methodology helped the team of NGO staff and volunteers to overcome dilemmas faced in delivering sexual reproductive health and rights education. Chapter 7 presents a high-level reflection on the value of double-loop learning in education NGOs. Reconstructing two learning trajectories that occurred in this PAR – one that led to double-loop learning and one that did not – this chapter presents ingredients and conditions to ensure double-loop learning ‘sticks’ in education NGOs. Considering the meaning generated by practitioners in this PAR I reflect on the viability of double-loop learning as a critical learning practice, and its potential to achieve sustainable lifelong learning goals. Finally, chapter 8 presents the conclusion and discussion, harvesting the main theoretical and practical contributions of this research as well as putting forth new questions and issues uncovered in the process.

2. Theoretical perspectives on organisational learning as a normative practice

Uganda's field of lifelong learning for development is uniquely shaped by the historical interplay between local and international actors, the country's neoliberal political-economic climate and the multitude of initiatives aiming to complement formal education programmes. NGO practitioners operating in this field are exposed to varying levels of technical and normative complexity that require not only technical rational knowledge and solutions, but also the capability to continuously generate practical solutions that help uncover and achieve what is 'right' in a given situation. This chapter elaborates the context of the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda, and positions organisational learning as a strategy to strengthen the normative practice of education NGOs. By doing so I clarify the epistemological underpinnings of this research. Finally, I revisit field theory as a theoretical framework to analyse how and whether organisational learning leads to transformative social change for participants of lifelong learning and beyond.

2.1 Introduction: swamps and high grounds

Aid and development efforts have been scrutinised increasingly since the start of the 21st Century. Scholars and practitioners have criticised the ineffective evaluation of development programmes (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012), the way in which development is narrowly defined in economic terms (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2001), but also the persistent structural power imbalances driving the north-south cooperation (Moyo, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001). The lifelong learning for development domain has not been excluded from this critique; large groups of learners remain excluded from learning opportunities and there is a persistent mismatch between learning interventions and the requirements for a sustainable global society (McGrath, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001; Van der Linden, 2016; Zeelen et al., 2010). The solution to making 'aid work better' has been sought in various domains – such as reconceptualising development itself,

advocating for new forms of financing, shifting programmatic emphasis, etcetera. One of the most influential responses to rising critiques has been the 'accountability wave', which introduced a series of tools and policies to recipients of aid funding to increase transparency and efficiency in the development sector (Chambers, 2010; Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013). NGOs make up a majority of these recipients and took up the task to use Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) systems, logical frameworks and results-based management methods to account not only for their spending, but also the effectiveness of their activities. In line with the same logic is the evidence-based movement that rapidly gained terrain in the development sector. Evidence gathered through rigorous scientific methodology, in particular, randomised controlled trials, would help create transparency and accountability, but also guide decision-makers on which approaches and programmes could more effectively achieve goals (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012). This promise gained traction and influenced major donors to include 'evidence' as one of the prerequisites for funding (Chambers, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013).

In theory, the expectation that organisations should justify their actions could trigger increased efforts for learning and innovation. However, in practice, accountability and learning seem irreconcilable. Trends of rationalisation and fragmentation of work have limited the discretionary space of NGO practitioners rather than enriching it. As Guijt (2010) states: "planning processes lock down plans into watertight projections of change which dictate the spirit of development as a controllable process in mutually reinforcing cycles." (p. 279). If the accountability efforts are not helping development organisations to learn what to do, when and where, then what would? In this chapter, I argue that to support a more ethical and productive practice we need to review the epistemology of this practice and seek to create learning and professionalisation processes that are rooted in the same assumption grounds. This argument is not new; Schön (1983) for example has proposed 'reflection-in-action' as an alternative epistemology of practice. He problematised that the orthodox paradigm - 'technical rationality' - cannot help practitioners deal with the complexities faced in the 'swampy lowlands'.

This dilemma of 'rigour or relevance' arises more acutely in some areas of practice than in others. In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique, and there is a swampy lowland where situations

are confusing 'messes' incapable of technical solution. The difficulty is that the problems of the high ground, however great their technical interest, are often relatively unimportant to clients or to the larger society, while in the swamp are the problems of the greatest human concern. Shall the practitioner stay on the high, hard ground where he can practice rigorously, as he understands rigour, but where he is constrained to deal with problems of relatively little social importance? Or shall he descend to the swamp where he can engage the most important and challenging problems if he is willing to forsake technical rigour? (Schön, 1983, p. 42)

In more recent years, the same argument has been used in the development sector as well, especially by those who suggest complexity thinking can advance development practice. Authors like Ramalingam (2013), Ramalingam et al. (2014) and Chambers (2010) problematise that the positivist paradigm that assumes linear causality can be problematic in cases where practitioners and organisations deal with complex problems.

The typical approach to such wicked problems is to act as if they can be simplified, or tamed, and then made amenable to quick fixes. But the evidence in a number of areas – from disease to urbanisation, from conflict to climate change, from economic growth to governance reforms – suggests that the underlying problems remain untamed. This forces programmes to adapt and change, and adds to both managerial challenges and costs. The mismatch between the reality of the problems faced and many of the assumptions that guide analysis and action poses a considerable challenge to the sector. (Ramalingam et al., 2014, p. 2)

In his book *Aid on the Edge of Chaos*, Ramalingam (2013) cautions development actors to be critical about the type of knowledge guiding their decisions, since knowledge is not only power but power also conveys knowledge. He observes trends showing that actors and organisations in the development sector adopt organisational models and knowledge hierarchies from the Global North. This critique on euro-centric epistemological frameworks dominating institutions in Africa is problematised by Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) and Odora Hoppers (2001) as well. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) advocates for epistemic freedom: “the right to think, theorise, interpret the world, develop own methodologies and write from where one is located and unencumbered by Eurocentrism” (p.3). Along the same lines, Kunneman (2016) urges us to grapple not only

with technical complexity, but also ethical and epistemological complexity that exists in today's work organisations. These normative forms of complexity point towards tensions practitioners will experience between personal advancement versus the common good and values versus rationality (Kunneman, 2016). Bringing it back to the field of education and learning, McGrath, Ramsarup, et al. (2020) equally problematise that:

[...] the world is not made up of atomised individuals guided by the hidden hand of the free market. Rather, reality is heavily structured by the operations of political economies that have emerged out of contestations and compromises in specific historical and geographical spaces. As a result, specific forms of labour markets and education and training systems have arisen, characterised in profound ways by inequalities and exclusions. These specific forms profoundly influence individuals' and communities' views about the value of different forms of learning and working. However, they do not fully define what individuals dream, think and do. (p. 480)

Using these theoretical lenses, in the next section, I portray the research domain; the work of education NGOs in the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda. I describe the topography of this field and what the swampy lowlands look like for NGO practitioners. Finally, I explore which type of organisational learning approach could help practitioners in navigating their field and which epistemology of practice should guide us when reviewing these processes of knowledge generation and usage. To get a handle on the 'complexity' of embracing complexity, I present field theory as an overarching framework that can help us connect the role of (epistemological) paradigms, agency, and structure when analysing social change.

2.2 The practice of lifelong learning for development

Though lifelong learning is often associated with adult education, in Uganda a strong emphasis is placed on youth. The trends of educational exclusion and the young demographic of the Ugandan population has activated numerous actors to introduce education and learning programmes that could build youths' capabilities to sustain livelihoods, exert their civic and sexual and reproductive health rights and support the sustainable development of the nation (Ahaibwe & Mbowe, 2014; Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016). It would be beyond the scope of this research to sketch the entire lifelong learning landscape here. But to understand the historical spaces and political

economy that made the field what it is today I focus on a few parameters that in my view affect the learning and knowledge demands NGOs face.

2.2.1 Demarcating the research domain

Lifelong learning for development in this study refers to the field at the intersection of international development cooperation and lifelong learning. It is an arbitrary field; not all actors in this field will use the term lifelong learning for development to describe their specialisation. However, in this research, I use it to refer to the body of knowledge and practice related to programming learning and education interventions aimed at achieving development goals. Although the term 'education for development' is more mainstream, I have chosen to expand our focus to lifelong learning to draw attention to formal, informal and non-formal learning services as well as a variety of learning domains. Especially when we look at the work of NGOs we shall predominantly deal with education and learning programmes that do not fit neatly within the mainstream education system.

Within the field of lifelong learning for development, we could identify a multitude of actors such as funding organisations, NGOs, policy makers, regulators, educators, learners, parents and communities. Service delivery in this field is commonly associated with not-for-profit organisations, but with trends of privatisation and social entrepreneurship, there seems to be an increasing number of organisations aiming to achieve social outcomes whilst earning profit. This PhD research focuses particularly on the work of NGOs. Although there are other providers, NGOs form an interesting type of organisation to study for two reasons. First, in the non-formal education sector in Uganda, NGOs are the predominant service providers (Blaak, 2010). Whereas there is no clear data on the number of education NGOs operating in Uganda, the NGO directory states that 182 NGOs operate in the domain of education (NGO Forum Uganda, n.d.). However, with a broader lens of lifelong learning, this number could be much higher, for example, if we include agricultural extension work or skilling efforts for youth. Secondly, NGOs take up an intriguing position in relation to other actors in the field; they often act as intermediaries between multiple actors (Anderson & Patterson, 2017; Lample, 2018). Some NGOs directly implement education and learning activities whereas others focus on advocacy or technical assistance to government partners or other education organisations. In both cases, they seem to take up an intermediary position between funders, learners, governments, their board etcetera. While exploring the field below, I

illustrate the unique challenges and learning requirements resulting from this positionality. Overall, by focusing on organisational learning in education NGOs we can generate practical insights for the main group of lifelong learning service providers, while critically analysing the macro dynamics to better understand processes of contextualisation in lifelong learning for development, and how NGOs may support other institutions and actors in the field.

2.2.2 A background to complexity thinking

The portrait I sketch of the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda is inspired by complexity thinking. This school of thought assumes that the problems we witness in the field today are rooted in dynamic systems set up by the actions of various actors at local and international levels. Consequently, there is no single or simple cause to explain how learning opportunities are shaped today and why they remain unavailable to large groups in Uganda. These problems have emerged due to interconnected forces and dynamics which are not a game of chance, but are influenced by power structures (Kunneman, 2016; McGrath, Ramsarup, et al., 2020; Odora Hoppers, 2001; Ramalingam, 2013). Complexity thinking is gaining terrain as an alternative epistemological paradigm to the conventional evidence-based movement, as it urges practitioners and researchers to avoid the simplification of development processes into linear models of change. As Byrne (1998) states: “The issue is that in the social world, and in much of reality including biological reality, causation is complex. Outcomes are determined not by single causes but by multiple causes, and these causes may, and usually do, interact in a non-additive fashion. In other words, the combined effect is not necessarily the sum of the separate effects. It may be greater or less, because factors can reinforce or cancel out each other in non-linear ways.” (p. 26). Rooted in this thinking, Ramalingam (2013) proposes a new perspective to aid that embraces the complexity of the realities we work in and moves away from linear modes of thinking in conventional aid perspectives (see table 2).

Table 2 Conventional and alternative development approaches

	Conventional aid thinking	New perspectives
Systems and problems	Systems and problems are closed, static, linear systems; reductionist- parts would reveal the whole.	Systems are open, dynamic, non-linear systems far from equilibrium. Macro patterns emerge from micro behaviours and interactions.

Human agency	Individuals use rational deduction; behaviour and action can be specified from top-down; perfect knowledge of future outcomes is possible.	Heterogeneous agents that mix deductive/inductive decisions, are subject to errors and biases, and which learn, adapt, self-organise and co-evolve over time.
Social structures	Formal relations between actors are most important; relationships are ahistorical and can be designed; actors can be treated as independent and atomised.	Interpersonal relationships and interactions matter in form of culture, ties, values, beliefs, peers. Informal matters, relationships are path-dependent and historical.
The nature of change	Change is direct result of actions; proportional, additive and predictable; can hold things constant; simple cause and effect.	Change is non-linear, unpredictable, with phase transitions.

Source: Ramalingam, 2013, p. 142 adapted from Beinhocker (2006)

Neely (2015) underlines that such complexity thinking should not only happen at the meso and macro levels, but especially at the community level. "Beneficial outcomes are only built at the community level through hundreds of unique situation-dependent interactions, choices, collaborations, and competitions that create patterns that form the emergent structures that help communities move away from poverty." (p. 797). Complexity thinkers do not propose all problems are complex, but as Ramalingam (2013) suggests, the tools and concepts of complexity thinking are vital in enabling development practitioners and policy makers to see beyond the immediate horizon.

Acknowledging rather than denying complexity can make us feel more at home in our world. It can help us understand the world better than we do, in some key areas where our understanding, ways of thinking and ways of acting are lacking. It can help us ask the right kinds of questions, it can serve as an engine for intuition, and it can help us critically engage with the answers. It can point to possibilities we might not have otherwise considered, ideas we may have discarded, approaches that could be more relevant and appropriate. However, complexity research, like all scientific endeavours, may be limited in

what it can tell us about what to do about the implications it generates.
(Ramalingam, 2013, pp. 361-362)

To sketch a portrait of the complexities of the field of lifelong learning for development, in the next section, I first use a historical lens. As McGrath, Ramsarup, et al. (2020) underline, we must understand the field of education as a result of contestations and compromises. Therefore, I do not only try to describe the field as it is today but also highlight important turning points in history that seem to have influenced the way lifelong learning is shaped. I do want to recognise that education NGOs take on varying approaches towards diverse goals within the field of lifelong learning for development. So, not all NGOs necessarily address complex problems. But the field in which they operate does form a complex system that makes it impossible to predict how change will occur. I support this argument by illustrating features that make the field a technically and normatively complex system. Technical complexity refers to the level of difficulty and certainty with which a task or strategy can be executed to achieve a particular goal (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Most functions in lifelong learning programming can be executed through more or less systematic and predictable processes - but I explore which aspects of the work of education NGOs could be complex rather than complicated. Additionally, technical complexity is not the only type of complexity NGO practitioners have to deal with. There are dynamics at play of conflicting interests, power forces and meaning-creating processes (Kunneman, 2005, 2016; McGrath, Ramsarup, et al., 2020; Odora Hoppers, 2001). Development itself is a value-laden process and thus any intervention aiming at facilitating it will have to grapple with ethical choices (Sen, 2001). In light of this, Kunneman (2016) stresses the importance of acknowledging ethical and epistemological complexity inherent to any field of work (summarised here as normative complexity). After presenting the topography of the field of lifelong learning for development, I present premises about which type of knowledge practitioners and organisations would benefit from navigating not only the hard high grounds, but especially the swampy lowlands.

2.2.3 History and context

From traditional lifelong learning practices to foreign interference

Traditionally, learning and education experiences in Uganda were facilitated by communities to prepare members for family roles, various vocations as well as spiritual growth. Whereas organised and written forms of education have been reported in places

like Timbuktu as early as the 11th Century, education in Uganda was predominantly informal and took place through oral methods such as legends, songs, poetry, proverbs and apprenticeships (Nafukho, Otunga, & Amutabi, 2005; Okech, 2004; Preece & Haynes, 2011). A variety of members of society were included in the learning process, from young to old, with a special phase demarcated for adolescents who went through initiation rites as they transitioned to adulthood (Preece & Haynes, 2011). Educators were foremost mothers, but also traditional intellectuals such as chiefs, storytellers and priests (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). In various accounts of education and learning in early African societies, authors underline the interdependence of members and the spiritual interconnectedness that formed key elements of the learning experience (Preece & Haynes, 2011). Others, however, caution that African traditional society was not inclusive to all. Irakoze (2020), for example, encourages scholars and policy makers to use a lens of intersectionality to understand whether indeed everyone was included through processes of socialisation, including education, in patriarchal traditional African communities. She argues that particularly women were disadvantaged and that this theme often remains underlooked because of the reliance on oral history – which was predominantly narrated by men. In addition, we can also question to what extent disabled people were able to participate in education and learning activities.

Ssekamwa (1997) explains that foreign forms of education were introduced to the Buganda kingdom in 1877 by Christian missionaries from Britain and France who founded schools (though at first without buildings) to convert people and instil morals. At the same time, Arab traders started teaching Ugandans how to read the Koran. Initially, both forms of education were embraced by the Baganda and their royal leader, Kabaka Muteesa I. However, this support dwindled due to several political, spiritual and inter-religious conflicts. Through their increased political engagement, the Protestant and Catholic missionaries continued to safeguard their provision of education albeit amidst conflicts between the two groups. In 1892, the British East Africa Company started pressing its agenda and mediated between Protestants and Catholics to ensure a unified approach which ultimately supported the establishment of Uganda as a British Protectorate in 1894 (Ssekamwa, 1997). After Britain took control over Uganda, the church remained the primary provider of education; after all, its teaching of a Euro-centred mode of civilisation supported the British mission to exert control over the people of Uganda. In the 1920s, however, for various political and financial reasons, the British Government claimed control over the education system. They established the

Education Department in 1925 and formalised the education system that created a pathway from primary to junior and senior secondary, to technical schools or university (Makerere University). Though implementation was still largely left to missionary groups, besides teaching morals, education widened its objectives to equip Ugandans to support agriculture and manufacturing (Ssekamwa, 1997).

Parallel to this formal system, which only catered for a few, indigenous education continued to equip Ugandans with the skills and knowledge required in traditional society (Ssekamwa, 1997, Openjuru, 2010). However, these latter forms of education became marginalised by the epistemicide the colonial project created (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001). Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) warns that colonialism was deceitful: “it presents itself as bringing about civilisation, progress and development [while] it subverts and destroys the order it found”. (p.17). Education and learning were redefined and shifted from the informal, interconnected, spiritual and intergenerational forms of learning to a Euro-centred epistemology enforced through a formalised education system. Divinity took on a Christian cloak, traditional intellectuals were shunned and replaced by the ‘formally educated’ who were hand-picked by the colonialists, and learning content was selected and prioritised based on a colonial development agenda (Ssekamwa, 1997). Besides redefining hierarchies of knowledge, the British education system also introduced a new class system that turned formal education into a ladder for growth within the new colonial order. In the lifelong trajectory of learning, this continued formalisation of the system created a divide between the educated and uneducated. The colonial administrators provided significant benefits to the academically educated, in terms of jobs and power over others, therefore to achieve University education became an aspiration to many Ugandans (Openjuru, 2010). Lample (2018) and Ssekamwa (1997) note that a large part of the struggles against the British education policy was in fact to gain access to this ‘capital’ rather than to overthrow the policy. Though this weakened resistance should be seen in the broader context of the oppressive structures used and the epistemicide itself (Mamdani, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001).

An era of nationalisation and neoliberal reform

When Uganda regained independence in 1962, education was considered a key driver for socio-economic development and the growth of the ‘new’ country. Despite initial plans to Africanise education, these efforts did not concretise and the formal education system

in Uganda (including its structure and curriculum) mimic the colonial British system to date (Lample, 2018). The government's education strategies since independence show a continuous effort to increase access to primary education as well as to develop professionals to fill up the immense gaps in the labour force (McGrath, Ramsarup, et al., 2020; Openjuru, 2010). However, these strategies rarely led to their intended impact. Under-financing as well as periods of war stalled the delivery of education. Critique emerged on the curriculum too. Education committees, such as the Castle Committee in the 1960s and the Educational Policy Review Commission in the 1990s, argued that the school curriculum did not prepare Ugandans for productive livelihoods (Ssekamwa, 1997). However, their proposals to 'vocalionalise' the curriculum did not materialise. This was in part due to the public preference for academic education – following the hierarchy of knowledge introduced by the colonial project (Openjuru, 2010). Instead, programmes were introduced to offer universal access to primary and secondary education: the Universal Primary Education (UPE) policy in 1996 and Universal Post-Primary Education and Training (UPPET) programme in 2007 (Delta Partnership, 2013; Openjuru, 2010).

Regaining independence did not mean the discontinuation of international interference in the education sector. First of all, the inherited British colonial education model continued to exert foreign epistemologies. In addition, the significant financial constraints Uganda faced created a dependency on foreign donors whose financial aid came with terms and conditions. During the 1980s for example, loans from the IMF and World Bank came alongside the pressure to reduce public investment in education. The logic of return on investment led to a prioritisation of primary education (McGrath, 2018; McGrath, Ramsarup, et al., 2020; Odora Hoppers, 2001; Wiegatz, Martiniello, & Greco, 2018). Moreover, as Wiegatz et al. (2018) claim, the neoliberal agenda of IMF and World Bank have greatly contributed to commodification, privatisation and a class order that is still visible in Uganda's education policy and practice. These authors, however, also underline that neoliberalism is not simply forced on Ugandan policy makers, the Ugandan elite utilises the capitalist model to advance personal gain. This pattern of governance has positioned education as a political-economic tool, demonstrated for example with the Universal Primary Education policy, which was introduced as a political project framed as a poverty reduction strategy during a campaign period, without rigorous planning and resource mobilisation (Asiimwe, 2018; Delta Partnership, 2013). As a result, lifelong learning remains narrowly defined as advancement in a formal system and its outcomes are measured in terms of economic results. What should be noted,

however, is that this neoliberal influence in the lifelong learning sector spans beyond Uganda. The international dynamics of financing and 'policy travel' created a discrepancy in the lifelong learning agenda between the global South and the global North. For example, in the South the emphasis was on access to basic education whereas the North upheld all domains of lifelong learning cited by Delors: learning to be, learning to do, learning to know and learning to live together (Preece & Haynes, 2011).

Isomorphism is also noticeable in recent curriculum reforms in Uganda. 'Learner-centred pedagogy', for example, is a commonly accepted norm in recent education policies in Uganda, and the 'competency-based education' approach has inspired the recent lower secondary reform (The Independent, 2020) and the National Teacher Policy (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2017). Travelling policies and practices may not necessarily be bad, but if we follow McGrath, Ramsarup, et al. (2020) assumption that reality is a result of compromises and contestations in geographical and historical sites, we should be critical about who benefits and who loses. Odora Hoppers (2001) warns that the architecture behind the international education for development field drives neoliberal norms of materialism and positions human beings as human resources, and in the education discourse that prioritises economic outcomes, there is a power imbalance favouring the global North. "Given the evidence of the strategies used in mind and space control within the North-South partnerships, 'acculturation', long associated with the goals of education, does begin to lose its innocent definition as the 'inflow of knowledge that is external to an individual society'." (Odora Hoppers, 2001, p. 34). Therefore, the processes through which these strategies are incorporated in local education efforts should be scrutinised.

Neoliberalism is not the only force observed in the international lifelong learning for development discourse, but other emerging theories and paradigms did not gain much terrain in the Ugandan education landscape. For example, popular education, which takes on the Freirean approach to learning to deconstruct oppressive power structures, has not had much influence in the African context (Hoppers, 2006). Nor has the human capability development approach (HCDA) inspired by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. This approach draws attention to the aspirations of individuals and what they value in light of development. It further positions individuals as agents of development – not as recipients of development (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 2001). In light of a more critical view on education and development, this capability approach has been

expanded to more explicitly make power and structure a subject of analysis. This Critical Capability Approach (CCA) views this interplay between structure and agency from a multi-dimensional perspective. For example, from a feminist perspective, problematising barriers women face. The CCA also views work as a broad concept, and in line with the HCDA, pursues learning outcomes that are valued by individuals. An important concept mediating what individuals pursue and find meaningful are aspirations – which the CCA positions as continuous life projects (McGrath, Powell, Alla-Mensah, Hilal, & Suart, 2020). This CCA approach goes beyond enabling individuals to act as agents of development, but carefully analyses the power dynamics through which one person or group may interfere with the aspirations of others. The latter include the ‘others’ of the future, especially in terms of ecological sustainability (McGrath, 2018; McGrath, Powell, et al., 2020). This CCA has not had a significant impact on the Ugandan lifelong learning discourse. Though it may seem like an abstract affair, the processes of colonialization, isomorphism, and financial aid have contributed greatly to certain gaps and challenges in the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda as I illustrate below.

Status quo: lifelong learning for development in Uganda today

Besides the historical perspective and brief analysis of the national and international discourse in the field, I discuss three major shortcomings in the field of lifelong learning in Uganda today. These shortcomings have clear roots in the historical developments of the field. Though the portrait below is not a comprehensive picture, it does illustrate important gaps NGOs seek to address.

1. *An excluded majority*: The formalisation of education (both in systems and in minds) introduced a new order, dividing people into categories of the educated and the uneducated. According to this ‘order’, Uganda faces an excluded majority given the realities of access to education (Blaak, 2010; Tumuheki, 2017; Zeelen et al., 2010). Despite successes in increasing access to primary and secondary education in Uganda, completion rates, as well as transition rates, remain low. For example, in 2016, only 59 per cent of pupils transitioned from primary to secondary school (UNESCO, 2020) and of those participating in lower secondary education only 26 per cent completed the full cycle (World Bank, 2020). There are deep inequalities disadvantaging girls, children in rural areas and poor households – not just in terms of access, but also in terms of quality of education (UNESCO, 2020). Alternative education forms are scattered and sparse and

are not in reach of the majority of Ugandans. The learning environment at home is also characterised by inequality between high income and low-income households. Only 38 per cent of children in poor households have a stimulating home environment compared to 74 per cent of the richest households (UNESCO, 2020). In a UNESCO column, Zeelen (2020) recently wrote that a new at-risk group has evolved: the educated youth. He hints at the low level of learning outcomes generated through the formal education systems in Uganda and other countries. Several studies have problematised the quality and relevance of the formal education system fuelled by teacher and student absenteeism, misaligned curricula and ill-equipped schools (Tumuheki, 2017; Zeelen, 2020; Zeelen et al., 2010). Youth themselves also expressed that the education they received insufficiently equipped them to succeed in the labour market (MasterCard Foundation, 2016).

2. *Neoliberal agenda:* As described earlier, Uganda – like other countries – followed the political-economic perspectives introduced through funding frameworks. The education policy discourse follows a neoliberal agenda that focuses on driving industrialisation and the commercialisation of agriculture towards economic growth. The sciences and technology are prioritised, as these domains seem to support this enterprise more effectively. The role of education is to equip the youth bulge with the skills to fit into the modernised industrial economy (National Planning Authority, 2013). Though Uganda's Vision 2040 also mentions education as a means to strengthen human rights, the human capital narrative dominates. Higher education is positioned as a mechanism to prepare a skilled workforce that can deliver monetary returns (Asiimwe, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001). Though, as hinted at above it is debatable whether tertiary education has successfully transformed into institutions producing human capital. Not only has the curriculum been influenced by a neoliberal logic, but the delivery mechanisms have also followed the assumption that the market can deliver services more effectively than the Government. The 2020 Global Monitoring Report states that Uganda has not met the funding for education benchmarks at any point in the last ten years. As a result, to complement the services delivered by the Government, private actors have started schools – comprising approximately double the number of government schools (Ministry of Education and Sports, 2021). The liberalisation of the market further deepened the inequalities in terms of access and quality education – those who can afford it access better quality education (Asiimwe, 2018). As proposed by the authors referenced earlier, it may be necessary to expand the educational discourse and funding frameworks

beyond neoliberalism if we want to ensure that lifelong learning interventions support transformative and sustainable development.

3. *Reliance on non-state education providers:* It may seem that this section so far has focused on education rather than lifelong learning. This is not because I want to narrow the definition of lifelong learning to focus on formal education structures, but rather because there is little data on non-formal and informal education outcomes in Uganda (UNESCO, 2020). This may generally be a result of Government and public focus on formal education, especially foundational education. As mentioned, the implementation of formal education has relied heavily on non-state actors – from the colonial period up to now. For non-formal education, this is even more the case. The Government White Paper (1992) only mentions a few forms of non-formal education that are officially recognised; most are forms of alternative basic education or accelerated learning programmes. Non-formal education spans various domains from health education to citizenship education, guidance and counselling and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) (Blaak, 2010). Though the White Paper proposed instituting a council for Adult and Non-Formal Education, such a body was never established, leaving a large portion of the lifelong learning interventions run unregulated. However, NGOs – which play an important role in the delivery of non-formal education – are regulated by the NGO Act of 2017. This is a generic act for any NGO operations and does not give clear standards in regards to the quality of education and learning activities. The NGO Act does stipulate that all activities carried out by NGOs should be approved by the District Non-Governmental Monitoring Committee (DNMC) (Government of Uganda, 2017). Even though the Act does not identify which activities of NGOs could lead to an offence, several authors have stressed that these measures may lead to intimidation of NGOs promoting human rights (Jjuuko, 2016). This ambiguous regulatory framework leaves non-state providers free on the one hand to organise lifelong learning in any form, but on the other hand, allows the government to scrutinise programmes without a clear standards framework. In addition, a survey conducted in 2003 illustrates that most NGOs in Uganda are small and are unspecialised. The ability of these small NGOs to learn and develop expertise towards solving a specific complex problem is limited by the high transactional costs of setting up small projects towards rapidly changing thematic areas (Barr, Fafchamps, & Owens, 2003). Barr et al. (2003) further note that there is a prominent level of duplication in efforts of small NGOs, signalling a lack of coordination.

2.2.4 *The plight of practitioners in education NGOs*

As mentioned earlier, this thesis focuses on NGOs as providers of lifelong learning for development. In light of the historical perspective described above, NGOs cannot be detached from international influence – if not through funding, through processes of isomorphism. What this positionality implies will depend on the type of NGO, their mission, funding mechanisms and many other factors. So, what I describe in this section is not a uniform scenario that all NGO practitioners will have to deal with. However, I reflect on elements of their core business and the topography it presents for practitioners to navigate. I particularly explore the complex and messy lowlands in this field – both in terms of technical and normative complexity. By highlighting these facets of practice, I present a foundation for epistemological models for organisational learning that are consistent with the type of problems practitioners face.

The technical complexity of lifelong learning for development

a) Learning needs are emerging, diverse and multifaceted: Learners targeted by education NGOs are often those who face unique barriers to education. Consequentially, the learning needs NGOs are aiming to address are often multifaceted. In the case of early school leavers, for example, one has to take into account multi-dimensional causes such as negative experiences in education, early pregnancy, poverty, orphanhood etcetera (Blaak, 2010; Blaak et al., 2013; Momo, Cabus, De Witte, & Groot, 2019). Besides learning needs being multi-dimensional, these needs and aspirations evolve as learners progress in their learning trajectory (McGrath, Ramsarup, et al., 2020; Van der Linden, 2016). When working outside of the formal education system, NGOs will likely face a highly heterogeneous group of learners, demanding a level of tailoring to serve all (Blaak, 2010; Waniha, 2008). This poses the technically complex task of tailoring, diversification and adaptation to cater for these diverse learning needs.

b) Rapid change and relevance of learning content: The task to align education programmes to diverse needs and aspirations is further complicated through the rapidly changing society. The world is changing fast, challenging lifelong learning practitioners to continuously scan their domain for advances and tailor this to learning content and activities suitable for the learning abilities of their learners (Nafukho, Wawire, & Lam, 2011; Van der Linden, 2016). As a result, lifelong learning practitioners are faced with a level of uncertainty whether the content they deliver is relevant to their learners by the time they are ready to apply it (be it in the world of work, family life, health, etcetera).

For those NGOs that seek to co-create knowledge in a more Freirean manner, this balancing act of combining grassroots knowledge with external advancements is even more complex. In this case, following Freire's curricular ambitions of creating consciousness about problematic power structures changes the role of facilitators significantly (Freire, 2005).

c) Change relies on multiple actors: To enhance and sustain learning outcomes, lifelong learning programmes should be executed in collaboration with multiple actors. Indabawa and Mpofu (2006), for example, recommend collaborating with government agencies, civil society, organised youth and adult groups to ensure alignment and avoid opposition or passive resistance. Communities can also provide role models, facilitators and venues for learning (Waniha, 2008). Furthermore, by involving the community, education NGOs can pave a way for learners to receive opportunities to apply newly acquired competencies (Tukundane & Blaak, 2010). This demands a diverse skill set of practitioners in education NGOs to broker and maintain relationships with these actors.

d) Knowledge on what works or does not work is contextual: Even though there is a large body of knowledge that provides methods and solutions for many of the issues raised here, in the field of education and learning there is no universal solution for effective lifelong learning interventions. Knowledge about what works and what does not work is highly contextual; depending on the geographical area, time period, target population, stakeholder relationships, historical background and learning goal. Berliner (2002) emphasises, "doing science and implementing scientific findings are so difficult in education because humans in schools are embedded in complex and changing networks of social interaction, participants have variable power to affect each other and the ordinary events of life." (p.19). This is why quality lifelong learning interventions rely strongly on the embodied knowledge of educators (Van der Linden, 2016). Learning how to be a good educator (or education designer or planner) is largely through experience, whereby research and standards can feed the actions of practitioners but these always need to be tailored to the context.

e) Self-inflicted complexity in NGOs: The above issues are not unique to NGO providers of lifelong learning; practitioners in public or private organisations would equally need to navigate these technical complexities. However, practitioners working in NGOs face another layer of complexity in their work due to their dependence on funding that is often restricted and short-term. There is an increasing sense of competitiveness driving NGOs

to commit to ambitious goals in the face of scarcity. “Development and humanitarian organisations are notorious for the imbalance that is almost inevitably found between aspirations, capabilities, and resources (human, financial, and temporal).” (Roper & Pettit, 2002, p. 14). On top of delivering a meaningful learning intervention, this poses the challenge of being resourceful and fulfilling the accountability needs, often requiring additional staff dedicated to fundraising and grants management processes.

Normative complexity of lifelong learning for development

Though complex in its own way, finding solutions to the above-stated problems is more or less achievable through experimentation – seeing what works. However, there is another layer of complexity interwoven in most of the issues above: the ethical and epistemological complexity of lifelong learning for development. Below I illustrate five aspects of the normative dilemma in the field of lifelong learning for development, which are undeniably intertwined with the technical aspects of the work.

a) Multiple rationales for education: Whereas education has been widely accepted as a catalyst for development, what is ‘right’ or ‘good’ education is highly contested. While reflecting on the history of education for development and the evolving discourse, McGrath (2018) concludes that “Education is motivated by multiple rationales even within the individual” and that “it is wrong to think that there can be a single way of understanding the relationship between education and development.” (p.228). Yet, by making decisions about content, assessment criteria, pedagogy, scheduling, etcetera, practitioners in education NGOs enact particular rationales. Using the case of sexuality education, De Haas (2017) illustrates that educators develop action strategies through a complex interplay of cultural schemas that often display conflicting facets of the professional identity, students citizenship and well-being, values and discourses. NGO practitioners may also not be governed by a single educational philosophy and approach. Though we may have observed that neoliberalism underlies educational policies this may not guide practitioners per se, yet, NGOs may have to align their narrative to such dominant paradigms. This means that NGO practitioners take up a significant normative responsibility, shaping and reinforcing rationales of education and learning through their actions. Odora Hoppers (2009) emphasises the importance of acknowledging one is confronted by a normative situation: “One of the most important moral differences between people is between those who miss, and those who see various moral features of situations confronting them. Perception is the setting for action and salience, i.e., the

adequacy of agent's consciousness concerning the situation, or ability to grasp the contours of a problem prior to being called upon to exercise that agency. It is key in this." (p. 612).

b) Globalisation and Africanisation: As illustrated above, the lifelong learning for development discourse in Uganda (and beyond) has largely taken on a neoliberal agenda, fuelled mostly by globalisation and international development narratives. On the other hand, there is a call for an Africanisation of education – or what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) calls epistemic freedom. Critical of the power dynamics underlying globalisation, some scholars are calling for a radical re-thinking of education and learning, rooted in an African epistemology (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001, 2009; Odora Hoppers & Sandgren, 2014; Preece & Haynes, 2011). This is not to say that globalisation and Africanisation are mutually exclusive. As Preece and Haynes (2011) argue: “in spite of the influence of international aid agencies for pursuing narrow, neoliberal, market-focused goals for lifelong learning, it should be possible for countries in the South to articulate a coherent vision for their own learning societies that embrace indigenous philosophical world views, but in a way that also recognizes the hybrid nature of the contemporary world.” (p.1). Odora Hoppers (2009) emphasises that the push for the inclusion of more diverse knowledges is naturally dialogical and breaks the hierarchy of knowledge – something she argues is difficult because of the absence of ‘bicultural experts at the epistemological level’. In line with the previous point, we could ask: are NGO practitioners aware of the epistemological models they shape or reproduce through their interventions?

c) Interdependent agency: As mentioned before, lifelong learning for development requires practitioners to foster collaboration between various actors. It is important to note that these relationships are embedded in an intricate web of power relations. Several authors have noted that the Northern institutions take up positions of power and through funding requirements, policy discourse and other mechanisms reinforce their power positions. But as Odora Hoppers (2009) notes: “Africans are not passive victims of cultural imperialism although they have been subject to coercive interventions, but active agents in negotiating unfamiliar, strange and alien cultural terrain.” (p. 605). Speaking about agency in the field of public health, Anderson and Patterson (2017) propose the term ‘dependent agency’ to underline that beneficiaries are not powerless recipients of aid programmes, but enact agency in their relationship with programme

implementers and donors, adjusting their actions to obtain access to services and resources that can benefit their personal goals. Given the multi-dimensional nature of power in aid and development, however, I would slightly reframe this term to ‘interdependent agency’ because the dependency factor is not one-directional. Without learners participating in programmes, NGOs do not have the legitimacy to exist and without implementing NGOs, funders would not be able to achieve their goals. In this architecture, every actor plays a role and can choose to utilise facets of the mainstream narrative to obtain access to resources and opportunities to act. As a result, fostering collaboration comes along with an intricate power game, played by all actors. A game in which an isomorphism of language occurs – possibly hiding authentic interests – and a game in which power is distributed unevenly and yet no one is powerless. NGO practitioners are not powerless agents who simply follow what the donor is requesting them to do, nor are learners powerless in simply following the programme set by an NGO and their educators.

d) Epistemology is power-laden: The uneven distribution of power in the development context is to a large extent exerted through the epistemologies underlying this practice. For the development sector in general, Ramalingam (2013) problematises that aid organisations tend to carry knowledge as a commodity into the context in which programmes are implemented and ignore grassroots knowledge. Odora Hoppers (2001) refers to Foucault, who connects meaning and power – knowledge is constructed through processes and systems of power and the emerging discourses shape the perceived realms of possibilities. If NGO practitioners are not aware of these normative and power-laden facets of their work, which is likely given the embodied and tacit nature of their knowledge in-action – they may reproduce processes that marginalise diverse knowledges. This unawareness would be further fuelled by the Tayloristic organisational forms of education and learning, where thinking and doing is separated and practitioners have limited space to use their professional discretion (Ramalingam, 2013; Van der Linden, 2016). Evidence-based programming is put forward as the golden standard reinforced by the demand for rigorous evidence as a condition for funding (Ramalingam, 2013). Not only is the professional’s knowledge cramped, but, as illustrated earlier, epistemological frameworks from the global North have greatly shaped what learning experiences will be offered and prioritised. Some scholars have argued that a level of Euro-centricity has also been internalised amongst local leaders and communities demanding a more formalised, theoretical form of education (Indabawa & Mpofu, 2006;

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) or pursuing local political interests (Wiegratz et al., 2018). The power interwoven into these epistemologies does not only play out at the higher levels of policies and programme designs; micro-power dynamics also exist in the direct learning context and play a role in shaping and reinforcing epistemology. Mainstream education in Uganda is characterised by authoritative relationships between teachers and learners and bias towards theory and teacher-centred pedagogy (National Curriculum Development Centre, 2012) – a model that is often carried forward to non-formal learning settings (Blaak, 2010). How do practitioners prioritise knowledge to guide them in their day-to-day work? And do they perceive knowledge as a potential tool to deconstruct problematic power structures?

e) Accountability paradox: Amidst the intricate web of power dynamics that shape the ethical and epistemological choices of practitioners in education NGOs lies the question: who do NGOs account to for their actions? Whereas it would be expected that NGOs are accountable to the people they serve, there seems to exist an ‘upward’ accountability to donors rather than mutual accountability with communities (Ebrahim, 2005; Guijt, 2010). Ebrahim (2005) hints at the need to prioritise which accountabilities organisations commit to, and he suggests that an internal accountability to the mission is necessary to reflect accountability to the communities the NGO serves. Though both Guijt (2010) and Ebrahim (2005) suggest that too much accountability can hinder organisations from learning how to achieve their mission, there is an undeniable need to secure funding and fulfil donor demands. As illustrated earlier this results in technical complexity but also in an ethical dilemma: who deserves accountability from an NGO in regards to their actions?

2.2.5 Recapitulation

As expected, because of the lifelong and life-wide nature of lifelong learning for development, the field is diverse and populated by a large number of actors. It may have been an impossible undertaking to sketch what this field and practice looks like. However, I hope that the features described above have illustrated the ‘swampy lowlands’ which, according to Schön (1983), are common in many fields. Again, the reason why I started by sketching this portrait is to illustrate that the problems education NGOs seek to solve – such as access to education, building capabilities, transition to decent work etcetera – do not exist in a vacuum. Lifelong learning is not a neutral undertaking, it involves choices and decisions that practitioners make as active agents,

where the learners, too, are agents in this process. These agents operate in a field that is characterised by power structures and dominant narratives which influence the perceived possibilities for action. Therefore, to deliver more relevant lifelong learning interventions that achieve not just narrow goals for economic gain, but also foster cultural diversity, ecological sustainability, gender equality, etcetera, we may need to set up these NGOs to act more responsively towards the complexities they are grappling with – both the technical and the normative complexities. Perhaps NGOs can then become the agents of change they have always claimed to be, rather than agents stuck in a web of conflicting narratives dominated by powerful actors from the North.

2.3 Advancing the field of lifelong learning for development: an epistemology of practice

In this section, I present considerations for an alternative epistemology of practice to position NGOs towards more transformative action in the field of lifelong learning for development. Following the logic of Schön (1983), Chambers (2010), Ramalingam (2014), and Kunneman (2016), amongst others, to achieve more meaningful work and organisations we need to address complexity at the epistemological level of our practice. This follows the assumption that the nature of the problem at hand should dictate which type of knowledge and professional environment one needs to solve these problems. These authors problematise that policy, academia and management practices are often incongruent with the type of knowledge practitioners require to solve complex dilemmas. Below I revisit their suggestions for a more fitting epistemology of practice and explore what this implies for education NGOs who seek to more effectively navigate the complexity presented by the field of lifelong learning for development.

2.3.1 *Rigour and relevance*

The incongruence between the nature of work and the epistemology underlying structures and policies in the workplace is rooted in a narrow definition of rigour. In the 1980s, Schön (1983) pointed out that in a bid for professionalisation in various sectors, a scientific approach was introduced to practice. This approach assumed that solutions to our practical problems could be created through a systematic, rational approach of experimentation to establish causality between interventions and their results – ideally, these experiments were executed by scientists. He problematised that this epistemological approach of ‘technical rationality’ did not match the nature of the

practice – particularly the ‘lowlands’ – and may thus be considered rigorous but not relevant. In the 21st century, a similar critique resounds in the development sector; there is still a mismatch between the standards used to assess good solutions or valid knowledge and the type of solutions and knowledge required in a complex context. What Schön refers to as the technical rationality paradigm, Chambers (2010) refers to as the ‘paradigm of things’ or the ‘neo-Newtonian practice’. In this paradigm, a logic of linearity is utilised to establish causality which is then translated into best practices, manuals, routines, quality control mechanisms, etcetera. This paradigm has greatly influenced the practice of development organisations, which can be observed in artefacts such as logical frameworks or results-based management systems (Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013). And like Schön, authors like Chambers and Ramalingam highlight that this paradigm does not suffice in the development sector because it limits the discretionary space of practitioners. They risk losing sight of relevance by focusing on jumping bureaucratic hoops in the name of rigour: “Good practice and performance, so often dependent on intangible personal and inter-personal unmeasurables like commitment, honesty, energy and trust, were undermined and sapped by the spreading culture in much development of targets, indicators and measurement, and the implicit and even explicit orientation of ‘if it can’t be measured, it won’t happen.’” (Chambers, 2010, pp. 13-14).

Though they problematise the paradigms of ‘technical rationality’, ‘paradigm of things’ or ‘neo-Newtonian practice’, none of the authors cited above suggest that rigour is not important – rather, they want to work towards an epistemology of practice where rigour does not distract us from relevance. Kunneman (2016) stresses that: “In our times we urgently need ethically more complex narratives, encouraging us to venture into ‘swampy lowlands’ where we are both ‘out of control’ and can experience deeper forms of ‘civic meaning’, both on the level of personal and of professional relations.” (p.430). Odora Hoppers (2009) also underlines the need to depart from the reductionism of the Euro-centred scientific approaches and build fraternities between types of knowledge – she similarly calls for policy and ways of organising that embrace pluralism. Van der Laan (2006) also critiques the scientific approaches that have led to fragmentation in social work. He argues that the whole is more than the sum of parts and practitioners and clients/learners and managers need to be granted discretionary space to utilise their knowledge – both explicit and tacit – to find solutions. This approach refocuses accountability away from the funder to “showing how learning has led to adaptation or ‘response-ability’”. Capacity development is then about increasing abilities to gather the

right information in order to make sense of what is going on in real time and adjust accordingly.” (Guijt, 2010, p. 287). The organisation’s legitimacy is not in achieving targets, but in the success it has in helping its target population (Van der Laan, 2006).

What could relevant rigour look like? Snowden and Boone (2007) propose a ‘probe, sense, respond’ approach in complex situations. A basic premise behind this approach is that in complex situations you can only truly understand patterns in hindsight. So, instead of locking in long-term goals and pathways, practitioners create environments to experiment allowing them to observe patterns and trends (Snowden & Boone, 2007). Such approaches should not be mistaken for the scientific approach to experimentation or input-output, behaviouristic logics of change. Van der Laan (2006) warns that becoming too methodical externalises thinking from acting – yet these two cannot be separated. It is thus important to clarify that ‘sensing’ is not based on data or targets only, but it follows the practitioner’s second nature, their feeling and sensing, which does not always happen consciously, but can be identified through cases. By presenting ‘reflection-in-action’ as an alternative epistemology of practice, Schön (1983) underlines that practitioners know-in-action; through experience, observing the results and being open to surprise, reframing problem situations and eventually being able to explain patterns (knowledge-in-action). “This dilemma of rigour or relevance may be dissolved if we can develop an epistemology of practice which places technical problem solving within a broader context of reflective inquiry, shows how reflection-in-action may be rigorous in its own right, and links the art of practice in uncertainty and uniqueness to the art of the scientist’s art of research” (Schön, 1983, p. 69). Chambers (2010) calls his alternative paradigm ‘participatory adaptive pluralism’ in which he emphasises that for the development practice multiple knowledges should be included and that this should be acquired through a diverse set of tools and methods. Rooted in the same principles, Van der Laan (2006) and Sennett (2008) call for an approach of craftsmanship as a means for re-professionalisation – embracing the tacit as well as normative nature of work. They point out similar professional roles as Kunneman (2016) underlines in his concept of normative professionalisation – which equips practitioners to deal with the ethical and epistemological ambiguity of their work.

Underlying these alternative epistemologies is the assumption that relevant knowledge to guide development interventions is contextual and tentative. Thus, if we are looking for an epistemological paradigm that is in tune with the complex nature of

the practice, rigour needs to be re-defined as a measure that warrants relevance in context and time. Rigour in paradigms such as 'reflection-in-action' or 'adaptive pluralism' involves a continuous process of testing, observing and re-adjusting, a process that can happen 'in-action', in a participatory manner and using a variety of methods. The type of rigour that is relevant in this alternative epistemology of practice is context-dependent, but also value-laden and inter-subjective. What is further emerging is that the logic of knowledge cannot be separated from the processes of knowing, and thus from the knowers. Next, I explore how we should view knowledge if it is no longer an external, abstract object that sits outside of the knowers.

2.3.2 *What is knowledge and who are the knowers*

The Newtonian knowledge paradigms are often associated with what Aristotle termed 'episteme', a type of knowledge that presents a theory of causality, derived from deduction (Eikeland, 2008; Flyvbjerg, 2001). By aspiring relevance for practitioners, our attention is drawn to other types of knowledge too, for example, 'techne' and 'phronesis'. Flyvbjerg (2001) describes techne as technical know-how and phronesis as practical knowledge and practical ethics – knowing what is right. Eikeland (2008) goes a step further in his explanation of Aristotle's knowledge typology. He distinguishes knowledge that is acquired from perception and knowledge that is acquired from practice. However, he notes that both categories of knowledge include elements of theory. Episteme can be a theory that is an explanation of external objects (theôrêsis) or a theory that is insight gathered from practice through deliberation and dialogue (theôria). The latter is a form of practical knowledge, a theory of practice. In his review of practical knowledge, Eikeland (2008) further differentiates technical and ethical aspects of knowledge. Practical knowledge could for example enable a practitioner to act competently (praxis or khrêsis), to manipulate a situation for personal gain (poiêsis) or to act justly, in a virtuous manner (phronesis). If we follow Kunneman (2016), who calls for more ethically complex narratives, this embeddedness of ethics in practical knowledge becomes relevant. Phronesis, especially, seems to be the type of knowledge that can enable practitioners to navigate normatively complex situations (though poiêsis helps to navigate these situations too, the results may not necessarily be just or sustainable).

Eikeland (2008) suggests that phronesis – how to act 'rightly' – is developed through a rationality of deliberation. Practitioners thus become significant knowers of their practice and the boundaries between practice and research blur. Practitioners can

be considered researchers of their actions, but researchers, too, can be considered practitioners of research (Eikeland, 2008). So, who then is best positioned to develop phronesis? If this form of knowledge is acquired through action and interaction (or deliberation), practitioners seem best suited to articulate and develop this type of knowledge, though researchers can contribute to developing phronesis as well. Flyvbjerg (2001), for example, makes a case for phronetic social science and emphasises the value of conducting case study research to generate contextual knowledge about what is right in a given situation. Stake (1995) also underlines the importance of case study research in social science to enable a multi-dimensional analysis that is spatial, historical, social and personal. Others emphasise the importance of involving the practitioners and people affected by the research problem to make explicit their embodied knowledge (Carr & Kemmis, 2005; Chambers, 2010; Van der Linden, 2016). Besides, Ramalingam (2013) points out the benefits of involving people from multiple disciplines to grasp the complexity and understand dynamics and feedback loops affecting micro-situations. Van der Linden (2016) also suggests that practice-oriented research that aims at high-quality lifelong learning for groups at risk is best situated in communities of practice: "involving various research contexts and combining professionalisation of its members with research undertaken. In this way professionalisation is based on the processing of experiences in practice-oriented research whereby the knowledge gained is not fragmented but part of a joint research programme" (p. 229). Therefore, the knowledge that can help overcome complexity lives in different people and is ideally developed through inter-subjective processes for which the methodology may rely on the context.

2.3.3 The role of power and values in the epistemology of practice

Since phronesis is concerned with the question 'what is desirable', power and values are inherent. The status quo – including the dominant epistemological paradigms – is upheld through a complex web of power dynamics (Bourdieu, 1977; Flyvbjerg, 2011; Odora Hoppers, 2001). Flyvbjerg (2008) poses the following value-rational questions as a guide to developing phronesis in organisational research: "1. Where are we going with this specific management problematic? 2. Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power? 3. Is this development desirable? 4. What, if anything, should we do about it?" (p. 153). Referring to Foucault's theory of power, Flyvbjerg (2008) emphasises that to understand processes of power, one needs to focus on the concrete, as power directly establishes reality. By understanding how power processes shape micro-situations, practitioners cannot only identify what could be 'right' in the moment,

but also contribute to deeply transformative action towards deconstructing power imbalances in the development sector such as racism, classism, patriarchy, etcetera (see for example Freire, 2005). “Dominant narratives tell convincing stories based on the interests of the powerful, persuading us to act for the benefit of privilege. But, when we start to question these stories, asking in whose interests they are told, we see different possibilities for changing the story and therefore changing the world” (Ledwith, 2017, p. 49). However, Guijt (2010) cautions us that in the development sector we should not be tempted to blame the ‘powerful donor’ for everything. She explains that the accountability wave, for example, is not kept in place by ill-intended individuals; rather accountability and the accompanying standards and interpretations of rigour are reinforced through systemic forces.

Though practitioners may act on their ideal of alternative futures, Kunneman (2005) underlines through his concept of normative professionalism, that there will always be a level of ambiguity in our realities and our actions due to co-existing, conflicting paradigms and hybrids that emerge. “Beyond the grand narratives of modernity and beyond the absolute notions of transcendence characterising traditional religious worldviews, new forms of moral deliberation and existential learning are emerging, centring around creative frictions between a plurality of different moral perspectives and existential scripts” (Kunneman, 2005, pp. 10-11). He uses social work as an example, and illustrates how social workers are continuously trying to connect “questions of productivity and efficiency with moral commitment and existential meaning” (p. 12). In a way, this is what Guijt (2010) also describes when she encourages development practitioners to find synergies between learning and accountability. De Haas (2017) illustrates ways in which educators already merge conflicting cultural schema – suggesting that educators also enact normative professionalism. Meyerson (2001) calls this creative manoeuvring in between value-sets ‘tempered radicalism’. Chambers (2010) stresses that these acts of defiance require a process of demonstrating the level of rigour adaptive pluralism delivers. In short, it does not only matter whom you ask what is the right thing to do at what time, there will co-exist several ‘right’ solutions given the normative complexity of work situations in the field of lifelong learning for development.

If we move away from the ‘neo-Newtonian’ idea that external researchers should generate the knowledge practice requires, organisations now carry a great responsibility to generate phronesis and other forms of knowledge required to navigate all corners of

their topography of practice – including the lowlands. It also poses a normative responsibility – how do these organisations define meaningful lifelong learning? Who ensures that this ‘meaning’ is in line with the needs of the populations they serve and not personal interests or the status quo? How can organisations – like education NGOs – enact such an alternative knowledge paradigm and set up their members to be reflective and response-able practitioners? Can organisational learning play a role in this process of normative professionalisation? In the next section, I illustrate how organisational learning has fallen into the trap of uncritically serving the epistemological assumptions of technical rationality. And I touch on theoretical concepts that can help us analyse how we might ‘learn our way out’.

2.4 Shaping organisations that learn to deal with complexity

The quest to set up organisations as knowledge-generating has been the ambition of organisational learning scholars since the 1960s (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2012). In the opening pages of the book that popularised the idea of becoming a learning organisation, Senge (2006) states: “As the world becomes more interconnected and business becomes more complex and dynamic, work must become more ‘learningful’. It is no longer sufficient to have one person learning for the organisation [...]. The organisations that will truly excel in the future will be the organisations that discover how to tap people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels in an organisation” (p. 4). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to present a full discussion of organisational learning and learning organisation literature. For a more comprehensive review, I would refer to other works such as Easterby-Smith and Lyles (2012) or Dierkes, Berthol Antal, Child, and Nonaka (2001). In this chapter I focus on the following questions: Are the concepts of the learning organisation and organisational learning still relevant to education NGOs today? And, can becoming a learning organisation help equip practitioners in overcoming the complex challenges to ensuring meaningful lifelong learning for all?

2.4.1 The learning NGO

Though the concept of the learning organisation was popularised in the corporate sector as a means to remain competitive, organisations in other sectors were quick to embrace it as well. One of the most cited definitions of the learning organisation is that of Senge: “An organisation that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future” (Senge, 2006, p. 14). Pedler used a similar definition: “An organisation which helps the learning

of all its members and persistently transforms itself" (Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell, 1991, p. 1). In the development literature, authors have expanded these definitions to make more explicit 'what' it is that a learning organisation should achieve. Aiken and Britton (1997) defined the learning organisation as: "An organisation which actively incorporates the experience and knowledge of its members and partners through the development of practices, policies, procedures and systems in ways which continuously improve its ability to set and achieve goals, satisfy stakeholders, develop its practice, value and develop its people and achieve its mission with its constituency" (as cited in Britton, 1998, p. 3). Kelleher and The Gender at Work Collaborative (2002) emphasise the following qualities of a learning organisation in the development context: "permeable to outside ideas and pressures; sufficiently democratic that those ideas with merit can flourish from all levels of the organisation and evolve into practice; possessing teams capable of functioning democratically and effectively; capable of resolving apparent contradictions between such issues as stability and change, and support and pressure; capable of using processes and tools for organisational learning" (p. 314). Though in essence very similar to the conceptualisation of the learning organisation in other sectors, authors in the development and non-profit sector seem to emphasise the mission-orientation of NGOs and other development organisations. Their definitions are also more explicit about the accountability, which focuses more on adding value to communities rather than pleasing the shareholders (Aiken & Britton, 1997; Kelleher & The Gender at Work Collaborative, 2002).

Because of this mission orientation, several authors have pointed out that the idea of being a learning organisation is particularly necessary for the development sector. Britton (1998), for example, states: "[...] if NGOs do not learn they are likely to cease to exist as they will not be able to adapt sufficiently well to the changing circumstances in which they find themselves" (p.7). In the context of adult education organisations in Africa, Nafukho et al. (2011) also stress: "Only learning organisations that are flexible, adaptive and productive can thrive, hence the need for organisations to transform themselves into learning organisations" (p. 147). In addition, others suggest that learning should resonate deeply with development organisations, because in the development sector learning is widely associated with the potential for transformation and has inspired a vast participatory practice in which organisations seek to mobilise multiple knowledges to generate change. At the same time, practitioners who join development organisations are interested in facilitating change and transforming the status quo (Roper & Pettit,

2003). Edwards (1997) also states that in theory, NGOs have an advantage in terms of organisational learning: “Because NGOs are embedded simultaneously in the worlds of action and understanding, have a presence that crosses national boundaries, and possess a value system which (in theory) promotes learning and communication, they have a strong set of comparative advantages in learning terms” (p. 237). Not specific to the development context, but for education organisations in general, Lumby (1997) also suggests having learning as your main business would suggest you are better equipped to facilitate organisational learning.

However sound the logic that NGOs should excel in learning, amidst the dominant neo-Newtonian paradigm and accountability wave, it seems NGOs are just like other organisations: not perfect. In general, literature illustrates that NGOs have a plethora of organisational learning systems in place. Intricate monitoring and evaluation systems, team meetings, staff development, and community dialogues are a few examples of learning mechanisms deployed by NGOs (Roper & Pettit, 2003). However, Ramalingam (2013) adds a critical note: “these [learning efforts] are all built on a mechanical perspective; that somehow the organisation will automatically be able to absorb the lessons and ideas generated from these efforts” (p. 79). As earlier discussed, there is an element of self-inflicted complexity in the sector. Edwards (1997), for example, problematises that funders encouraging NGOs to run on low overheads can make it difficult to invest in staff development, learning activities etcetera. And even though NGOs may claim to be flat and organic, their organisational structure remains hierarchical, and decision making, thinking and doing remain divided (Britton, 1998; Edwards, 1997; Ramalingam, 2013). In the Ugandan context, the majority of NGOs are small and unspecialised, and the ability of these small NGOs to learn and develop expertise towards solving a specific complex problem is limited by the high transactional costs of setting up small projects towards rapidly changing thematic areas (Barr et al., 2003).

Edwards (1997) concludes: “In practice, there is nothing magical about NGOs as organisations that enables them to resolve these complex learning dilemmas, whatever their comparative advantages in theory” (p. 4). The accountability wave and positivistic paradigms that dominate the aid landscape significantly limit the space practitioners have to experiment, look out for the surprise elements etcetera. Referring to education professionals, Van der Linden (2016) problematises that education organisations

externalise knowledge from the professional. “Many professionals, willingly or unwillingly, follow the prescribed steps without really observing or hearing the learners. The textbooks may be very good, based on many years of experience in teaching, and the primers may assure that the right knowledge and skills are taught, but even then they should not blur the sight of the learners” (p. 227). The narrow definition of rigour that is operationalised through accountability measures, procedures, guidelines and monitoring and evaluation tools may work for those activities of practitioners that happen in the high grounds, but do little to help them ‘muddle through the lowlands’ (Kunneman, 2016; Van der Laan, 2006).

Before I look at ways in which an alternative paradigm of practice can be operationalised through organisational learning, it is worth noting that development actors are not always unaware of the epistemological mismatch. In fact, there are signs of a growing movement to equip professionals and organisations to act more adaptively and ethically amidst complexity. One example is the Global Learning for Adaptive Management (GLAM) initiative implemented by a coalition of NGOs led by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) (Global Learning for Adaptive Management, 2019). Another example is the Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) approach, which has been used in several country contexts to collaborate with governments and other partners to find solutions to complex problems (Harvard University, 2021). However, translating these approaches to mainstream practices requires a paradigm shift that demands intentional effort. As mentioned earlier, Guijt (2010) underlined that it is not because of ill-intentions that the accountability paradigm has remained dominant. Chambers (2010) links this to the fact that those with decision-making power are often far away from the realities: “The misfit is little perceived by those furthest from field realities and with most power. But then all power deceives. Recipients do not tell donors what they experience. They think about future funding. Because funds and power are involved, these tightening and constraining shifts pass largely unremarked and unchallenged. And what can be called ‘things procedures’ like the log frame are convenient for understaffed donors: they transfer transaction costs and any blame to those whom they fund” (p. 14). Besides incentives against sharing about the realities and criticising the status quo, dealing with complexity is also complex. It seems like a human tendency is to respond to complexity by trying to control it.

Leaders who don't recognize that a complex domain requires a more experimental mode of management may become impatient when they don't seem to be achieving the results they were aiming for. They may also find it difficult to tolerate failure, which is an essential aspect of experimental understanding. If they try to overcontrol the organization, they will preempt the opportunity for informative patterns to emerge. Leaders who try to impose order in a complex context will fail, but those who set the stage, step back a bit, allow patterns to emerge, and determine which ones are desirable will succeed. (Snowden & Boone, 2007)

In the adult education sector, Nafukho et al. (2011) recognise that complexity can be overwhelming and that therefore managers of lifelong learning programmes should adopt a level of optimism and persistence: "It means that the managers and leaders of organisations involved in relief and development, including adult education organisations, must reject the possibility of defeat and renew their firm commitment to the aims and objectives of their particular organisation. The Swahili proverb – *Penye nia ipo njia* ('Where there is a will there is a way') best captures how challenges facing managers of adult education should be viewed and handled" (p. 224).

From this brief review of literature, a paradoxical picture emerges. If the learning organisation as a concept and practice would be relevant and achievable one would expect (education) NGOs to excel at it. But literature suggests that NGOs are handicapped in facilitating critical learning that enables them to navigate complexity. Despite numerous efforts, NGOs are stuck in the dominant paradigm of accountability (technical rationality). Given that this challenge is not unique to NGOs, in the next section, I review the body of knowledge on organisational learning to explore: how can NGOs work through these tensions and enable reflection-in-action?

2.4.2 From the learning organisation to organisational learning

A first step to help NGOs learn to deal with complexity more effectively is by making a conceptual switch from 'the learning organisation' to 'organisational learning'. Just because NGOs do not meet the ideal type of organisation described by Kelleher and The Gender at Work Collaborative (2002) or Aiken and Britton (1997), does not mean that they do not learn. "Demystifying the learning organisation means stepping back from the false dichotomy between organisations that learn and those that do not" (Lipshitz, Friedman, & Popper, 2007). Lipshitz et al. (2007), comment that instead of focusing on

transforming an entire organisation, we should focus on the processes of learning that can help overcome specific problems. They define organisational learning as: "a conscious and critical process of reflection intended to produce new perceptions, goals, and/or behavioural strategies" (Doving, 1996 as cited in Lipshitz et al., 2007, p. 16). This definition itself does not make it much easier to locate where learning happens, but their multifaceted model might. Organisational learning in this model is located in Organisational Learning Mechanisms (OLMs): "structures that enable organisational members to jointly collect, analyse, disseminate, and apply information and knowledge" (Lipshitz et al., 2007, p. 16). These OLMs are not necessarily formal systems but can happen informally or spontaneously as well. In addition to OLMs as a structural facet of organisational learning, their model considers multiple facets to analyse whether organisational learning is productive or not. For example, the cultural and psychological facets to analyse the influence of cultural norms conducive to learning and the degree of psychological safety, or the context, policy and leadership facts that tease out the possible influence of the organisational context (Lipshitz et al., 2007).

Based on an extensive literature study and multiple empirical studies in a variety of organisations, Marsick and Watkins (2003) identified similar dimensions that make organisations more or less effective at learning:

1. Create continuous learning opportunities: Learning is designed into work so that people can learn on the job; opportunities are provided for ongoing education and growth.
2. Promote inquiry and dialogue: People gain productive reasoning skills to express their views and the capacity to listen and inquire into the views of others; the culture is changed to support questioning, feedback, and experimentation.
3. Encourage collaboration and team learning: Work is designed to use groups to access different modes of thinking; groups are expected to learn together and work together; collaboration is valued by the culture and rewarded.
4. Create systems to capture and share learning: Both high- and low-technology systems to share learning are created and integrated with work; access is provided; systems are maintained.
5. Empower people toward a collective vision: People are involved in setting, owning, and implementing a joint vision; responsibility is distributed close to decision

making so that people are motivated to learn toward what they are held accountable to do.

6. Connect the organisation to its environment: People are helped to see the effect of their work on the entire enterprise; people scan their environment and use information to adjust work practices; the organisation is linked to its communities.
7. Provide strategic leadership for learning: Leaders model, champion, and support learning; leadership uses learning strategically for business results (Marsick & Watkins, 2003, p. 139).

In the context of this research, such multifaceted models may help locate where learning in an organisation happens, who is part of it, who sets the agenda, and what changes it leads to, but also analyse the forces that make such learning effective or not. These models especially identify the internal adjustments organisations can make to learn towards overcoming particular problems – albeit simple or complex.

By locating and analysing OLMs, we can further investigate to what extent the learning that happens is rooted in the transformative reflection-in-action epistemology of practice or the instrumentalist technical rationality – and whether this matches the nature of the problem at hand. For example, whose knowledges are considered in existing OLMs? How effectively do OLMs make explicit the embodied knowledge of practitioners and learners? What changes are made to the curricula and do these changes help learners fit into the status quo or transform it? Consequently, rather than seeking to 'become a learning organisation', this focus on organisational learning provides guidance as to which organisational aspects might be tweaked to create more conducive learning spaces for its members to tackle complexity. This quest will be deeply contextual, Robinson (2001) notes that it may be futile to work towards a universal and generalisable set of learning capabilities and that it could be more worthwhile to look at the particular learning task at hand. To support researchers and practitioners in untangling how OLMs can be shaped by practitioners to fit the environment, Shani and Docherty (2003) introduced the concepts of learning requirements and learning design dimensions. Learning requirements are the conditions posed by the unique work context that practitioners need to work towards for learning to be productive. Learning design dimensions are the various possibilities practitioners have towards achieving these conditions, for example, different learning systems or decision-making processes. In their view, mechanisms could be considered the organisation's capabilities to enact the

learning requirements and dimensions to achieve long-term results. In short, by looking at organisational learning (mechanisms) rather than the learning organisation, researchers and practitioners might more effectively generate practical knowledge to learn to navigate complex work environments.

2.4.3 Field theory to connect individual learning to organisational learning

Organisational learning and OLMs perhaps do not fully demystify how organisations learn as entities. Jarvis (2007) for example comments about Argyris and Schön's classical work on organisational learning: "While Argyris and Schön rightly recognise that learning is personal so that it appears that this type of organisation is person-centred, they are suggesting that when organisational procedures are changed positively as a result of social pressures, then it is what they call organisational learning so that once more we can conclude that organisational learning, as a concept, is not actually learning per se nor necessarily people-centred – but it is change in the right direction" (p. 112). Various authors have attempted to clarify how organisational learning can be conceptualised as a form of human learning that takes place at a supra-individual level. Lipshitz et al. (2007) do this by comparing Organisational Learning Mechanisms (OLMs) to what the central nervous system is to individuals – data is gathered, processed and translated into changes in beliefs, action strategies or goals. And as we have seen, the various multifaceted models of organisational learning illustrate how individuals might be agents for organisational learning, but their learning process is a social one and is influenced by the social context. However, there is one perspective that seems to connect human and organisational learning in a more comprehensive manner; field theory. Friedman and Sykes (2014) pose that field theory does not only help explain the connection between human and organisational learning but actually vanishes this dichotomy: "both individual and organisational learning can be understood in terms of a set of constructs that are neither specifically human nor organisational." (p. 150). To clarify this premise, I first revisit core concepts of field theory and how they can help explain how individuals and organisations learn their way towards meaningful change.

Field theory is developed by leading scholars like Cassirer, Bourdieu and Lewin and can be placed within a relational worldview (Bourdieu, 1977; Friedman, 2011; Friedman, Sykes, & Strauch, 2014; Lewin, 1939). And field theory has been widely applied in organisational research (Friedman, 2011; Friedman et al., 2014; Friedman & Sykes, 2014; Hilgers & Mangez, 2015a; Tatli, Özbilgin, & Karatas-Özkan, 2015). Field theory

assumes that “reality is best grasped as an ordering of elements of perception through a mental process of construction that gives them intelligibility and meaning” (Friedman et al., 2014, p. 4). Social reality is perceived spatially – viewing all actors and properties as interdependent. Through social interactions, people give meaning to properties and relationships and as interactions become patterned, fields emerge within the social space. Each field forms its *symbolic order* – socially constructed meaning and values. Fields also differentiate themselves through a *structure of positions* and relationships between actors (Hilgers & Mangez, 2015b). Organisations could be viewed as fields, with a unique symbolic and structural order, but they also operate in relative autonomy to other fields – such as economic and political fields (Hamadache, 2015; Hilgers & Mangez, 2015b). Scholars such as Lewin and Bourdieu presented field theory as a plea to analyse social phenomena and social change from a comprehensive perspective – acknowledging that due to the interdependence of factors we cannot fully comprehend social phenomena without exploring them in their historical, cultural, economic context and by viewing how human action has shaped a particular field and at the same time is affected by it. To understand how this field theoretical perspective helps connect human learning and organisational learning two concepts are relevant: habitus and social transformation.

In view of relationalism, “fields can be understood as spaces that not only link different elements into a kind of network, but also exert force and shape the behaviour of its constituents.” (Friedman et al., 2014, p. 6). As fields emerge and actors operate in these fields, actors internalise social norms, governing rules, structures and meanings. Bourdieu (1977) refers to this internalisation of the external as ‘habitus’. Through habitus, people are able to *play the game* and pursue what is at stake in a field. As such habitus is a stabilising force – disposing people to act in a reproducing manner. But habitus is also an externalisation of the internal - our cognitive activities, actions and interactions also shape the field. Particularly in situations of ambiguity, spaces emerge where actors can choose to create new meaning, take up new positions, access new forms of capital and as such change the configuration of a field (Friedman, 2011). The discretionary space of practitioners is thus shaped by the field’s configuration (and related fields), but that configuration itself was shaped and developed through the agency of practitioners (Buch, Andersen, & Klemsdal, 2015). Habitus thus suggests that agency and structure are two sides of the same coin – this redefines change as a result of learning too as something that is not specifically human nor organisational (Friedman & Sykes, 2014). This idea of habitus can be connected to one of the core concepts introduced by Argyris (1999) in his

theory of organisational learning: theories-of-action. Argyris too recognised that people are guided by mental models that they developed over time; a set of assumptions about the situation they are in, goals in this situation and follow a logic in choosing an action strategy. Theories-of-action are socially constructed in his view, given we build these assumptions through observing and interacting with our social environment. These theories or mental models become shared over time – creating norms about the way things are done. Organisational learning then becomes an act of revising theories-of-action and establishing whether alternative theories-of-action could lead to more desirable results. It is from this view that single-loop and double-loop learning can be differentiated. “Single-loop learning happens when matches are created, or when mismatches are corrected by changing actions. Double-loop learning occurs when mismatches are corrected by first examining and altering governing variables and then actions.” (Argyris, 1999, p. 68).

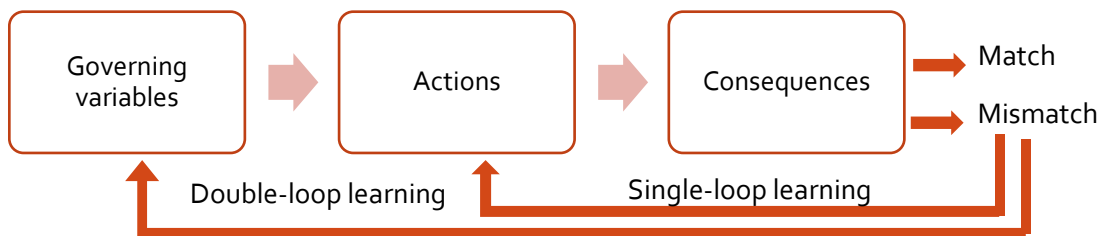


Figure 2 Single-loop and double-loop learning (Argyris, 1999, p. 68)

Both single and double-loop learning have effects on the field and are connected to our mental models that are a result of an internalisation of the field. Though Argyris (1982) warns organisations and facilitators of learning that in many cases single-loop learning allows problems to reoccur considering it does not address the underlying causes. In their review of Lewin and Bourdieu’s work, Friedman and Sykes (2014) reconceptualise learning as: “particular patterns of changes within the structure of a field (e.g., differentiation or restructuring) or the rules governing its behaviour (e.g., habitus). These changes can occur at various levels: within an individual, among individuals, between the individual and the organisation, between groups and the organisation, and between the organisation and its environment. However, the pattern of change is the same regardless of the level.” (p. 150). Friedman (2011) describes six different patterns of change that may occur at any of these levels:

- 1) Differentiation which for an actor, means the division of a large relatively amorphous field into smaller fields with more specific rules of the game and meaning that connected to each in particular configurations.
- 2) Knowing one's place in which actors in the field accept and settle into the positions dictated to them by the rules of the game.
- 3) Migration involves agents moving, or at least trying to move, from one position in the field to another position.
- 4) Emigration involves agents leaving one field and entering into another with a different configuration with different rules of the game and new meanings.
- 5) Forming enclaves involves differentiating a new field within an existing field, but with its own configuration of positions and different rules of the game.
- 6) Transformation, which involves a major reconfiguration of a field and of the rules of the game. (Friedman, 2011, pp. 251-253)

This perspective of learning as trajectories of change, illustrates that learning leads to change in an individual's actions and mindsets but also to changes in the field. Change at any of these levels, means a change in the other level given the processes of internalising the external and externalising the internal (habitus). This also poses critical questions about the space individuals are given within a field to pursue certain actions and dispositions and whether aspirations have been biased through processes of power. And to what extent individuals in particular positions of a field are granted (or do perceive) the power to act on alternative value sets and beliefs that may go against the status quo. I explore this critical angle of organisational learning in the next section.

2.4.4 Critical organisational learning towards meaningful lifelong learning programming

Since the concepts of organisational learning and the learning organisation were introduced, authors have raised concerns that if not used critically, these ways of organising could lead to organisations becoming more effective at doing the wrong thing (Argyris, 1999; Jarvis, 2007; Pedler & Hsu, 2019; Symon, 2003). "All such criticisms rest on the idea that organisational learning is not a value-neutral activity but proceeds from values, has implications for values, and is subject to critique in terms of a conception of what is good or right, and for whom" (Argyris, 1999, p. 11). Or as Pedler and Hsu (2019) state: "What is often ignored in this dominant discourse is that learning and any non-reflexive application of knowledge, may lead to uncontrollable outcomes and harm to

people and society" (p. 99). Could field theory, as an overarching framework, offer an antidote for the uncritical nature of mainstream organisational learning theory? I have already illustrated that field theory draws our attention towards reflexivity – a capability that helps practitioners become aware of how their personal beliefs and dispositions are influenced by the field. Depending on the parts of our theories-of-action that change we may achieve more or less transformative change in a field. In this view, organisational learning does not only result in better organisational outcomes in view of the narrowly defined indicators that dominate the technical-rationality paradigm. Rather, the pathways for change introduced by Friedman (2011) illustrate how shifts in positionality, redistribution of capital and the development of new meanings and rules of the game may happen as a result of deeply critical forms of organisational learning. How could NGOs become catalysts of this deep change not just within their organisation, but towards alternative paradigms of practice? How could NGOs offer practitioners spaces to unpack their embodied experiences and approach complex dilemmas reflexively and in a multi-disciplinary manner? One factor that both complicates and enables operationalising these critical forms of organisational learning is that of power.

Though mainstream organisational learning theory is often silent about power and the role of values/normativity (Jarvis, 2007; Pedler & Hsu, 2019), field theory offers tools for a critical analysis of the role of power in organisations and their surrounding fields (Bourdieu, 1977; Hamadache, 2015). Power in this perspective is a multifaceted and dynamic force that is created through an interplay of agency and structure. It is, for example, through habitus that we internalised power structures in a field and are disposed to see limits to the possibilities for us to act in certain ways. Habitus also offers us the ability to operate more effectively within existing power structures, either by learning the rules of the game and accessing forms of capital meaningful to us, or by using forms of 'dominated power' to exert power within power asymmetries. Bourdieu (1977) refers to women, for example, who in societies he studied had no formal power in marriage but could exert power implicitly within the available spaces.

Even when women do wield the real power, as is often the case in matrimonial matters, they can exercise this fully only on condition that they leave the appearance of power, that is, its official manifestation to men; to have any power at all, women must make do with the unofficial power of the *eminence grise*, a dominated power which is opposed to official power in that it can

operate only by proxy, under the cover of an official authority, as well as to the subversive refusal of the rule-breaker, in that it still serves the authority it uses. (p. 41).

This speaks to the concept of dependent agency (or interdependent agency) used by Anderson and Patterson (2017) who “recognise both the existence of neo-patrimonial structures and the ability of individuals to manoeuvre around, reinterpret, utilise, and at times, be constrained by these structures” (p. 6). By focusing on agency, we can analyse how paradigms may be transformed. As Chambers (2010) states: “So paradigm as redefined has to be living and enacted. People are central since it is they who give energy and life to make paradigms work” (p. 42). Finger and Asún (2001) suggest that through reflexivity people can choose to ‘distance’ themselves from problematic paradigms. Driven by a vision for sustainable communities, groups can develop a new praxis rooted in their resistance. This interplay between structure and agency is key in understanding how power influences organisational learning processes. Bourdieu (1977) illustrates that as fields mature those in a position of power do not depend on exerting their power directly – rather methods of influence, dominance and dependency are reinforced through institutional structures. “The absence of a genuine law [...] must not lead us to forget that any socially recognised formulation contains within it an intrinsic power to reinforce dispositions symbolically” (p. 21). This perception of power can support our analysis of organisational learning as a critical practice that helps education NGOs navigate the technical and normative complexity of their work.

First, organisational learning itself is influenced by power and reconstructs or reinforces it. “Because learning is a social activity it is therefore always power-laden: as constructed in specific social settings, which are sites of power relations and political activity, learning activities serve particular purposes” (Pedler & Hsu, 2019, p. 99). As we have seen, the current order which is enforced by the dominant epistemology of practice has influenced how organisations learn, which information is gathered, which questions are asked, and who is included. From Friedman (2011) trajectories of change, we might conceptualise OLMs as fields of their own. If we perceive fields as arenas of power relations, we must observe through which processes the powerful influence what is considered at stake in a field (Bourdieu, 1977; Hamadache, 2015). Since fields exist in relative autonomy to each other, who determines what is at stake is not always within the organisation. Fields could have their symbolic order, power relations, meaning-giving

processes, etcetera. Therefore, OLMs could be a means for individuals to learn 'to know their place' but they could also be enclaves or microcosms with a unique *modus operandi* (Friedman, 2011). The multifaceted models of organisational learning have offered ingredients such as psychological safety and cultural norms that may enable people to be more or less open to critically analyse their lived realities. Field theory adds concepts such as symbolic order, structural order, habitus, positionality and capital, which can further enrich our analysis of current organisational learning practices to understand how these are either enabling practitioners to respond to problems in line with their complexity levels or forcing technical rationality on problems that require reflection-in-action (or adaptive pluralism).

Secondly, organisational learning can offer a space for individuals to exert their power. Through reflexivity, people can become aware of the power dynamics and how these can influence the options one does or does not perceive. In his work with Israeli schools, Friedman (2011) illustrates how a reflective approach helped education practitioners open up new solution spaces. In this case, practitioners reflected on the mental models guiding their action strategies and were able to reframe the situation. By looking differently at problematic situations, they were able to unlock new solution spaces. While habitus is shaped by the field, it does not limit individuals to only those actions that reproduce the way the field is configured. Individuals do have the power to reshape 'how things are done'. Reflexivity is a capability that requires intentional effort by the individual and the organisation in which they work. This is because it has to overcome defensive routines and self-sealing processes at both individual and structural levels (Argyris, 2010). At the individual level, Bourdieu (1977) illustrates that as people develop habitus, they become unaware of the rules governing their actions: "The explanation agents may provide of their own practice, thanks to quasi theoretical reflection on their practice, conceals, even from their own eyes, the true nature of their practical mastery, i.e. that is learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*), a mode of practical knowledge not comprising knowledge of its own principles" (p. 19). Like Bourdieu, Argyris (2010) found that people are often unaware of their actual dispositions, beliefs and norms (our theories-in-use) and he adds that we often espouse different beliefs than those actually guiding our actions (our espoused theories). For example, a manager may say they have an open-door policy and that they want staff to share openly about challenges, yet their actions are guided by an objective to cover up challenges to save face. What makes double-loop learning – or reflexivity on the field dynamics – 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, the manager at some point may assign high-profile projects to those staff who praise his work and do not bring up challenges – a trend that in itself may become 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. 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 to others) power to revise how success is framed and align our actions to what is meaningful to us and those we are trying to support. It is not only personal defensive routines and self-interest that limit reflexivity; organisations are also generally not modelled towards supporting it, as I have illustrated.

An analysis of critical organisational learning thus should take into account which self-sealing processes may hinder reflexivity from happening - from the individual level to the wider field of lifelong learning for development. This requires us to look beyond the espoused theories-of-action and find ways to uncover theories-in-use. OLMs too can be evaluated for their capacity to make explicit these theories-in-use and the level of change occurring as a result of collective learning. And learning can be evaluated by its impact on the power structure and agency of individuals to act on alternative rules of the game. In addition, following Bourdieu's interpretation of field theory, it would also be important to avoid the pitfall of 'demanding a logic of practice that is not that of practice'. He warns of the theorisation effect: "One thus has to acknowledge that practice has a logic that is not that of logic, if one is to avoid asking of it more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself either to wring incoherences out of it or to thrust upon it a forced coherence" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 109). Theories-of-action, therefore, may be useful to explain the interconnectedness between mental models, actions and the socialisation processes through which they are developed – they should be used with care not to oversimplify human action. "Practical logic – practical in both senses of the word – is able to organise the totality of an agent's thoughts, perceptions, and actions by means of a few generating principles, themselves reducible in the last analysis to a fundamental dichotomy, only because its whole economy, which is based on the principles of the economy of logic, presupposes a loss of rigour for the sake of greater simplicity and

generality and because it finds in “polythesis” the conditions required for the correct use of polysemy” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 110). Thus, when it comes to practical knowledge, especially phronesis, there is a level of fuzziness implied.

2.5 Conclusion – a framework for inquiry

In this chapter, I portrayed the lifelong learning for development landscape in Uganda to illustrate the technical and normative complexities practitioners in education NGOs could encounter. From this portrait, I discussed the dominant epistemology of practice – technical rationality or neo-Newtonian – in light of alternative paradigms: reflection-in-action and adaptive pluralism. To operate in complex environments, practitioners would benefit from articulating and generating phronesis, a practical form of knowledge that does not only guide on how to act competently but also justly. This type of knowledge is generated through deliberation and involvement of multiple knowers, and because it includes all knowledges, organisations become important knowledge actors. Organisational learning is commonly associated with the knowledge-generating and adaptation abilities of organisations. However, I illustrated that organisational learning should be shaped in line with learning requirements that a work context (and desired paradigm) presents. This calls for a more critical theory of organisational learning. From the literature review and theoretical frameworks discussed above, I derive five premises that could guide our quest to improve organisational learning in education NGOs as a means to more meaningful lifelong learning opportunities in Uganda.

1. Because organisational learning requirements are contextual and organisational activities are in constant flux, it is most useful to focus on organisational learning – in particular OLMs – rather than the concept of the learning organisation. By analysing these spaces of learning we can explore how well these processes fit to address specific problems an organisation is trying to grapple with. This is also a reason why this chapter first mapped the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda to understand which learning requirements this practice presents to practitioners and organisations.
2. To identify levers for transformative change – in and outside the organisation – we should avoid a dichotomy between individuals and social systems. Rather, through concepts such as the field and habitus, we can analyse the interconnectedness between the two. This provides lenses to analyse and facilitate reflexivity on

theories-in-use and effect change not only in action strategies, but also beliefs, assumptions and goals, as well as self-sealing and defensive routines that could hinder us from 'acting justly'.

3. Power should be an object of study in research on organisational learning – especially in the development context. The history of lifelong learning for development in Uganda and the positionality of education NGOs present a dynamic and complex web of power dynamics that may sustain and reinforce a status quo in which lifelong learning remains narrowly defined and unavailable to an excluded majority.
4. Deeper insights into these dynamics can be gained from a detailed analysis of specific cases in which theories-in-use may be reconstructed. This should happen with the practitioners to make sense of their lived realities and through a methodology that is sensitive to power dynamics and defensive routines that may be triggered by such a reflexive process.
5. Generalisations about critical organisational learning in complex contexts should consider the same epistemological premises of reflection-in-action and phronesis: this knowledge is subjective and contextual. Field theory as reflexive sociology, however, offers an opportunity to identify how the interplay between context, learning requirements and the effectiveness of OLMs may occur, which could hint at generative principles that could occur across contexts.

The conceptual framework offered by field theorists seems to offer a critical yet pragmatic framework to shape these analyses together with practitioners. Field theory provides conceptual lenses that guide inquiry, but also a premise about agency that can inspire change. Before illustrating how these theoretical lenses helped us analyse and improve organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda, I first present the research methodology used to shape a collaborative process of inquiry.

3. Research methodology: intentional emergence

The research presented in this thesis used a phronetic approach to PAR. For the research methodology this implied that beyond the participatory cycles of action and reflection, the research went through layers-of-width – connecting micro-realities and field dynamics – and layers-of-depth – investigating mental models behind the theories-in-use. In this chapter, I present the research trajectory and account for the ways in which participation was facilitated at each stage, as well as insights and changes triggered throughout the research process. Like many PARs, this study had an emergent character in the sense that within guiding principles, activities and directions took shape through collaboration between the researcher and participants. Reflecting on the journey, I discuss challenges and limitations regarding power dynamics, fitting a PAR within an organisation's day-to-day operations and persistent barriers to implementing new action strategies.

3.1 Introduction

In chapter 2 I problematised the technical-rational approach to knowledge generation and utilisation in the lifelong learning for development field. Consequently, the research approach we used in this PhD study sought to embrace the reflection-in-action framework, which acknowledges the inter-subjective and dynamic nature of knowledge, whilst being critical of the power dynamics. The research approach was both inspired by phronetic research (Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012) and Participatory Action Research (PAR) (Boog et al., 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2008b; Rowell, Bruce, Shosh, & Riel, 2017). Both these approaches offer a rich variety of approaches and methods. The research design and the methodology used in this study has been inspired by the existing body of knowledge on PAR and phronetic research, but it also had an emergent character calling for new methods and modifications to existing methods. In line with Bourdieu's

reflexive sociology, in this research it would apply that: “The fact that there is no ‘choice’ that cannot be accounted for, retrospectively at least, does not imply that such practice is perfectly predictable [...]” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 15). The research stages and activities presented in this chapter were not all ‘known’ from the onset of this research, but in this chapter I account for the choices made. By reconstructing our journey and the turning points, I illustrate the interplay of guiding principles and spontaneity, external forces and power dynamics. After presenting the research activities and milestones in detail I derive practical implications for other researchers who may want to use a phronetic approach to PAR and/or conduct this in collaboration with an organisation.

3.2 Phronetic PAR: redefining action and looking for layers

Before presenting the research trajectory that occurred between late 2015 and mid-2019, I would like to clarify the broader research approach. Action research is often presented as a series of cycles of action and reflection (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011; Reason & Bradbury, 2008b). These cycles are usually presented as a continuous spiral because knowledge in action research is viewed as tentative, and can be modified given new information and situations (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). According to Reason and Bradbury (2008a): “in action phases co-researchers test practices and gather evidence; in reflection stages, they make sense together and plan further actions” (p. 2). Action research can start at any point of the cycle – either with an action or a reflection phase. For example, McNiff and Whitehead (2011) suggest starting action research by taking stock of what is going on and identifying a concern and possible solutions. Though the premises underlying the cyclical representation of action research are valuable, I would like to propose some modifications to how the action and reflection cycle is conceptualised for this particular research. First, I would like to widen our definition of action in PAR and add an element of layering in-width and layering in-depth to enrich the action and reflection elements. Based on these proposals I present a visualisation of the process that adds layers to the cyclical approach.

Regarding the action element of this PAR, I would like to clarify two things: how I related to action as the facilitative researcher and what will be demarcated as change or innovation in this view of action. Action researchers commonly distinguish first-person, second-person and third-person action research. First-person action research focuses on one’s personal life world, second-person refers to a collaborative inquiry on a topic of

mutual concern and third-person focuses on wider collective levels such as organisations or movements (Brydon-Miller & Coghlan, 2019; Torbert, 2001). These three types of action research are interconnected, for example, third-person action researchers also require the same level of reflexivity on their own practice as first-person action researchers. As an external person to the organisations involved in this research, I acted both as a second-person and third-person action researcher. Consequently, a large part of the action we investigated occurred on the work-floor, in my absence. Eikeland (2008) introduces helpful concepts to locate the processes of action and reflection: back-stage and on-stage spaces. On-stage spaces are the day-to-day operations and the primary processes of organisations, while back-stage spaces are those spaces where members reflect on their on-stage actions. This PAR created several back-stage spaces that fed on-stage processes of the participating NGOs (see for example De Haas, 2017). This implies that action does not always sit neatly in the PAR process and often happens outside of the view of the facilitating researcher, consequently not all activities may be investigated or evaluated in the PAR. Secondly, because in action research action and inquiry are inseparable and inquiry is seen as a form of action (Torbert, 2001; Udvarhelyi, 2020), I consider the back-stage spaces as actions. Especially because organisational learning is strongly associated with back-stage spaces (Eikeland, 2008). In a way, these PAR activities modelled and tested new forms of collaborative inquiry that itself taught us a lot about the organisational learning practices that are and could be. If we view organisations in a relational manner, whereby agency and structure are inter-connected, these spaces are likely to leave a dent on how things are done. As Heraclitus said: "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man" (Bryan, 2013).

Though I refer to this PAR as a phronetic PAR, it is undeniably inspired by Critical PAR (CPAR) as well. Flyvbjerg (2008) defines phronetic research in the organisational context as: "an approach to the study of management and organisations focusing on ethics and power" (p. 153). McTaggart et al. (2017) emphasise that in CPAR: "participants are committed to engaging in a broad social analysis of their situation (exploring the conditions that prefigure their practices) and a collective self-study of their practices to determine what to do to improve their situation" (p. 22). Both approaches draw attention to problematic social structures underlying our practices – whilst phronetic research adds a strong focus on values. Inspired by both these approaches I introduce the element of 'layers' in this PAR. To produce the practical wisdom required to deal with complexity,

this research sought to achieve a level of critical understanding about the interdependency of agency and structure in shaping practices. Concretely, in this chapter, I illustrate how we did not only move through cycles of action and reflection, but also through layers-of-width and layers-of-depth. Layers-of-width refer to the connections made between micro, meso, and macro realities and the movements of zooming-out and zooming-in. For example, zooming-out to understand organisational learning in seven NGOs through a multiple-case study design or zooming-in on the micro-scenarios of volunteers in one education programme; but also, very importantly, reconnecting micro-realities to wider field dynamics to understand why certain action strategies are adopted. Cutting through layers-of-depth refers to the movement across our theories-of-action, reaching the assumptions and beliefs underlying the action strategies of NGO practitioners. This requires not only cutting through the espoused theories-of-action, but especially those in-use (Argyris, 1999). These layers further illustrate that this PAR moves in between second- and third-person action research. Consequently, my role in particular was to enrich the reflection process by connecting actors in and across fields and steering inquiry into the underlying structures. Both in-depth and in-width analyses will help shine a light on power dynamics and value or meaning creating processes, by paying attention to the symbolic and structural order and how these are internalised through socialisation.

To visualise these layers-of-width and layers-of-depth I created a layered visualisation (figure 3). This diagram does not necessarily represent a chronological process, but highlights the elements of a critical reflection on the status quo – situating situations in their wider fields and analysing the processes of socialisation that shaped these fields. Secondly, to move in-depth to reflect on current actions and their outcomes through the levels of beliefs, assumptions and understanding as internalised perceptions of the field. Towards changing the practice of organisational learning, these new insights can lead to double- or single-loop learning, meaning the mental models may be revised or simply the action strategies. And finally, change can be perceived through its impact on the field. From the layered perspective too, 'back-stage' spaces become increasingly important to co-create practical wisdom that can transform problematic power dynamics through processes of deliberation.

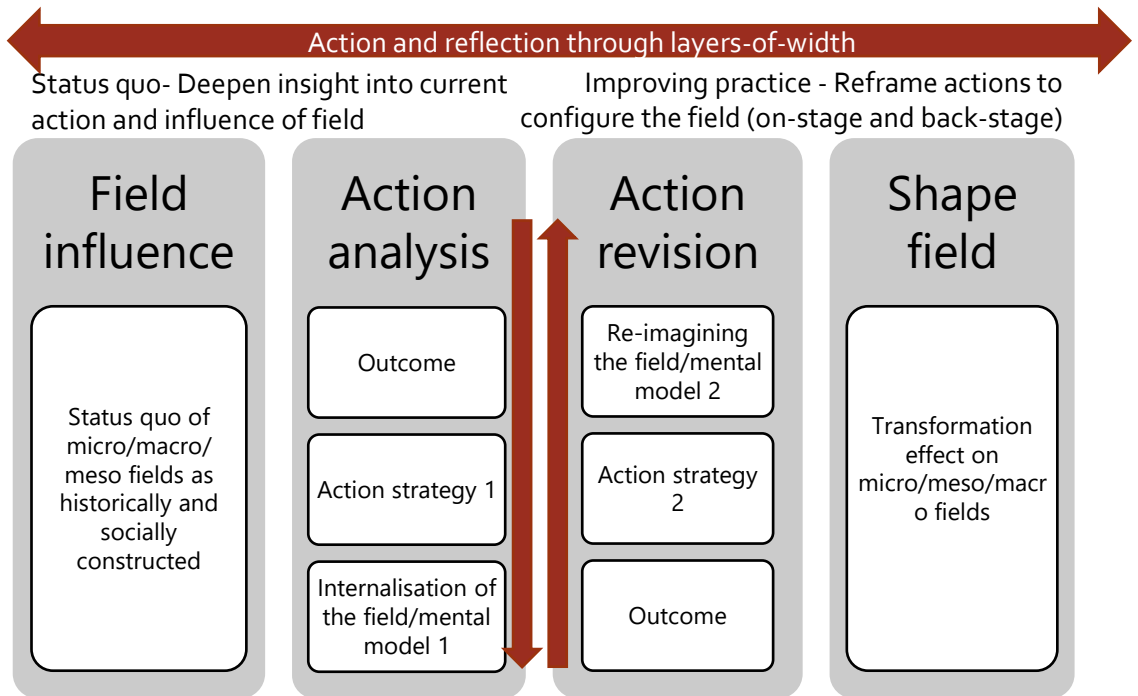


Figure 3 Schematic presentation of the layered PAR process

Chronologically we can distinguish five phases in the research presented in this thesis: orientation, problem diagnosis, case study entry, case study – learning team, and closing. Within each stage, both action and reflection occurred, cutting through different layers. Table 3 provides a chronological overview of the stages and research events, as well as knowledge contributions and 'back-stage' and 'on-stage' action innovations. The next sections present a detailed account of each research stage, including the activities, methods used, the role of the researcher, knowledge on practice theories and effects on agency and structure and challenges.

Table 3 Overview of research trajectory

Stage 1 Orientation, April to December 2015				
Purpose	Main activities	Knowledge	Back-stage action	On-stage action
Establishing what is meaningful OL, broker connections towards a community of practice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Informal consultations with practitioners in education NGOs (13 participants) 2. Orientation dialogue 	First impression of the role of OL in education NGOs and important themes in these processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New connections between NGOs and researcher ▪ Setting and experiencing norms of communicative space ▪ Modelling dialogue method for collective learning 	Unknown
Stage 2 Problem diagnosis, January to September 2016				
Purpose	Main activities	Knowledge	Back-stage action	On-stage action
Identifying examples of and barriers of meaningful OL. Identify research direction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interviews in seven education NGOs to profile OL practice (24) 2. Participatory workshop 3. Feedback committee for proposal 4. Ethical clearance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profiles of organisational learning in seven education NGOs • Prioritisation of issues • Co-creating tentative understanding of fields emerging around double-loop learning with external actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Exchange of OL practices between organisations – action inducing ▪ Set a shared vision for the research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actions initiated by workshop participants - Community feedback - Further research triple loop learning - Inter-organisation sharing - M&E + implementation co-creation

Stage 3 Case study entry, October 2016 to September 2017				
Purpose	Main activities	Knowledge	Back-stage action	On-stage action
Map organisational field and opportunities for mutual learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Leadership consultations 2. Observation 3. DLOQ 4. Hanging around/informal interactions 5. Interviews 6. Orientation workshop/stakeholder mapping 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying who are the external actors and whose knowledges are currently included • Case study organisation as a field and deeper insight into OL practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reflecting on how learning is happening and which knowledges are excluded ▪ Aligning research goals 	Intentional involvement of actors 'missed' in the elephant map
Stage 4 Case study – learning team, October 2017 to December 2018				
Purpose	Main activities	Knowledge	Back-stage action	On-stage action
Deeper investigation and testing of organisational learning innovations on-stage	<u>Co-design</u> PAR workshops team Integration planning	Discrepancies between espoused theories and theories-in-use	A shared understanding of double-loop learning	Spin-offs like learning tracker, joint monitoring
	<u>Track 1: Volunteers as catalysts</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Interviews 2. Analysis workshop 3. Action planning workshop 4. Knowledge transfer session to new volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconstructed theories of action for dilemmas in SRHR education delivery • Applied reflexive thinking to transform the 'field' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New spaces for staff and volunteers to meet ▪ Case interviews – reframing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Training on stakeholder engagement - Knowledge transfer session to new volunteers - Changes to volunteer incentives/roles

	<u>Track 2: Community actors</u> 1. Interviews, FGD 2. Validation dialogue 3. Community-NGO meeting 4. Local government engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community perceptions on external-facing OL • Untangling power dynamics in community-NGO-local government learning spaces 	Experimenting with a community-led space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sending greeting cards to external actors - External actors leading a training session - Parent sessions
	<u>Track 3: Double-loop learning capabilities</u> 1. Double-loop learning workshop 2. Force field analysis 3. Learning for success (2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying barriers to double-loop learning • Redefining double-loop learning to fit the context & insight on preferred methods 	Skill-building/ modelling of methods for double-loop learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leadership reviewed 2018 work plans for learning integration
Stage 5 closing, January to May 2019				
Purpose	Main activities	Knowledge	Back-stage action	On-stage action
Synthesise findings and disseminate	1. Reflection interviews 2. Closing workshop team 3. Closing workshop leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harvesting insights on change processes in PAR and organisational learning processes 	Dissemination to broader research groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unknown

3.3 Stage one – Orientation

The idea for this PhD study was rooted in my own early career experience; I wanted to deal with the rigidity I experienced in several lifelong learning projects. To discover whether the problem I experienced was of concern to other NGO practitioners as well, I took initiative to open up a communicative space wherein participants come “together to address a legitimate concern of mutual importance as the impetus of the change process.” (McTaggart et al., 2017, pp. 21-22). Wicks and Reason (2009) warn that the way relationships with participants are initiated can make or break an action research process. Referring to Habermas’ distinction between *life world* and *system*, they encourage third-person action researchers to start from the lived experiences of participants and avoid an invitation to the research that is too formal. The latter may lead to a *system* focus on efficiency, control and predictability becoming the norm in the research space. During my visits to Uganda between April and December 2015, I met various peers working with ten education NGOs, two universities and a regional organisation for organisational learning. These informal meetings took place in their workspaces and cafes. The main focus of these conversations was to find out these practitioners’ general orientation towards their profession, and the role of organisational learning in achieving the goals important to them. These views were important input for an orientation workshop in December 2015. In the weeks leading up to this workshop, I personally invited all practitioners to the orientation workshop and emphasised facets important to inclusion. In the one-on-one meetings I underlined that their contributions and thoughts would be important in shaping a good research process (Dustman, Kohan, & Stringer, 2014; Wicks & Reason, 2009).

The half-day gathering aimed at opening the novel communicative space between practitioners who were working with different education NGOs. I endeavoured to create an environment in which the *system* pressures would not set in, and to create a levelled playing field for participation regardless of seniority or gender. McArdle (2002, as cited in Wicks & Reason, 2009) encourages action researchers to craft such spaces creatively, to create a level of *un-normalness*. For this purpose, I selected a venue that offered multiple and diverse meeting spaces, the room was set up to mimic a round-table and on the walls were posters with quotes from the preliminary consultations about organisational learning. The programme aimed at combining informal interactions and sessions focusing on the topic of inquiry (Wicks & Reason, 2009). A total of eleven

representatives from education NGOs, universities and network organisations, as well as the research supervisors, participated in this meeting. A dialogue about the participants' perspectives on organisational learning was the main element of the workshop. Isaacs (1999) defines dialogue as a "living experience of inquiry within and between people" (p.9). To facilitate this dialogue at this early stage of the research I opted to utilise the metaphor of *cooking soup* (Friedman & Blaak, 2016). The guiding principles were: everyone has something valuable to add to the 'soup' and silence is an important component of dialogue. To ensure everyone was able to form their thoughts and have a platform to express these, the dialogue was facilitated through seven steps.

1. Collecting spices through the *walk of quotes*: Quotes and paraphrases from preliminary interviews and consultations were pinned on the wall and participants were invited to select the quote³ that resonates most with them.
2. Sharing the recipe: Introducing the steps of the dialogue, clarifying how to participate.
3. Lighting the fire: Giving participants a minute of silence to reflect on what participants want to say about their quote.
4. Adding ingredients to the container: Following the seating arrangement, participants each got two minutes to share which quote they chose and explain why they selected this quote.
5. Heating up the fire and stirring the soup: After listening to all participants, the floor was opened for participants to respond to each other's contributions.
6. Turning off the fire: Another minute of silence to reflect on the dialogue.
7. Tasting the soup/conclusion: Going round the table again, participants were invited to share what they picked from the conversation.

During the dialogue, several anecdotes were shared about how organisational learning was currently set up in education NGOs. In between the lines, insights emerged about the epistemology of organisational learning; how is knowledge generated and who are

³ Example quotes: "Monitoring & Evaluation is not really designed to support learning. Even if it is innovative, qualitative or participatory it is not designed for learning." "When donors ask for lessons learned they want a list of bullets. It gives a picture but it doesn't capture learning".

the knowers. At this point, participants started highlighting something that turned out to be an important theme throughout the research. Majority of participants had selected the quote: "*The best learnings come from the most unexpected people; organisations should embrace that*". In their explanation, participants underlined that knowledges from various people (including the guard, field staff, children) should be included through organisational learning processes. This theme recurred again in stage 2 and was guiding the collective inquiry in stages three and four. Participants were cautious about the power dynamics that could hinder this engagement as well, and mentioned conditions for effective organisational learning such as safe spaces, flat management systems and tolerance for failure.

After the dialogue, participants were asked whether it would be worth conducting a PAR towards improving organisational learning in education NGOs. Feeding into this conversation, a former PhD student who used PAR explained to the participants what a PAR could look like, emphasising that the research process is co-designed. Using the *human barometer* method, participants indicated how important the topic was to them by standing on an imaginary line representing a scale of one to ten. Generally, participants agreed the topic was worth pursuing because they felt organisational learning was an important means to ensuring their organisations facilitate meaningful education. However, they did not feel they were in a position to zero down on one particular research question. They recommended that we should first explore what is currently happening in different types of NGOs and what we should focus on according to multiple practitioners.

I've also kind of made some reflection; have you been going to the education NGOs and asked them what is your biggest challenge that you'd like to be researched on? And if your answer is 'no', I think then I could [...] say you should actually go back and begin by just asking one or two questions. As education NGOs, they are doing so many different things what is that one common thing that they all want to be researched upon?

Ben⁴, Leader, Education NGO, Orientation Workshop, December 2015

⁴ All names mentioned in this thesis are pseudonyms, except for the (co-)authors.

Building on this, participants recommended several NGOs that could be approached for such a stock taking exercise. After the meeting, I developed a workshop report with preliminary analysis and translated the recommendations into a work plan with the next steps.

All in all, the orientation stage enabled me to move from a first-person reflective practitioner to a second-person researcher facilitating a process to address an issue of mutual concern, but also a third-person researcher bringing together representatives from various organisations. It was relatively easy for me to connect with participants from the onset, given we work in the same sector. I understood their life world; we shared a similar educational background, vocabulary and embodied experience. In my subjective experience, the dialogue was successful in establishing a tentative communicative space. I call it tentative because we reached levels of inclusion but did not fully establish control and intimacy (Wicks & Reason, 2009). However, the orientation activities did set up a good foundation for the next steps. The metaphor of *cooking soup* and the *walk of quotes* reinforced the principle that everyone's knowledge is important. By the end of the orientation workshop, participants had not only hinted at important themes, but were also able to guide the next steps of the research. Every participant in the workshop contributed to the conversation and the fact that participants slowed down the researcher, inviting her to first map current practices, suggests that there was a sense of ownership over the research design. Choosing a conducive physical space and using methods that invite people to leave their chairs and move around to engage with data creatively helped to create a sense of *un-normalness*. Even though I managed to open up a tentative communicative space, as I illustrate in stages three to five, it proved difficult to engage this group up to stage five.

3.4 Stage two – Diagnosis of the problem⁵

3.4.1 Mapping organisational learning practices

In line with the recommendations of the participants of the orientation workshop, I set up a multiple-case study to investigate how organisational learning manifests itself

⁵ Also see chapter 4.

across organisational contexts. As Stake (2006) underlines, by reviewing a phenomenon in multiple settings one can discover various facets of the research domain – or what he calls *quintain*. The quintain of this research being organisational learning in education NGOs who work in the lifelong learning for development sector. Even though this sub-study may not have been a thorough and in-depth multiple-case study, it does adopt important features of his approach. For example, in selecting the organisations, the criteria presented by Stake (2006) were honoured: “is the case relevant to the quintain? Do cases provide diversity across contexts? Do the cases provide good opportunities to learn about complexity and contexts?” (loc 829). The selection criteria for diversity were formulated by participants of the orientation workshop and included: nationality of the founders, education service, size, age and type of funding. Seven organisations were identified through purposeful sampling, as well as their accessibility (see table 4) (Creswell, 2007).

Table 4 Participating NGOs and interviews

	Nationality of founders	Years of operation⁶	# staff & volunteers	Type of educational service	Location	Source of funding	# of interviews
1	International	3	7	Access to formal education	North	Private	3
2	National	15	10	Non-formal skills training & adult literacy	Central East	Fees, private	2
3	International	2	18	Teacher development	All regions	Foundations	4
4	International	3	27	Non-formal skills training	Central East	Foundations	5
5	International	20	381	Civic & sexuality education	All regions	Multi- and bi-laterals, foundations	4

⁶ As of 2016

6	National	6	13	Entrepreneurship education	Central and Central East	Service contracts	4
7	International	5	6	Non-formal skills training	Central, North, East	Private, foundations	2

The premise of a multiple-case study design is that practices can only be understood in their context. Therefore, the semi-structured interview tools were designed to capture not only what organisational learning processes were in place, but also how this linked to the organisational context. The organisational learning processes themselves were investigated as per the concept of Organisational Learning Mechanisms (OLMs): “the structures that enable organisational members to jointly collect, analyse, disseminate, and apply information and knowledge” (Lipshitz et al., 2007, p. 16). OLMs help analyse organisational learning itself as fields with their governing rules for people to gather, process and interpret information about their social reality. To capture the organisation and its environment as fields, several multi-dimensional models of organisational learning were used as lenses (Chiva, Alegre, & Lapiedra, 2007; Jerez-Gómez, Céspedes-Lorente, & Valle-Cabrera, 2005; Lipshitz et al., 2007; Marsick & Watkins, 2003). Whilst it may be impossible to capture all dynamics in a field, these models helped investigate how each organisation formed as fields and the role of organisational learning in reconfiguring these fields. Between January and March 2016, I interviewed two to four representatives in each organisation, representing both support and implementation units. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and shared with the participants to add thoughts or suggest corrections.

To support a cross-case analysis, I developed short profiles of each organisation. These profiles captured basic organisational information, what makes them unique, major OLMs in place, examples of break-throughs that were a result of organisational learning and remaining challenges. In the process, I utilised ATLAS.ti to conduct a round of open coding, partially deductive based on the interview tool (and thus theoretical assumptions about organisational learning) and partially inductive following issues emerging from the interviews (Flick, 2009; Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). These profiles were shared with the interview respondents first and later with the organisational leadership to comment in case anything was missing or misrepresented.

These member-checks were an important first step to validating the data analysis. In one instance an interview participant highlighted which quotes they preferred not to be quoted directly because they felt these could be traced back to them. The most important part of the cross-case analysis happened during the PAR workshop with representatives of the participating NGOs, as well as members who were part of the orientation stage. The workshop served two purposes. First, to enrich the analysis of organisational learning practices emerging from the interviews. Secondly, to inspire new action scripts through deliberation about: “what we are and could be doing so that our lives can be more rational and reasonable, productive and sustainable, and just and inclusive” (McTaggart et al., 2017, p. 25). Again, the venue for this workshop was chosen carefully, we gathered in the assembly hall of a school for children with hearing disabilities. By meeting directly in the life world of learners, I was hoping to inspire reflection on the rationale of organisational learning. Besides, by choosing a cost-effective venue I wanted to demystify that learning can only happen when there is a budget available to rent out costly conference rooms. This time the workshop was chaired by one of the research participants, not only because he is a competent facilitator, but also to emphasise the collaborative nature of the research. This allowed me as a PhD student to listen and observe more attentively.

As participants trickled in, they were invited to move around the room to review the organisational learning profiles of the seven NGOs that were pinned up on the walls along with a chart inviting comments. To get new members on board, I provided a brief overview of the research so far and one of the participants shared a recapitulation of the orientation workshop. I felt it would not be the most meaningful use of time for participants to dive into the raw data from 24 interviews. Therefore, I developed a method (the *discovery walk*) that could expose participants to raw data that I curated around broader themes emerging from the overall interviews. Participants were grouped in trios and discovered the data together. To guide our inquiry, I provided three questions: What opportunities and challenges do you see in this area? What are your personal experiences in this area? What could you do differently in this area? The themes were: understanding beneficiaries, the role of M&E, balancing formal and informal organisational learning and discretionary space for practitioners. Because the trios included representatives of different organisations, the exercise stimulated exchanging experiences, finding synergies and contrasting practices. During a plenary session, participants shared what stood out to them and I also made a short presentation of

patterns that stood out for me. Participants received a form to write down their thoughts on each component of my presentation as well spaces to indicate how strongly they related to the message conveyed. The latter was aimed at gauging which thematic area participants would be most interested in exploring further in the next research phase. After the presentation, a short group discussion was facilitated to seek further feedback. In short, the participants contributed three important insights that determined the thematic focus of the continuation of the PAR.

i. Accurate picture - Overall, participants felt the profiles and findings represented what is happening in their organisations and they underlined that organisational learning is a contextual practice – taking a different shape in every organisation.

ii. Double-loop learning - Participants were most interested in investigating the themes of double-loop learning and learning from and with learners. Through conversation, participants connected the two through the concept of collective learning. They noted that double-loop learning would enable organisations to navigate power dynamics and pressures from donors by presenting progress beyond narrow targets. And enable more authentic learning from the learners themselves, who occasionally prioritise short-term results.

iii. Need to go in-depth - There was a point of critique that the data collected so far through semi-structured interviews only revealed espoused theories and not theories-in-use, suggesting the PAR should investigate deeper the actual practices (see quote below).



Figure 4 Photo of the vision drawings created by participants

Marit ehm, because you said it's actually this action research, participatory ehm. When you getting the data, when I'm looking into in the beginning I see a lot of kind of formal [...] ways of exchanging information. [...] How do you make sure the information you're capturing, [...] you're not restricting yourself to the higher level of getting what kind of formal setting is here...

but more less you get lower in the direction of ehm what is happening on ground.

Sylvester, participant, co-analysis workshop

After establishing the issues of mutual concern, participants were invited to create a shared vision for the research outcomes. To tap into a different language, free from the *system* pressures, I chose a visualisation exercise. On the wall were four posters where participants could draw what they feel organisational learning could contribute to (a goal), the conditions for this, indicators for success and risks. To translate the relatively individual drawings into a shared vision I offered participants coloured stickers to vote on the most important issues. I further asked participants reflection questions like: Why did we select these particular issues? How can we explain the difference in our choices? Eventually, this led to an agreement that organisational learning should ultimately help learners (primary beneficiaries) achieve their goals towards holistic change in communities. The aspiration to facilitate holistic change in line with what is meaningful to learners and communities does suggest a desire to overrule trends of fragmentation and target-based programming dominant in the field of lifelong learning for development (also see chapter 4).

3.4.2 Research proposal – feedback committee meeting

The co-analysis workshop had provided clarity regarding the thematic interests of NGO practitioners, as well as a few pointers for the research design. As the facilitating researcher I was able to translate these insights into a research proposal. To support this process, I analysed the workshop transcripts and interviews alongside the literature on organisational learning and PAR. Matching priorities of practitioners with gaps in the literature I developed a proposal which I submitted for ethical clearance through the authorities. Both the Gulu University Research Ethics Committee (GUREC) and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) cleared the research. To account for what I put together to research participants, I organised a feedback meeting with those participants of the workshop who expressed interest in providing critical feedback on the research process. Again, this meeting was chaired by one of the research participants, in this case, a PhD student in her final phase of research. The meeting took place in the meeting room of one of the participating organisations, reinforcing the shared ownership of the research process. Since a few months had passed, the five participants were invited to recapitulate previous engagements. It is beyond the scope of

this chapter to provide a detailed report, but each participant mentioned examples of how the research so far had triggered them to change their organisational learning practice. Again, the idea that learning could happen from unexpected people was popular. One example was that one organisation started including office support staff in the annual programme review meeting. This moment of sharing revealed that the co-analysis workshop created a back-stage space to reflect on organisational learning, not only in their own organisation but also in other NGOs.

The majority of the meeting was spent reviewing the research proposal. To simplify this discussion, I divided the proposal into three parts; the why, the what and the how. Inspired by the *World Café* method, participants wrote down their thoughts, associations, questions and feedback on a big piece of paper that covered the meeting table (The World Cafe, 2021). In this meeting, I proposed to focus the research on double-loop learning with external actors⁷. I also introduced field theory as a framework to analyse the dynamics in and outside the organisation that affect practitioners. Generally, the participants responded confirmatory to the rationale presented. They expanded the proposal by brainstorming who these external actors would be and discussing several barriers they experienced to double-loop learning. All in all, the members made three recommendations for the research proposal. The first was to look beyond learning and education for youth and expand the view to lifelong learning. Participants stressed that there are gaps from early childhood development to adult education. At first, I was hesitant to take up this broad view as I worried it would make the research too wide. However, I took up lifelong learning for development as the broader field of interest, whilst keeping an eye on the unique requirements for youth programming. The second suggestion was to make the research question more explicit and mention the outcomes organisational learning should have; in this case, participants proposed capability development for the learners in their education programmes. For this purpose, the question was updated to: How can education NGOs in Uganda create space for double-loop learning involving external actors for delivery of relevant and sustainable lifelong

⁷ Throughout the research I use the term 'actors' rather than 'stakeholders'. Though 'stakeholders' is a common term in development interventions, 'actors' in my view does better justice to the agency of people (Van der Laan, 2006). Moreover, from a field perspective, interventions are just one small aspect in development trajectories. Therefore, people cannot be reduced only to having a stake in one intervention.

learning programmes that contribute to the capabilities of young adults and their social systems? Which I simplified for the purpose of this thesis to: How can education NGOs in Uganda create space for double-loop learning involving community actors towards meaningful lifelong learning for development interventions? The capabilities of social systems were included from the perspective that youth operate in a field and by empowering them alone they may not have the opportunity to utilise new skills and knowledge. The last suggestion was regarding the type of organisation that should serve as a case study organisation. Participants confirmed the selection criteria I presented: Delivery of non-formal education programmes for young adults, organisational mission expressing an intention to build capacities of local communities, diverse funding-base that illustrates common donor compliance requirements, a departmental division between Monitoring and Evaluation and programme implementation and commitment to the research objective and process. However, participants did add a critical note to the criterion of a diverse funding base. They noted that the organisation should not be one that only learns to serve the donor needs, but should have a sovereign learning practice towards its own learning needs.

I want to add also that maybe it could also depend on how much you are changing or influencing that space. You find cases where learning generated from organisations actually changes the thinking and practice of donors. [...] Going back to Marit's photo of the swamp how do you navigate it? To the point I actually say, river full of crocodiles, how is the organisation surviving? You know, they could swallow you up if you don't do the right thing (laughter). So that's interesting, how do you manage to keep it so many and still remain in the game... and you still deliver impact, people in the community are happy, things like that.

Irene, support team member, feedback committee meeting

3.4.3 Layers-of-width

In terms of layering, both the orientation and diagnosis stage remained at the surface level of the broader field of NGOs working towards lifelong learning for development. In such a short period we did not manage to investigate organisational learning in-depth, but the wide-angle lens presented multiple advantages. For example, it allowed me to learn what practitioners felt were issues of genuine concern. By mapping organisational learning in seven NGOs, we were able to discover more about the quintain which formed

a solid foundation to ensure the single-case study, executed in stage 3, yielded insights towards a topic relevant to other organisations. A participant recognised this as an advantage as well:

I liked very much how much you include so many aspects of this topic, that especially when you look at the different themes that it's not just about M&E, or just about eh the connection between communities and organisations, but it includes... it's really it seems a very rich research in that way, so I'm really excited to see what comes out of it.

Alexandra, participant co-analysis workshop

However, due to the wide-angle view, I also faced the case-quintain dilemma described by Stake (2006). I needed to find a balance between achieving some form of consensus about the practice being studied, as well as documenting key differences emerging through cases. Participants contributed to both sides of this continuum. They shared a variety of ideas and experiences – some of which we brought together into more coherent narratives through the vision exercise. In my experience, what was important was to reflect on what was so far said by whom and how this connected to the body of knowledge. Zooming in and out as a third-person action researcher put me in a unique position. I developed a more comprehensive oversight of all research activities compared to others involved in the research.

This also meant that some of the decisions I made in the process were informed by reflection processes that happened outside of the participatory spaces. For example, suggesting double-loop learning as a concept that could enrich organisational learning did not come from any of the participants; rather, it is a concept I identified based on the experiences shared. Somekh (2009) refers to action research as being in an *adventure playground* having the options to choose which research methods and identities to use in a particular situation (Somekh, 2009). She underlines that action research does not limit researchers to using specific conceptual frameworks, rather, theories and metaphors are helpful tools in developing agency. When inserting external frameworks to support participants in making sense of their world, Ernie Stringer encourages action researchers to do so “delicately by inquiring whether or not it’s useful to think about this in these ways or if it might be possible to do this or that” (Dustman et al., 2014, p. 438). Therefore, I included member-checks to ensure concepts such as double-loop learning, field theory and the idea of learning spaces made sense to the participants – most explicitly during

the feedback committee meeting. Participants confirmed that the lenses resonated with them – as illustrated through the quote on feeling stuck in the swamp and under the attack of crocodiles. As the research unfolded, I observed that participants added their own interpretations towards these concepts which I will further explain in chapter 7.

3.5 Stage three – Entering the case

3.5.1 Including leadership and staff

Based on the case study criteria, four of the seven profiled NGOs were eligible. However, one stood out in terms of accessibility and interest in participating in the research. This organisation is not a traditional education NGO, but a large component of their programming consists of a non-formal education model for youth across the country. At the time of the research, the case study organisation operated in ten countries and started operations in Uganda over two decades ago. The organisation consisted of around 70 staff and 250 volunteers. They ran eight different development programmes for youth in the areas of livelihood, SRHR and civic engagement. When it comes to improving organisational learning practice, the role of leadership is considered critical (Lipshitz et al., 2007). Therefore, I started by connecting with the senior management team. In February 2017, the country director had given a green light to the research process. Following their approval, I organised a half-day workshop for senior management in April 2017. The meeting, held at a school, was co-facilitated by myself and a senior manager who had participated in the research since the diagnosis stage. She became the first co-researcher in the PAR, playing a significant role in brokering relationships within the organisation, allocating time for activities and spreading findings and innovations. At the start of the workshop, managers updated the organisational learning profile that was developed during the diagnosis stage. After this, I presented a short version of the research proposal. I acknowledged that there could be other lenses to use, but that this was the proposed angle based on the mapping exercise. The main purpose, therefore, was not to explore new research questions but to establish whether this question was sufficiently meaningful to the organisation. The members noted that the question was aligned with the new organisational strategy that was also looking for mutual accountability with communities, and had a strong emphasis on learning.

After onboarding the leadership, there was a need to get a bigger representation of the organisation on board, and the entry stage aimed at developing a rich view of the

field emerging around double-loop learning in this specific organisation and establish ways of working that could foster a PAR. To advertise the research across the organisation, I developed an infographic and a brief pitch that I delivered during an all-staff meeting. In line with the recommendation by one of the research participants earlier, I decided to investigate deeper whether the espoused practices of organisational learning matched those in-use. To gather these insights, I used a combination of conversational and observational methods. For example, I spent time *hanging around* the office where I was welcomed to use a desk to work on my research. This enabled me to have informal interactions with staff members during lunch and at the water cooler or meetings on appointment. Some of these were recorded, but I also took extensive field notes of spontaneous encounters and observations. These interactions helped strengthen relationships with staff from various teams, and formed an easy channel to be invited to activities connected to the research. I observed several activities that related to organisational learning. For example, a co-analysis workshop in youth-led research or a management meeting reviewing progress. Lastly, I used the non-profit version of the Dimensions of the Learning Organisation Questionnaire (Marsick & Watkins, 2003; McHargue, 2003) to rapidly gain insights into the views of people across the organisation. This survey was administered via e-mail using Google forms and led to a 30 per cent response rate. Findings were analysed using SPSS 24 and compared to findings from the DLOQ in other organisational settings (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). By using varying methods, I tried to create a safe conversational space, sometimes anonymously (such as the DLOQ) to mention sensitive issues, and other times informally to avoid the pressures of efficiency, letting the conversation flow without a specific goal.

3.5.2 Identifying the 'location' for the PAR

It had become clear at this point that the organisation with eight different programmes had a decentralised manner of decision making. Therefore, it made sense to zoom in on one programme team that offered a relevant context and could accommodate the research to go through layers-of-depth. Before establishing this, I wanted to make sure I had a sense of the most important themes and issues emerging around double-loop learning with external actors. I sought to validate themes emerging from my observations and conversations through two workshops. I planned these gatherings together with the lead co-researcher. In May 2017, during the annual planning retreat, all staff were invited to a 90-minute mini-research session. Besides informing members about the research purpose I was trying to clarify what PAR is like and how members

could participate. Rather than explaining this verbally, I opted to model it and illustrate the *un-normalness* of this research. For this purpose, I developed a methodology called *elephant stakeholder mapping* (see Intermezzo 2). After a brief introduction of the research purpose, I used the metaphor of the elephant and the blindfolded men to explain collective learning – emphasising that we need to consult external actors to gain insight into the true nature and solutions of problems. After this, programme teams developed their *elephant maps* by establishing the social problem their elephant represents, listing the various actors who know something important about this problem (and clarifying what it is they know) and finally listing the platforms they have in place to mobilise these insights. Groups received red, orange and green pencils to rate how successful they were in terms of engaging the actors in each little field. This self-assessment helped expand the view of the organisational field to the external actors affected and involved in the various programmes. Also, some of the programme teams reported having used the insights gained to include new platforms to involve those actors whose voices are underrepresented. A second important meeting that helped narrow down the issues to focus on was the thematic validation meeting with the senior management team. In September 2017 I had analysed the data through a round of open coding in ATLAS.ti. A few themes stood out in regards to the way organisational learning was leading to critical improvements in the education model. To validate these themes, I created *statement cards* to trigger a critical discussion (e.g., #8 If we had all the money in the world, we would run our education model like this). Managers picked a card in turns, and posed the statement to each other. Reaching a level of convergence, this meeting confirmed a few challenges observed, especially the lack of flexibility in programming, despite several efforts to include community voices and making interventions youth-led.

Based on this convergence, together with the lead co-researcher, I identified three possible programmes that would suit the research. One of these turned out to be difficult to access given it was implemented through a consortium of organisations. For the other two, both located in central-eastern Uganda, I organised orientation workshops to enable teams to make an informed decision about participating in the research. The half-day workshop started with a similar exercise to the *walk of quotes*. This time programme staff and volunteers walked around the room to discover quotes about organisational learning in their own organisation. We engaged in a dialogue about emerging insights and how these themes manifest themselves in their programme. I also

introduced the basics of PAR and asked the team what they would expect from the research process and me as a facilitating researcher. Through these workshops, I discovered that both teams were very interested. Together with the programme manager, we selected the team that had the best capacity to implement innovations.

In November 2017 I presented a brief summary of my orientation report to all staff during a retreat. The emphasis of this short session was to explain the next steps and clarify where the PAR would be located. The lead co-researcher presented the opportunity for other members to join an internal feedback committee similar to the structure adopted by Tukundane (2014). This idea, however, never materialised and illustrates a challenge that seemed to reoccur in this PAR: once you narrow the group of participants it requires a significant investment to keep others involved and informed. As a part-time PhD student, it was difficult to find time for deeper and regular engagement with the bigger group. Tumuheki (2017) underlines the importance of empathy towards the already burdened lives of research participants. In this case too, the low response rate from organisational members may have suggested they might have struggled to find the time. Therefore, I had to be flexible and utilise the platforms in which staff were already meeting to keep everyone updated and seek input throughout the research process. In addition, to keep a wider audience involved, two editions of a newsletter were created and disseminated to the wider research community.

Table 5 Organisational level workshops across stages 3 to 5

Seq. No.	Topic	Participants	Date	Chair/facilitator
1	Leadership orientation	Senior management team	10/4/2017	Marit
2	All-staff orientation (elephant mapping)	All staff	11/5/2017	Marit
3	Thematic validation	Senior management team	14/9/2017	Marit
4	Research update – first findings	All staff	30/10/2017	Marit
5	Research update – findings update and discussion	All staff	15/5/2018	Programme team lead & Marit

6	Force field analysis for priority changes	All staff	16/5/2018	Senior management member & Marit
7	Learning from success	All staff	8/11/2018	M&E member & Marit
8	Leadership closing meeting	Senior management team	31/5/2019	Marit

3.6 Stage four – Case study: Three learning and innovation tracks

3.6.1 Goal inquiry

Now that we had zeroed down on the location of the PAR and the group that would go through the cycles of action and reflection together, it was pertinent to identify which part of their organisational learning practice with community actors they wanted to improve and how we could set ourselves up as a PAR team. During the orientation meeting, programme team members had already expressed that collective learning with external actors in their education programme was an area of concern.

When we engage external actors like teachers, local leaders, youth and parents in learning, we usually share knowledge, gain knowledge from them or generate knowledge with them. From my perspective, the things we have done, the meetings we have had with local government, I do not think we do actually generate knowledge with them. We do a lot of informing rather than them contributing [...] So, they really have no much to say in those kinds of trainings or meetings, because we have come with our structured agendas on what we want to inform them.

Penninah, implementing educator, orientation workshop

To set ourselves up for action and reflection cycles, I opted for a methodology inspired by the action evaluation approach of Friedman and Rothman (2015). This approach starts from goal inquiry to discover issues of shared concern, recognising that multiple actors often define success in projects differently. Friedman and Rothman (2015) used a survey for the goal inquiry, but to save time I organised a *why, what, who workshop* for the programme team in November 2017. At the start of the workshop, participants shared their personal passion for youth development. This centred the conversation around the *why* and helped identify several commonalities between team members. The

conversation then moved to the *what* using the guiding question: Through this PAR, what will change in our organisational learning processes around our education model? This conversation resulted in roughly three goals:

- I. Strengthen engagement processes for youth and other actors in national sexuality education policy development.
- II. Mobilise volunteer voices to reshape the education model at an organisational level.
- III. Strengthen inter-team learning about the education model.

Initially, the *who* section of this workshop was meant to identify who should be invited to join as co-researchers in this PAR. However, the team felt hesitant to bring people on board such as the district officials, health workers, youth and parents, out of fear of receiving socially desirable answers. They requested me to meet them separately to give them a private voice. This conversation started to reveal the team's perceptions of collective learning spaces; they felt that external actors often used narratives to save face. At the end of the meeting, the team members were given co-researcher forms that sought consent to participate as co-researchers. This formalised the PAR team, though new members would come and others would go over the course of the research. The PAR team at this point included implementing practitioners, team leaders as well as support staff such as monitoring and evaluation officers.

In November and December 2017, I conducted interviews with two Community Based Organisations (CBOs) working in the space of SRHR education, district officials, parents and volunteers (see table 6). For the volunteers, I organised a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) using similar statement cards as those I used with senior management. One of the volunteers brought me to the village he previously operated in to introduce me to some parents. I conducted short interviews in which he acted as a translator. In part, this could have influenced the participants' answers as I may have become associated with the NGO – this is difficult to establish. Overall, the interviews and FGD revealed that there was little opportunity for the various actors to influence and critically review the programme. The volunteers felt their views did not reach the decision-makers. On a positive note, one district official felt the case study NGO is a positive outlier, especially because they disseminate their research findings widely and utilise a multi-dimensional approach for youth programming. However, during the interview, he

also mentioned that perhaps he could take on a more critical stance and step away from his position at the periphery.

I think I should dig deeper and get to know, it's at that level that you can get to understand and maybe be of more use to them than staying at the periphery.

Pius, district official, interview

Later in the research, I discovered that Pius acted on his own recommendation and joined the NGO in meeting youth groups.

Table 6 Interview participants *why, what, who*

Actor category	#	Method	When
Local government	2	Semi-structured interview	November 2017
CBO working in the same field	2	Semi-structured interview	November 2017
Parent	2	Semi-structured interview	November 2017
Volunteer educators	8	Focus Group Discussion	November 2017

To further equip the newly formed PAR team, I decided to share theoretical concepts related to the research topic. As recommended by Ernie Stringer (Dustman et al., 2014), I tried to test together with the co-researchers which conceptual tools could be helpful for us in the process. The workshop was co-organised with the programme team lead and co-facilitated by one of the M&E staff who had been involved in the research since the start. Other roles were distributed amongst various team members such as timekeeping, energizers and photography. Using PowerPoint and videos I illustrated double-loop learning (Argyris, 1982), the ladder of inference (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994) and blame and gain frames (Ramalingam, 2006). After these introductions, participants formed small groups to apply these concepts to fictive scenarios based on the preliminary findings (also see chapter 7). This workshop contributed to a shared understanding of double-loop learning that formed an important foundation for the rest of the research. It also created a space for personal reflection as to why certain frames and actions are carried into learning spaces.

To round up the goal inquiry, I organised the findings of the various *why, what who* consultations in Venn diagrams illustrating what the various actors had in common, what unique views emerged and what conflicting views emerged. Whereas Friedman and

Rothman (2015) used a multi-actor dialogue, we only met with staff and volunteers following the decision made earlier about the configuration of the PAR team. What stood out when we reviewed the findings was that all actors were deeply passionate about equipping youth to achieve their goals and drive change in their communities. They all believed that participatory approaches were needed to set up such interventions. Conflicting views emerged around whether the existing spaces for participation were actually effective. This was a turning point in this PAR in the sense that the team started to ask themselves: are our learning mechanisms in line with how these external actors want to be engaged? For example, the team had assumed that their quarterly reports for local government actors would be sufficient to keep them informed, but in many cases, these same actors expressed not being sufficiently updated about their progress. The team raised follow-up questions such as: How do these actors like to be involved in the programme cycle? What kind of information do they like to receive? What could these actors contribute to our programming that we are currently ignoring? At what stages of the programme management cycle has our NGO involved key players so far, how and what has been the result (non-, single, vs double-loop learning)? Though this may seem like a fruitful co-design session, at this point, I started questioning whether the goal inquiry was specific enough. It seemed like the same issues kept recurring and they did not become any more concrete. In the next rounds of activities, however, I realised that for the issues to be concrete we also needed to go through the layers of depth behind the problems as I explain at the end of this section on stage 3.

In March 2018, we held a third PAR meeting to set specific goals and create an action plan. From this point onwards the team's action research meetings were chaired by team members. This allowed me to focus on specific input to feed the process and observe the conversation. Revisiting the issues discussed in the previous meeting, we brainstormed innovations and research activities to address these issues. To support this process, I presented several action research methodologies that could help us investigate the field and root causes of the problems faced. For each activity, a lead person was assigned and a tentative timeline was determined. Roughly, the activities started to carve out two learning pathways: one focused on improving the volunteer capacity to engage with external actors and a second to find out what external actors themselves wanted. These two tracks are illustrated in more detail below and in chapter 7.

Table 7 Research and innovation activities scheduled by the PAR team in March 2017

Activity	Executed
Sending cards for Easter.	Yes
Map what information stakeholders actually want.	Yes
Map existing platforms in the sub-county.	Partially
Stakeholder mapping - Knowledge network.	Yes
Volunteer & staff training on stakeholder engagement. Invite a stakeholder to the training.	Yes
Participate in activities organised by the district/sub-county	Partially
Review current systems in place	Partially
Tracking stakeholder engagements (re-initiating the check-list that existed).	No
Action at home review + volunteer-led innovations.	Partially
Publicity based on the mapping exercise.	No

Whilst on paper this planning session suggests a strong sense of ownership over the PAR process, in reality, the assigned leads were not always able to follow up on the activities. This slow progress was disappointing to me and in the PAR process, I had to learn to reframe my own definition of success. Through personal conversations with mentors and supervisors, I learned to appreciate that there were many demands for the co-researchers. Some had to go for maternity leave, others left the organisation and were replaced. I learned to appreciate the small steps taken, for example when the parent curriculum co-design activity was not as comprehensive as I would have hoped, at least the co-researcher included a new set of questions and reached out to parents before planning the sessions. Together with the programme team lead, I tried as much as possible to follow the rhythm and work schedules of the team members and look for synergies with on-going activities. I also continued to maintain my connections with the head office, once in a while spending a day in the office. This allowed me to update leadership through informal conversations. This parallel process led to some small spin-offs, for example when a member of the M&E team felt inspired to revamp the learning tracker to make sure all programme teams track their learning regularly. Learning, in this case, referred to key insights about the programme design and implementation strategies that emerged during programme implementation.

Table 8 Action research team meetings programme level

Seq. No.	Topic	Participants	Date	Chair/facilitator
1	Orientation meeting	Programme team	2/10/2017	Marit
2	Why, what, who	Programme team	8/11/2017	Marit
3	Double-loop learning workshop	Programme team + local office teams	15/1/2018	Marit + M&E member
4	Research design	Programme team	9/2/2018	Marit
5	Action planning	Programme team	12/3/2018	Programme staff
6	Action check-in	Programme team + supervisor	19/4/2018	Programme intern
7	Volunteer innovations	Programme team	10/5/2018	Programme volunteer
8	Team re-orientation	New programme lead + team	26/7/2018	Marit
9	Learning from success workshop	Programme team + local office teams	1/8/2018	Victor Friedman & Marit
10	Collaborative analysis	Programme team & volunteers	17/9/2018	Programme volunteer
11	Research integration	Programme team	7/12/2018	Programme team lead
12	Closing workshop	Programme team, volunteers & local office team	13/5/2019	Marit

3.6.2 Learning track 1 – Volunteers as catalysts

In February 2018 a new cohort of volunteers joined the NGO to implement the programme in various communities across central-eastern Uganda. Within the PAR process, the team had established a goal of equipping volunteer educators to more effectively broker relationships with external actors, especially at the community and local government level. Eventually, a learning track evolved resulting in a reframing of the volunteer role as changemakers and catalysts of double-loop learning.

To introduce the new volunteers to the workings of the PAR team, I was given half an hour during their orientation training. In this session, I asked volunteers to write their vision for change on a piece of paper. I then drew a padlock on a big paper explaining that we could view the desired change as the padlock and I drew a key, representing the programme model they were currently being trained on. In my explanation I gave the volunteers a disclaimer that the key may not always fit; there may need to be some

adjustments to unlock the change and that this research is looking into the processes through which the NGO learns and makes such adjustments together with those involved. After the session, around a dozen volunteers expressed interest in being part of the PAR team. Their main motivation was to ensure the programme they were about to deliver would bring the intended impact to youth in the communities. Several volunteers also expressed interest in experiencing a research up-close after they had learned about it in university. By observing three of their training days, I also got an impression of how the programme was framed for the volunteers and what was said about engaging external actors. Moreover, it provided an opportunity to interact with volunteers informally during lunch and tea breaks; these were usually very joyful moments wherein we took selfies or discussed issues around development.

In March 2018, I met the group of interested volunteers again during one of the volunteer meetings. By now they had implemented the programme for a few weeks and had first-hand experiences with external actors. During this conversation, one theme stood out in particular; the volunteers felt insufficiently equipped to act as changemakers, instead, they felt they were trained to be target achievers. After the meeting, we formed a WhatsApp group to ease communications and coordination about the volunteer involvement in the PAR. Starting April the volunteers chose representatives to participate in the PAR meetings with the programme team and occasionally chaired the meeting. As a result of volunteers and staff meeting at the table, the two parties developed a mutual understanding. It became clear to both parties why certain practices continued to persist despite new insights. It seems important to meet each other back-stage and not only on-stage where system pressures dictate the modus operandi.

But eh, last year you made our work easier (haha) with this research, whereby volunteers understood our position. They also understood that we have somewhere where we can also end. And then, they understand that it is not all about reporting, reporting every now and then [...] but also working, working around to solve the, any challenges by themselves but not [...] specifically relying on [program officers] for support.

Juliana, implementing team member, closing workshop

The double-column case interviews that I facilitated from February to November 2018 also formed an important catalyst in this PAR. This interview method is inspired by

Argyris' double column method and further adapted by Action Design (Rudolph, Taylor, & Foldy, 2001). Before the interview, participants were given guidelines on writing a case about a dilemma or a success they experienced while engaging community members in their work towards improving the education activities. In the right-hand column, participants wrote what occurred and, on the left-side, they wrote personal thoughts and feelings. In those instances where a participant did not submit a case in advance, they would share their story at the beginning of an interview. After explaining the case, participants established whether they felt this was a dilemma or a success. If dealing with a dilemma, we followed the method of reframing described by 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. If dealing with success, we followed the learning from success method described by Schechter, Sykes, and Rosenfeld (2004). These interviews aimed at reconstructing the theory-in-use which contributed to the success and which general principles the organisation might learn from this instance. After the interview was transcribed, I conducted a thematic analysis (Flick, 2009) to summarise the original theory-of-action as well as the new theory-of-action or general principles of success. This summary and the transcript were shared with participants for feedback. Only three participants shared feedback while others solely acknowledged receipt. During the action research workshop of September 2018, I presented general themes emerging from the interviews, and staff, together with volunteers, discussed the findings and explored desirable action strategies to ensure volunteers are better equipped to facilitate collective learning more critically. The ideas were further cemented during the staff-only PAR meeting in December 2018 and a back-ward planning session with the programme team lead.

Table 9 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
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	Value contradictions, volunteer position
11	Volunteer 2018	Timothy	Male	Problem reframing	Monetary expectations, volunteer position
12	Volunteer 2018	Lilian	Female	Unstructured	Volunteer position, value contradictions

All in all, these series of events helped unravel the mental models that hindered volunteers (and staff) from engaging in critical learning with external actors, as well as the strategies they used to manoeuvre tensions around programme targets, budget constraints, conflicting expectations and value contradictions. Through a reflexive thinking process, the interview participants first individually, and then as a team, during the workshop examined their own beliefs and actions. Whereas the team at first aspired to equip volunteers to better represent the organisation and promote the programme, success was redefined as working towards shared responsibility and mutual relationships. This illustrates the layered aspect of this PAR in terms of depth. Building on the concepts learned during the learning from success and double-loop learning workshops, the team was able to untangle how their assumptions and models connected to how they internalised the field, and that at the same time their actions shape or reproduce the field. This realisation was accompanied by a sense of power – a sense that the team could create an alternative future, for example, by redefining success as something that starts small. Based on this collective inquiry process, the team

implemented several action strategies to reframe the volunteer role towards being changemakers (see chapter 6 and 7 for more details).

3.6.3 Learning track 2 – Community actors

One of the goals the team formulated was to improve their relationships with community actors. They underlined that they wanted external actors to 'appreciate their work'. Despite their efforts to keep people involved and informed, they kept hearing that people do not know them. As mentioned earlier, the team was eager to find out from the perspective of community members and government officials how they would like to be involved. A micro-innovation that the team proposed was to invite community representatives to the volunteer training to lead the sessions on stakeholder engagement. This did happen during a refresher training of the 2018 cohort. A teacher and parent were invited to share their recommendations on how to collaborate effectively. In addition, during the same training volunteers were given Easter cards to share with various members of the community. Through these cards, the team wanted to tackle their habit of reaching out to community actors at the point that they need people to partner in an activity. The team was hoping that these cards could broker a better, more personal connection. One of the PAR team members was assigned to make follow up calls with some of the actors to find out how these cards were received and whether they changed their perception of the NGO. Unfortunately, the report of this person got lost while he transitioned to another job. During the April PAR meeting, the volunteers mentioned that the cards received mixed responses. Some found the cards used as coasters, for example. A small achievement can be noted, however, handing out the cards did become a first-time interaction with some of the community members, providing them with an opportunity to get to know people around.

To learn more about the NGO-community relationship, we designed a sub-study to map how community actors would like to be engaged in collective learning. This exercise, however, presented a couple of dilemmas. First, earlier in the research, the team had problematised not receiving critical feedback from community actors – they felt their involvement would hinder gathering authentic views. Secondly, PAR as an approach seeks to solve problems of concern to participants; yet in this case, an NGO raised the issue, not the community. We did not want to assume that the problem experienced by the NGO was their problem too, or that they were necessarily interested in this research (Arieli, Friedman, & Agbaria, 2009). To overcome these dilemmas, the

NGO team and I opted to conduct this as a separate sub-study of the PAR. I recruited three research assistants to form an external research team and widened the research tools to inquire about all NGOs, not just the case-study NGO. Most importantly, through the initial research activities, the research team investigated whether the problem identified by the NGO mattered to the community and provided an opportunity to influence the direction of the research.

Table 10 lists the research activities that emerged in this trajectory and who participated in which activity. Inspired by field theory, the research methods aimed at mapping the status quo of the field of youth development in the village. For example, what did youth consider meaningful issues, which actors were important in this field, who does what and how do youth and other community members like to relate with the NGOs operating in their village? I developed the research instruments and invited some of the volunteers to help contextualise the questions. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) tool was developed for use with a female youth group. This included visualisation exercises; participants were asked to map their village and important places for youth, as well as their knowledge networks. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format and participants were selected through a snowballing method.

Table 10 Community research activities and participants

Seq.	Activity	Method	Participants
1	Data collection about community perceptions	Focus Group Discussion	Female youth group members (9)
		Interviews	Local leaders (2) Young male (5) Young female (5) Elders (5) Business people (3) Health worker (1) Head teacher (1)
2	Community dialogue	Dialogue, brainstorm	Young male (4) Young female (5) Adult male (3) Adult female (4) Incl. local leaders, religious leaders, elders, health worker, teacher, youth
3	Committee meetings	n/a	Community representatives (4)

4	Community-NGO meeting	Community-NGO meeting	Community members (37) NGO representatives (15) District and local government officials (4)
5	Spin-off	Field notes	n/a

Together with the assistants I analysed preliminary insights from interviews and FGDs and presented their insights for feedback during a community dialogue using the local language. At the end of the meeting, members brainstormed recommendations for themselves, NGOs and government actors. Based on the proposal from participants in this meeting, a community-NGO meeting was organised to present recommendations to NGOs operating in the village. After this meeting, the committee met a few more times to discuss follow up steps. A research assistant transcribed and translated all recorded interviews and meetings. During the final round of analysis, I used ATLAS.ti guided by the questions set out in the previous section. Through cycles of open and axial coding (Flick, 2009), six code groups emerged: Youth development status quo, Actors, Relationships aspects, Perceptions of NGOs, Positionality and agency and Space factors. An important layer of analysis occurred in the conversations with research participants throughout the research activities and reflections with co-researchers. One of the co-researchers mentioned for example that the defensiveness of NGOs during the meeting was due to power dynamics; they felt they had to save face in front of the local government representatives. On the one hand, the community-NGO meeting modelled a community-driven collective learning mechanism. In a way it held up a mirror for the team – reflecting whether their assumptions about their programme model and community engagement had been right (see chapter 5). On the other hand, however, when it came to engaging external actors differently and setting up new spaces for collective learning the team implemented no major innovations (see chapter 7).

3.6.4 Learning track 3 – double-loop learning capabilities

Whereas the on-stage innovations can be grouped under tracks 1 and 2, a third track emerged with back-stage innovations that helped enhance our reflexivity skills. First of all, the regular PAR meetings formed a platform to discuss topics that were normally not addressed.

There are so many things that we have discussed in this action research, that otherwise we would not have had time to talk about them. And it's so

interesting that when we sit, [...] how many aspects would come up and you're like: "wow!"

Andrew, support team member, action research meeting December 2018

Secondly, several workshops aimed at modelling double-loop learning methods. For example, the double-loop learning workshop and the learning from success workshop. The latter was co-facilitated by Victor Friedman and myself. The participants include members from the programme team as well as other local office team members. After a brief introduction of 'self-in-the-field', Victor facilitated an example reflection session using learning from success (inspired by Schechter et al., 2004). One of the volunteers shared about a situation she considered a success and participants collaboratively distilled what elements helped achieve the success. As a spin-off from this reflection, the team investigated the monetary expectations and the transactional character of their relationships with external actors (also see chapter 6).

Parallel to the PAR activities with the programme team, we organised several all-staff sessions to keep the wider team up-to-date, but also to disseminate the double-loop learning methods. In November 2018, for example, we facilitated a short session with all staff on learning from success. In May 2018, we used the force field analysis method which helped operationalise field theory in a concrete manner (Ramalingam, 2006). At the start of the session, we presented preliminary research findings and invited the organisational members to connect these insights to their programme strategy and work plans for the upcoming year. After brainstorming recommended changes, the members voted on the four most important changes that should be made. In groups, participants conducted a force field analysis to understand what pressures may work against the change and what opportunities could be leveraged to support the change. During an informal check-in, one of the senior managers informed me that she reviewed each programme work plan for signs that learning has been incorporated for the next year. Overall, the various skill-building workshops were very helpful. Not only did they generate key data and insights, but they were transferable to other learning platforms. In the closing phase, I made a final attempt to integrate as many of the insights and skills as possible, as I describe in the section about stage 5.

3.6.5 Layers-of-depth

Working with one programme team in stage 4 proved to have several benefits for the PAR process. The team had a strong base of shared experiences, and their programme

provided a direct platform to try out innovations, while it was relatively easy to access team members in one place. By focusing on the lived realities of one team we were able to zoom in on smaller and more concrete, situations. Rather than discussing general themes and espoused theories, we were able to dig deeper to understand the team's mental models regarding collective learning with external actors. Ultimately these micro-situations ended up revealing how the wider field was internalised and how this affected the work of these NGO practitioners; members discovered their blind spots. The back-stage spaces facilitated reflexivity, opening up the realm of possibility and giving the team a sense of power and agency. They felt less helpless in the face of the dominant paradigms in development cooperation. "Thinking spatially gives expression to the fundamental plasticity of the social world because the limits are not fixed, but rather defined by our imaginations and ability to put imagination into action through these relations" (Friedman, 2011, p. 13). In my reflections I have wondered to what extent this depth became an organisational asset; individuals who had participated in double-loop case interviews felt empowered, but to what extent did this translate to organisational change? Whilst I am not able to provide a concrete answer to this question, I can imagine that the agency of individual members found their way to effecting smaller changes. In chapter 7, I discuss the durability and spread of the PAR outcomes in more detail.

3.7 Stage five – Closing

Ernie Stringer advises action researchers to start their action research project with an exit plan (Dustman et al., 2014). At the start of the journey, I did sketch an exit plan; I was especially keen on keeping the leadership team involved throughout and making sure the innovations generated through the PAR were taken up at the organisational level. I was also looking forward to bringing back the other NGOs involved in stages 1 and 2 to make sure every participating NGO could benefit from the in-depth insights. Before I elaborate more on the research methodology used in this stage, I want to clarify how I knew the time was ripe to exit. I realised that the difficulty with PAR is that new ideas keep coming up and given the rapid changes in the organisational context (and beyond) new questions keep emerging. However, at the start of 2019, making up the balance, I realised I had sufficient insight to answer the research questions we set at the start. Secondly, the programme team had undergone several staff transitions, leaving behind very few original co-researchers and making it difficult to keep up the collective inquiry community. For practical reasons too, it was the right time to close my PhD study.

Therefore, around April 2019 I started initiating a few closing activities. These were aimed at concretising some of the insights towards possible dissemination within the organisation. And second to gather from the co-researchers' view what the research had been able to achieve in their practice and thus to evaluate the various activities that happened back-stage and on-stage.

At the PAR team level, I conducted semi-structured interviews with four available co-researchers in May 2019. These interviews covered topics such as most outstanding research activities, their views on how participation was facilitated, research outcomes and general feedback for me on my role as the facilitating researcher. In the same month, I facilitated a reflection workshop with six team members and three volunteers. During this half-day workshop, I created a *trip through memory lane* by pinning sheets on the wall with all research activities in chronological order. Since there had been some staff turnover and not everyone had joined the PAR at the same time, I paired up *new* and *old* team members to discover the activities and bring back memories together. During a plenary session, participants shared their key insights. This yielded new knowledge for me regarding changes made outside of my horizon. Johanna for example mentioned a change in the way community partners are identified and involved.

Oh, my memories I will start with eh how we do our stakeholder engagements, eh and one thing that stood out and kind of a learning is now working with the different departments than working with the individuals. [...] And I think it somehow helped and it improved our eh, stakeholder eh, it pulled the stakeholders to support the different activities than being attached to a specific individual. Because at times they are not in office and they won't be able to provide the required support at that time. But if you're working with a whole department anyone can be assigned to support like the different organisational activities.

Johanna, staff sharing office with programme team, closing workshop

During this workshop, members also raised questions to find out what stuck and what did not happen as planned. One of the volunteers, for example, asked if new systems were taken up by the NGO in incorporating some of the findings. I passed this question back to the programme team who confirmed that some systems were updated, for example, the support and supervision check-list was revised to facilitate more meaningful conversations with the volunteers. I also probed further to find out why

certain things were not implemented (see chapter 7). At this stage, the team requested me to make some noise when sharing the results with the senior management team.

At the end of May 2019, a closing workshop was organised for the senior management team. Organising this workshop was difficult because there were several vacancies in the leadership team. The meeting did happen with four members some of whom were in temporary or acting positions. Using a PowerPoint presentation, I presented the research findings along the three learning tracks and invited the leadership to think about the next steps. Given the fluidity of the acting senior management team, it proved to be a difficult period to follow up on implementation or consideration of the recommendations. Both closing workshops were recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed, forming helpful data to reflect on the research process in general.

Another closing process happened at the community level. I set up a meeting with the district official in charge and the community organising committee to ensure he was informed about the community's innovative idea of establishing a coordinating committee. Afterwards, together with the committee, I organised a football competition for young men and women in the village. This was meant as an appreciation for participation by the youth as well as to visibly announce my exit. The idea of establishing a coordinating committee at the Parish level was implemented by the organising committee, but after a few gatherings died down.

3.8 Reflections on phronetic PAR

3.8.1 Cutting through the layers of our lived realities

As mentioned in the introduction, it may not be possible to plan and predict every step in a PAR but in hindsight the steps make sense. To structure my recollection of the research trajectory, I introduced two types of layering, layers-of-width and layers-of-depth. Over time, our interchanging phases of action and reflection meandered into exploring the influence of the wider field on micro-situations and investigating how agency could be fostered to change problematic elements about the field. In a way, the research followed a funnel design moving from the broader challenges in the field of lifelong learning for development to a community of organisations and one programme team in particular. Through a reverse funnel, these micro-realities were reconnected to the broader fields; through reflexivity with programme participants but also by writing this thesis. Both

forms of layering helped the co-researchers to produce meaningful knowledge about the organisational learning practice of NGOs and possible strategies for double-loop learning. They highlighted barriers at the levels of mental models, as well as field dynamics. The team was also able to innovate how the organisation collaborates with external actors, especially by reframing the volunteer role as catalysts for double-loop learning. Innovations also occurred outside of the view of this PAR, triggered by the communicative spaces facilitated from stages one through five, and participants developed and implemented new strategies. Other ideas never materialised, and to some extent we were able to explain why (see chapter 7).

There is also something to say about visualising the PAR process. At the start of the PAR journey, I used the conventional PAR cycle to illustrate the research stages to the team. During one of the reflection interviews, a co-researcher mentioned it would have been helpful if I revisited the phases and helped the team anticipate where we are going next. To him, it was not always clear where we stood. The layers, thus, might have made sense to me as a facilitative researcher who was in every single PAR space and activity, but since participation fluctuated over time it was not clear to all participants. I would recommend other action researchers to embrace emergence, but also make an effort to visualise or articulate the journey more explicitly to participants. In this PAR all steps were documented and analysis occurred continuously, but this was not always shared broadly to keep members up-to-date or lined back to the process framework. This is partly because I did the research as a part-time student and could not always keep up with transcribing, analysing and interpreting the findings in-depth as fast as perhaps was needed. The other reason why stages could have been blurry is because of the similarities between the research topic and the research approach. On the one hand, it helped to model methods that could also be used for continued organisational learning. On the other hand, participants may not always have been aware about how the back-stage spaces were linked to organisational learning. Therefore, it might be helpful to build-in reflection on spaces and make the movements between on-stage and back-stage more explicit.

As Friedman and Blaak (2016) suggest: "the ability to create containers and the ability to open a space for dialogue, constitute the central features of the craftsmanship of participatory research" (p.126). In regards to opening a communicative space and including participants I found the idea of *un-normalness* useful (Wicks & Reason, 2009),

trying to shake things up to keep distorting power dynamics at bay and help participants make sense of their world. I intentionally tried to avoid replicating the usual learning spaces for NGOs which often involve a conference room in a hotel. Metaphors, unique venues and co-facilitation all turned out to be ingredients to facilitate learningful conversations. Participants also appreciated the sessions where creative methodologies were modelled (rather than just mentioned/talked about) as a means to build their own capacity in facilitating learning spaces. Yet, other times, we chose to merge our PAR spaces with the existing learning spaces as a means to access participants in a cost- and time-efficient manner. I was able to utilise multiple tools that other action researchers had developed but also worked on contextualising these and creating my own (such as the *elephant map*). The research stage guided me in selecting and modifying or creating these methods, as well as the mentoring I received from my supervisors and other members of our Youth, Education and Work research network. It was further helpful to reconnect to the literature throughout the research process to explore what others have done at various stages of action research and read reflections of other action researchers about managing power dynamics and other challenges. I may also have been helped by my prior experience in curriculum design, training and facilitating capacity development activities. However, this research stretched my skills set, sometimes uncomfortably pushing me to venture into a methodology that dug deeper and wider while keeping the participants involved amidst their busy schedules.

One factor that undeniably affected the rhythm of going in-depth and in-width is that the group of co-researchers fluctuated strongly throughout the phases of the research and included only internal members of the organisation. Due to the design of the study, those engaged earlier in the research disappeared to the background and did not maintain the same level of engagement. This was an intentional compromise to enable an in-depth inquiry. The feedback committee could have been implemented more systematically, perhaps through more light-touch interactions such as a shared lunch or virtual meetings. Moreover, one could argue that a PAR on learning with external actors should include these external actors as co-researchers. Besides the community learning track, the people in the room were all NGO practitioners. Adding external actors as co-researchers could have been interesting, albeit, I felt the research was sufficiently meaningful with the current group of co-researchers with temporary spaces being created for the voices of other actors. However, I do also wonder what would have happened if other actors were involved as co-researchers and were able to influence the

way the research was executed directly. Perhaps, as had happened with the volunteers, this involvement could have strengthened the mutual understanding amongst the parties. Or it could have expanded innovations to include government and community action. As a consequence of the decision not to involve external actors as co-researchers, the double-loop learning efforts centred mostly around the practitioners and their theories-of-action. This led to changes in how they shape organisational learning with community actors, but it is not traceable whether double-loop learning occurred on the side of external actors. Though the fluctuating community of inquiry had its challenges, this research illustrates that a single and multiple case study approach can add value to a PAR process. By conducting a multiple-case study, the field dynamics around double-loop learning can be better understood for the general field of education NGOs, and the action scripts can be followed up more at the single case study level.

3.8.2 Ethical considerations

When it comes to ethics in PAR, authors commonly refer to authentic participation and catering for power dynamics (Angucia, Zeelen, & De Jong, 2010; Boog et al., 2008; Tumuheki, 2017). In the case of my PhD research, I also had to account for the more conventional ethical procedures as per the research regulations in Uganda. I had to find a way to cater to both. A dilemma herein was that the PAR was strongly emergent and the GUREC and UNCST required detailed protocols. Further, I could only prepare this protocol when the research process had been co-designed by the wider research group. This may have been 'late' in terms of clearance but did offer a review of a co-created research design. If I had presented a proposal sooner it might have been misaligned to the realities of those affected by the problem.

During the process, I made sure all participants were given the power to make their own choices and that participation was voluntary and fully informed. This meant that every participant or co-researcher could always opt-out or choose to skip activities. In most of the interviews,⁸ I and the research assistants managed to first build rapport before conducting any formal interview through informal interactions. This was to ensure that participants felt comfortable enough to articulate their preference for the interview

⁸ Only with the actor consultations of 2017 did I have to conduct interviews during a first interaction with a person.

setting or to opt-out. For those cases where group meetings were organised in the community, consent was sought in written form and we explained the research goal and terms of participation in the local language. During all engagements, I was flexible around the use of the voice recorder. For example, with the PAR team I continued to seek consent for recordings during every meeting. For interviews and FGDs I and the research assistants would first strike the conversation and once the participant was in the flow request permission to record the conversation. Consequently, some audio recordings were incomplete, missing the start of the conversation (though this was captured in the interview notes). In my view, this was justified given it promoted free choice of the participant, ensuring they felt comfortable enough to say no. For those participants with e-mail addresses, I always shared the transcript of the interview. Only a few participants responded; some chose to highlight certain quotes I should not include in reports verbatim, others added some afterthoughts. Whenever the participant was not comfortable being recorded, we would not record any audio but take written notes.

To ensure my interpretation of the data and my knowledge claims were valid, several spaces were created for co-analysis or responses to the findings. Just like organisational learning spaces, these spaces are not free from power dynamics – in which my positionality as a white PhD researcher also plays a role (Van der Linden & Zeelen, 2008). I cannot claim that the spaces for validation were free from bias, but these spaces were usually lively and participants contributed varying views, regularly disagreeing with me and each other. It could be that members who were generally less interested in organisational learning chose not to participate, which could have biased the findings. In this process we may have also excluded important voices from the co-research process. In the village, for example, we missed girls' voices in the community dialogue probably due to local power dynamics. We were able to overcome this in the community-NGO meeting by granting youth the opportunity to speak first. However, there were definitely community members who could have added interesting views too but chose not to participate, maybe because of earlier experiences with research and NGO meetings. The final knowledge products of this research were also presented for validation. For example, by sharing a draft paper with co-researchers or co-authoring a paper with a co-researcher. All in all, I hope this chapter has illustrated how the voice of research participants shaped the research trajectory – demarcating a democratic process of knowledge generation and knowing (Boog, 2008).

3.9 Conclusion Operationalising reflection-in-action through phronetic PAR


As a first-time action researcher, sometimes, I experienced the emergent PAR design as uncomfortable. The level of uncertainty sometimes made me doubt my capabilities; was I doing the right thing? Looking back, things clearly added up and I hope this account inspires other young action researchers to take the plunge. Peters (2017) refers to a metaphor that Freire and Horton borrowed from the Poet Machado: “make the road by walking”, to embrace that action research is a process that unfolds itself as we go. This is exactly how I experienced the process, at every twist and turn of this research process was a partner-in-learning who added their stamp onto the process. As a third-person action researcher, I enjoyed my role as a facilitator, zooming-in and zooming-out and facilitating in-depth conversational spaces. In chapter 2 I illustrated the merit that alternative epistemologies of practice seem to have to help us overcome the complex problems in the field of lifelong learning for development. In this chapter, I proposed a phronetic approach to PAR as a potential way to work consistently with alternative epistemologies of practice such as reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) or participatory adaptive pluralism (Chambers, 2010). In the following chapters I present the research findings generated through this methodology.

Intermezzo 1 | A Co-Researcher's Journey: Recollections of the Participatory Action Research

By Sophia Irepu, Development Worker, Organisational/Project Management Specialist.

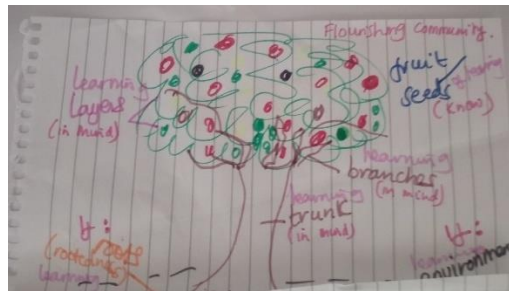
Out of the many rich components of Marit's research, the most captivating for me was the research methodology and the commitment with which Marit handled it. I feel I would have done us a disservice if I did not give all of us a sneak peek into what it looked like from my side of the process.

The journey started on 16th May, 2016, when I was barely two months into my new role and I got the invitation to join a dissemination workshop about organisational learning in NGOs. Having experienced research validation meetings before, I thought I knew what to expect, but this meeting surprised me. When I reached the Ntinda School for the Deaf in Kampala, standing at the door was Marit being warm and she welcomed me to enter the room and make myself familiar with what was displayed on the walls. Being the curious one, I immediately took her up on the offer and took a gallery walk around the room. When all members had reported, Marit welcomed us all and explained the choice of venue for the meeting: "to give us a feel of what it is like to be a learner, so that we can be able to connect with the core of the research", which was organisational learning in education NGOs towards improving education and learning. From then on, we used multiple participatory methods to dig into the findings. We were able to learn about organisational learning and to see a different array of applications across the organisations. To come up with a common vision on learning that later became the topic of focus for the study, we were asked to illustrate what learning looked like from our



It never crossed my mind that the journey would stretch beyond this workshop, but I thought to myself, the research is interesting and she is employing a unique approach.


perspective. So, I drew a tree that had different shades of leaves and fruits to indicate the different forms and levels of learning depending on its environment and enabling factors. Other participants also shared and explained their visions of learning. At the end of the day, we were asked some evaluation questions to identify how we would like to be engaged in the next steps of the research. It never crossed my mind that the journey would stretch beyond this workshop, but I thought to myself, the research is interesting and she is employing a unique approach.



A few weeks later I was delighted to receive an email from Marit indicating that she would love for us to host a discussion on how to take the research forward. Days later we met in our boardroom with members of other education NGOs and together with Marit brainstormed broad potential research areas. During the brainstorm, Marit laid out a flipchart across the table and asked us each to feel free to write our ideas there, while we also shared them verbally. Members were quite animated as we discussed the research focus, characteristics of the case study NGO to be able to qualify, and the key question we would like the research to answer. At the end of it all, we agreed the research should focus on how NGOs can increase the space for learning amidst competing and strong influencing forces. This later came to be known as the "murky field of learning in NGOs", which informed the use of the Field Theory as one of the key theoretical groundings of the study. It is one of my favourite theories and practical illustrations of learning challenges to date. We then agreed to have Marit go and review these and use the checklist to determine the organisation that would eventually serve as the case study.

Imagine our delight when days later Marit called to inform us that our organisation had been selected for the case study and that it had met all the requirements. The Country Director again gave us the green light, with a proposal that since I had already been working closely with Marit, I could continue and be the focal person and co-researcher. Marit run me through what that meant and I was more than happy to take on the challenge.

From that point on it was a rollercoaster on actions as the research process took shape, with numerous meetings to agree on the practicalities of the research. Marit had me sign a consent form and co-researchers' agreement and we agreed on a procedure for selecting the project for study amidst an amazing pool of eight potential projects. The actual research work itself began with the orientation of the leadership team to get their support for the research process. Marit still proposed to host them at the Ntinda School for the Deaf and gave them the same explanation as to why that choice of the location, to my pleasure and amusement! Imagine people used to sitting in the boardroom making big decisions for the organisation now seated in a classroom. The excitement in the room was of World Cup proportion, with each member animated and amused at being seated behind a school desk like a pupil, as Marit took us through what learning looked like in the organisation. We discussed this at length and zeroed on an area of potential research for the organisation: the out of school youth learning curriculum. With this done it was agreed that Marit engages all staff in another workshop to explore this further.




Imagine our delight when days later Marit called to inform us that our organisation has been selected for the case study and that it had met all the requirements.

When the workshop drew closer, Marit met up with me again to discuss how we could go about the research engagement with the staff. We agreed to administer the DLOQ to all staff to establish in a broader sense what learning really looked like from the perspective of the staff. This was done and presented at the workshop, showing that there were areas of learning the organisation was strong in but also others that it could strengthen. It was at this point that realisation came to the organisation of how much more informal community-driven learning we needed to do beyond the formal structured set up we were used to. Marit then took the staff through a practical session where she asked us to

map what our learning looked like with others, using the elephant map and this turned out to be one of my favourite applications of the research to date.

From that workshop, the research progressed to the case study project, where Marit had an orientation workshop with the selected project team to agree on the study area, which stakeholders to engage, what methods and tools to use, and the research questions. I also engaged as often as possible directly online or in physical attendance until the very end. With frequent touchpoint meetings with Marit for brainstorming methodology, emerging issues, preliminary data from the study among others. This was the best part of the research that I loved the most because here we got to challenge ourselves to bring out the best form of the study, generating rich insights from the data, which between ourselves we called “knowledge mining” because the more we looked at them the deeper we got and the more interesting discoveries we made.

Throughout 2016 up until 2019, Marit employed unique approaches to the study and exhibited a high level of organisation and collectedness. Part of us, yet not fully part of us, connected but disconnected, as I came to learn later from Professor Jacques Zeelen, her PhD supervisor. This was part of knowing when to zoom in and zoom out, drawing the line between when to participate to further understand the participants and their experiences and when to be the researcher, merely observing what was happening around her. All these generated great insights that have now become her PhD Thesis. I am happy to have been part and parcel of this unique process. We managed to produce three newsletters which were shared with the other education NGOs that were part of the process at the start as a way of keeping them connected to the process. We shared the same internally with all staff through the organisation’s email. Marit wrote research briefs that I always shared with the organisation’s management to keep them in the loop and on other occasions, Marit made presentations at the leadership meeting to offer direct updates. Together we have written an article that was presented at the ARNA conference in Canada in June 2019 and another for a journal submission for 2021.



This was the best part of the research that I loved the most because here we got to challenge ourselves to bring out the best form of the study, generating rich insights from the data.

Did we achieve our expectations of the process as an organisation? I would say: yes, and probably more. Did I as a co-researcher meet the expectations I had for the organisation and myself as an individual? Yes. At the organisational level, Marit helped us to rekindle and enhance an organisational fire that was flickering and getting lost in the formal processes of organisational learning, which I knew then that active participation in the process would help us achieve. At a personal level for me, she reignited the fire and need to rethink my perception of PhD study; I was scared of it because of what I had heard people say, but I have always wanted to pursue a PhD myself.

I got to learn about precious scholars like Victor Friedman – *Learning from Success*, Etienne Wenger – *Communities of Practice, Networks and Collective Learning*, Christopher Argyris – *Organisational Learning and Theories of Action*, and Cornwall and Ramalingam, who had done broad works on Organisational learning and fell in love with their work. Marit taught me that she had learnt from Professor Jacques that this is called “standing on the shoulders of giants” and I couldn’t agree more. And in the true sense of the phrase, I conclude by saying that this research process helped my then employing organisation and myself, not only to “stand on the shoulders of giants” but to fly on their wings as well.

4. Normative practitioners in action: a portrait of organisational learning in seven education NGOs

At the beginning of this PAR, participants of the orientation dialogue asked: What is currently happening in our organisations in terms of organisational learning? Where are the pitfalls and shortcomings? They felt this question had to be answered before we could design a research together. Through a multiple-case study with seven education NGOs we discovered a rich organisational learning practice. In this chapter I portray how education practitioners enact normative professionalism despite persistent barriers of fragmentation, power imbalances and funding constraints. Using the field theoretical lenses of space, positionality, relative autonomy and power I analyse how practitioners shape organisational learning as a force that creates, reproduces and transforms lifelong learning for development paradigms.

4.1 Introduction

In chapter 2, I proposed that an epistemological shift is required in development organisations to re-shape organisational learning to deal with the complex problems our society is facing. This involves deconstructing the technical rationality paradigm and accountability wave that fragmented development work. Episteme, knowledge gathered through systematic processes of deduction, could still play an important role to solve technical problems found on the high grounds. However, to navigate the swampy lowlands of the lifelong learning practice, phronesis should be gathered through processes of deliberation about what is right. I explored how a more critical approach of organisational learning could be supported through conceptual frameworks of field theory. Critical organisational learning is focused on identifying what is the right thing to do – rooted in an awareness of the power relations, but also a level of reflexivity about how practitioners internalise the rules of the game, positions, relations and meanings

characterising a field. Looking at the practice of education NGOs from a relational world view, we can distil what barriers to critical organisational learning exist, as well as how practitioners act as agents in translating and transforming the present epistemologies of practice. Kemmis, Heikkinen, Fransson, Aspfors, and Edwards-Groves (2014) for example, present a definition of practice that emphasises this agency: “a form of socially established cooperative human activity that involves characteristic forms of understanding (sayings), modes of action (doings), and ways in which people relate to one another and the world (relatings), that ‘hang together’ in a distinctive project” (p.155). This chapter presents a turn to practice to analyse how field dynamics shape organisational learning practices and how practitioners navigate the spaces available to articulate and strengthen their phronesis.

This diagnostic study, however, was not purely driven by an abstract model that suggests there is something interesting to learn from practitioners. As described in chapter 3, I intentionally shaped a communicative space to ascertain whether the feeling of ‘learning is not leading to the necessary adaptations’ was a shared feeling among practitioners in education NGOs. From the start, participants expressed themselves as agents; they saw several gaps and barriers, but they also shared about various innovations that they have been able to introduce. In the orientation dialogue, for example, they confirmed the observations of various authors that NGOs tend to act risk-averse and put local knowledges at the periphery – learning was particularly associated with accountability (Chambers, 2010; Ebrahim, 2005; Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013). Peter, for example, problematised that risk is often perceived as something negative and something to avoid; a perception that hinders experimentation and learning.

I think in organisations [are] really, really scared to make mistakes. I think when, when we look at our donor reports, some, we talk a lot about the potential risks, and how we are going to mitigate these risks and what not. So, we are really, really, scared to make mistakes and I think if we're so scared of that then we're not really gonna learn.

Peter, NGO practitioner support unit, orientation dialogue

On the other hand, several examples were mentioned of creative learning methods that helped the organisations align their programming to the needs and preferences of their learners. For example, consulting children on how their playground should be designed or a manager allowing a team member to experiment with a new approach on a small

scale despite doubts about the effects. The participants felt, however, that they were not in position to pinpoint where the research should focus so that organisational learning would become more meaningful. They felt it would be important to hear from practitioners in a variety of education NGOs what is already happening and where challenges exist.

This chapter presents the outcomes of this multiple-case study. The aim of this chapter is two-fold: 1) draw insights from the current practice in education NGOs and 2) explain the focus of the next research stages. The findings presented in this chapter are derived from three main data sources: the orientation dialogue, semi-structured interviews in seven education NGOs and a collaborative co-analysis workshop. The methodology has been discussed in more detail in chapter 3. The mapping exercise focused particularly on the Organisational Learning Mechanisms (OLMs). As discussed in chapter 2, this is not only a pragmatic method to locate organisational learning in the context of particular problems, but they also form an interesting unit of analysis given they are fields in their own right. After introducing the seven case study organisations briefly, I present an overview of the OLMs we discovered. Other facets such as leadership, cultural norms or the external environment that influence organisational learning are addressed more implicitly in section 4.4 – not just as aspects that are external, but integrated with the agency of organisational members. Finally, I highlight a few selected OLMs that illustrate more critical forms of organisational learning.

4.2 The seven education NGOs

The participants of the orientation dialogue suspected that organisational learning looks differently in various organisations depending on the organisational background, size and type of education and learning programming it offers. Therefore, they suggested that we should study a variety of education NGOs on the following criteria: nationality of their founders, education service, size, age and type of funding. Through snowball sampling based on these criteria, we identified seven organisations presented in table 11.

Table 11 Participating NGOs

#	Nationality of founders	Years of operation ⁹	# staff & volunteers	Type of education programme	Region	Funding source	# interviews
1	International	3	7	Access to formal education	North	Private	3
2	National	15	10	Non-formal skills training & adult literacy	East	Fees, private	2
3	International	2	18	Teacher development	All	Foundations	4
4	International	3	27	Non-formal skills training	East	Foundations	5
5	International	20	381	Civic & sexuality education	All	Multi- and bi-laterals, Foundations	4
6	National	6	13	Entrepreneurship education	Central & East	Service contracts	4
7	International	5	6	Non-formal skills training	CentralNorth, East	Private, Foundations	2

To illustrate the fields emerging around organisational learning in these organisations I briefly characterise these organisations in terms of their programming, mission and unique organisational learning habits or characteristics. All organisations are kept anonymous; therefore, I exclude details that may reveal the organisational identity and used more general terminology, rather than organisational jargon. Please note that all these portraits are based on experiences and perceptions shared in 2016 by one to four representatives per organisation (management and implementation representatives). The situation in these organisations has very likely changed and may have been coloured by the persons participating in this research.

⁹ As of 2016

4.2.1 Organisation 1 – Mentor-driven and organic learning

Organisation 1 is a young and small-scale organisation that operates in Northern Uganda, supporting children and youth who face multi-dimensional barriers to education. The organisation provides financial support as well as mentoring services to ensure the learners start and stay in school. Organisational learning in this organisation happens mostly organically, triggered by the urgent and emergent needs of learners. In the spirit of mentoring, a safe space between staff and learners is created to investigate their experiences and needs. Besides this, different actors are involved to develop a better understanding of the child's home and school situation – for example, teachers, parents or guardians. Given the limited budget, staff and senior management are continuously trying to balance priorities. A few formalised learning mechanisms are in place, such as a needs assessment that happens when a child joins the programme or school, and home visits. During these visits, forms are filled and reviewed periodically to ensure the right care and assistance is provided. For staff, too, a few formal mechanisms are in place to ensure coordination of efforts and review of their performance.

4.2.2 Organisation 2 – Permeable lines between organisational learning and education practice

Organisation 2 is a small and long-standing community-based NGO delivering several training programmes for youth and adults at their training centre in Central-Eastern Uganda. Sporadically, education programmes take place in the community as well. Typical for Organisation 2's learning practices are short lines between staff and senior management and between learners and staff. There seems to be a strong parallel between their vision on good education and organisational learning; the learner's knowledge and ideas are central in the informal organisational learning practices. Learners are considered equal to staff and organisational learning is an extension of this relationship. For example, student representatives and a lesson feedback book are structural mechanisms that allow for continuous adaptations based on learners' feedback. Most organisational learning seems to take place informally, and is only supported by loose reporting and follow up systems. Within this organisation, there seems to be nothing more but a permeable membrane between learners and staff allowing for quick and easy information sharing.

4.2.3 Organisation 3 – Practice-based evidence and evidence-based practice

Organisation 3 is a young, fast-growing organisation putting teachers first in their programme model but also in their organisational learning practices. A multitude of structured OLMs, as well as informal learning channels, are geared towards understanding the reality of the teachers and how they and other stakeholders experience the programme. It should be noted that Organisation 3's delivery model works through a variety of implementing government and non-governmental partners. The M&E department is keen on capturing practice-based evidence and blending it with evidence-based practices – always aiming to put the teachers' knowledge first. They are in the process of introducing several new OLMs that aim at in-depth inquiry and quicker learning loops. A further unique element for Organisation 3 is that the team takes time for informal learning. For example, by shadowing/observing partners for a day, or by organising strategy drinks to discuss important themes in an informal setting. The implementing, M&E and design teams work closely together and a culture of inquiry and positivism connects the team.

4.2.4 Organisation 4 – Collective organisational learning

Organisation 4 is situated in Central-Eastern Uganda and is transitioning out of its start-up phase, building systems and establishing its mission and vision. During this transition period, several organisational learning initiatives have been introduced by individual staff. Structural learning mechanisms, however, have also started taking shape. A monitoring and evaluation team, for example, supports implementing staff in the participatory development of tools and analysis of results, and strengthens research skills of team members. Besides this, weekly staff training is provided. A unique structure in their education programme is the youth advisory council. In this council, youth representatives elected by youth in the community analyse the needs of youth in the community and identify solutions that the organisation could consider implementing.

4.2.5 Organisation 5 – Youth-centred organisational learning

Though not a traditional education NGO, a large component of Organisation 5's programming aims at facilitating learning and education of youth and community members. Organisation 5 is a rapidly growing organisation covering almost the entire country through several district offices. To facilitate organisational learning at this large scale, multiple formal platforms are built in to re-think programme implementation and design frequently. Organisational learning is monitored by the M&E department.

Organisation 5 aims at a strong youth and community-centred approach to development and this is certainly reflected in OLMs which continuously engage youth and other stakeholders. Moreover, the organisation positions youth as researchers to investigate the realities of fellow youth across the country and to inform programming. Their large pool of young volunteers also offers a great source of knowledge and insight, and these members are consulted through various channels such as reflection meetings and regular field visits. The organisation regularly brings all staff to one location to ensure cross-programme learning, for example, through annual planning or quarterly staff development retreats.

4.2.6 Organisation 6 – Learning-oriented leadership

Organisation 6 offers various non-formal education services to youth, particularly focusing on entrepreneurship development. Organisation 6's leadership is ambitious in terms of organisational learning. An environment for learning is set up by involving staff in decision-making and problem solving, setting targets for networking with potential partners and maintaining a flexible programme design that is modified between cohorts based on lessons learned. Staff's professional development is supported through distributing leadership practices. For example, rotationally chairing meetings and leading professional development sessions. Apart from internal learning, community members are engaged through a local advisory committee and feedback is sought from learners and community members on several occasions. Like Organisation 2, this organisation adopts a flexible delivery style allowing facilitators to adjust the delivery methods on the go.

4.2.7 Organisation 7 – Identifying local solutions through organisational learning

Characterising Organisation 7's organisational learning practice is the strong team spirit. Knowledge, information and ideas flow freely through the organisation as different departments continuously work together on project implementation and meet every morning to celebrate and review progress. Organisation 7 believes the solution for poverty lies in the community. Their practical skills workshops, learning videos and annual public events are all geared towards providing large scale access to locally created solutions to people living in extreme poverty. Organisation 7 actively seeks local solutions that exist in communities to inform their organisational processes, giving beneficiaries and local leaders a voice through surveys and videos. They located their office on the

edge of three slum communities in Kampala to increase accessibility and interaction. Before staff interact with community members, they intentionally prepare how the conversational space could be set up to create a safe space for community members.

4.2.8 The topography of lifelong learning for development

Though the profiles described here are short, hopefully they illustrate the diversity of approaches NGOs adopt to serve the lifelong learning for development agenda. It has become clear how, over time, influenced by their mission, founders' mentality, funding opportunities and partnerships, these organisations formed unique fields. Members interact and relate differently in each organisation – sometimes organically as they meet in the learning site, other times through intentionally shaped meetings. Managers and founders have left a dent in this field, and each organisation showed how leadership styles fuelled unique innovations. The participants of the orientation dialogue were right: organisational learning is a situated practice and it looks different depending on the organisational context. However, linking it back to the topography of lifelong learning for development we could see that all the organisations operated in swampy, messy regions of the wider field. Organisation 5, for example, seeks to strengthen youths' sexual reproductive health and rights amidst a conservative context. Organisation 3 offers entrepreneurship training to a heterogeneous group of out-of-school youth with varying levels of literacy and learning preferences. Even Organisation 1, whose mission is seemingly simple - increasing access to education by providing school fees - in reality, deals with various barriers to educational inclusion. As I share in section 4.4, there was friction at times between the nature of the problems these NGOs sought to solve and the way organisational learning was shaped. But, as the interviews and workshops illustrated, practitioners in all organisations found meaningful ways to enact their agency to act towards more desirable futures. Before presenting these insights, I first explain how practitioners defined organisational learning.

4.3 What does organisational learning mean to the practitioners

Organisational learning literature presents a variety of definitions of organisational learning or the learning organisation (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2012). Therefore, the semi-structured interviews started off with the question what organisational learning meant to the participants. Practitioners – like organisational learning scholars - offered diverse answers. For example, they emphasised staff development, learning from

experience and mistakes, unlearning, generating knowledge systematically or learning from trends and other organisations.

What I understand with organisational learning is probably improve the way we work based on experiences, [...] from the word go. Which requires a lot of documentation, follow up on probably actions since they are being implemented, making sure everyone has an input in everything we do, and their input is documented and shared across the different implementers across the entire structure. So, it is basically experience sharing follow up on what works well, what doesn't work well probably analyse it, interpret it.

Joanna, M&E manager, Organisation 5

Most commonly, practitioners did not limit organisational learning to one purpose. A recurring rationale of organisational learning was that it should help the organisation to understand the realities of their learners and align their education programmes to address emerging needs.

Organisational learning to me it's like an intervention, where you systematically look at the needs in the community, and then you come up with an appropriate way of addressing such needs. So, that as time goes by, you can be able to see that there is interconnectivity between what you wish to provide and what [you] actually provide.

Jacob, manager implementation, Organisation 4

The emphasis on the impact on learners and communities was further underlined during the second workshop, when participants formulated their vision for success in the upcoming PAR. Their vision was to facilitate a holistic change in communities and learners being able to achieve their goals. Associating organisational learning particularly with the desire to serve the greater good is not just something that 'made sense' at the organisational level. It connected to the professional identity of the practitioners as well. Kenneth, for example, shares how his genuine interest in his learners sparks a drive to learn as an individual and to prompt organisational learning.

If I talk to a child, and a child narrates to me their problems, sometimes it breaks me down. It makes me feel like how is this really happening to a human being? [...] So, if you see the smile in the child's face as she or he

narrates the story, I ask myself how are you still smiling? [...] And so that has really also helped me develop my emotional strength [...] And these are experiences that we bring back to the office and we try to make it a goal for us to also try to learn and try to adjust to our flaws. Sometimes it is within the office level, sometimes it is on the personal level.

Kenneth, implementing educator, Organisation 1

Regardless of this intrinsic desire to do the right thing for learners, in their accounts, practitioners do not explicitly describe organisational learning as a transformative force. They also related organisational learning to fitting in, keeping up and getting ahead, and not necessarily transforming the status quo. But as I illustrate below, the aspiration to facilitate holistic change in line with what is meaningful to learners and communities did turn out to be a force that overrules dominating trends of fragmentation and target-based programming.

4.4 Organisational learning mechanisms in education NGOs

One of the sub-questions in this research was: Which organisational learning mechanisms are currently used in education NGOs in Uganda? After coding the interviews, 107 OLMs emerged as presented in tables 12 and 13 at the end of this chapter. Some OLMs were unique to a particular organisation, others were more common. On average the interviews revealed 33 OLMs per organisation, with Organisation 2 showing the lowest number of OLMs (9) and Organisation 6 showing the most (48).

Table 12 OLM count per education NGO

Org#	Total OLMs	Learning strategy	Reporting	Implementation	Staff dev't	Inter dep't	Research & dev't	Extern. learners	Extern. others
1	21	2	4	4	1	1	0	5	4
2	9	1	2	0	1	1	1	2	1
3	43	4	2	5	7	6	5	7	7
4	39	2	2	10	7	3	3	7	5
5	42	5	4	5	8	4	8	4	4
6	48	2	7	8	14	2	4	7	4
7	33	2	4	6	7	3	1	4	6

Though I am presenting this numerical overview, this multiple case study did not aim at detecting correlations between OLMs, organisation type or educational programme. Because of the semi-structured interview method used, it is possible that OLMs existed in organisations but that members did not bring them up during interviews. Therefore, I do not read too much into the frequencies of OLMs being mentioned. Rather, I briefly discuss what the 107 OLMs suggest about the organisational learning practice in education NGOs. In the next section, I discuss in more detail the challenges and considerations of practitioners, but here I focus on the types of OLMs in place. In table 13, one may notice that some OLMs are not traditionally considered learning mechanisms such as 'photography' or 'physical office located in the community'. It is important to note that we documented what practitioners considered as OLMs. For each of the OLMs listed in table 13, there was a clear narrative of how that activity, tool or space enabled the practitioners to gain new insights and/or capture and disseminate these insights for future reflection and action.

What the interviews revealed, first of all, is that the education NGOs are very intentional about organisational learning. Education NGOs actively raise questions to understand how their activities can be run more effectively, what the impact of their programme is on learners, what other services or activities they can run and how. In addition, a plethora of mechanisms aim at equipping NGO practitioners with the competencies required to implement the programme activities. In the reflection-in-action paradigm discussed in chapter 2, such professional development could promote a reflective practice wherein practitioners develop a critical awareness of the realities of their learners and identify alternative action strategies to facilitate the (social) change they aspire to. Looking at the OLMs under implementation it becomes clear that most organisations have frameworks in place that capture these pathways to change in targets, activities and standards. This hints at the same fragmentation that Van der Laan (2006) criticises in the social work sector or Van der Linden (2016) in the lifelong learning sector. Consequently, it could be that the professional development efforts will create tension by equipping practitioners to question and ignore these targets, or instead, the efforts induct the practitioners into this system and sets them up to perform well into this structure. It is possible that the two are aligned and practitioners – through their reflective practice – influence the way targets and standard practices are set. However, the respondents mentioned this was not sufficiently the case and felt it was particularly

the donor who influences what targets the teams strive for. I unpack this tension between professional discretion and rationalisation more in section 4.5.

This leads to a second observation: most external facing learning mechanisms aim at understanding the needs and lived realities of the learners and/or direct programme participants. These OLMs could be categorised as focused or widely oriented. The focused processes measure and observe specific changes according to targets (e.g., needs assessment or surveys) or feedback on specific activities (e.g., design interviews), whereas the widely oriented mechanisms focus on the life world of learners, for example shadowing or informal conversations. Moreover, a good number of OLMs that are research and development-oriented also seek to understand the realities of learners and what it takes to enable them to access new opportunities. However, only a few OLMs are aiming at the wider social systems at the local community level, but also at regional, national and international level. This poses a risk that complex problems are addressed based on partial knowledge. Moreover, there is only one organisation that identified an OLM specifically oriented towards collective learning with their funding partner. So, there is a chance that new insights are not integrated into grant agreements until the next cohort or programme cycle (also see Chambers, 2010).

Lastly, before I untangle how these OLMs were shaped through an interplay of agency and structure, I would like to underline the role that practitioners ascribe to M&E in regards to organisational learning. Most organisations (except organisations 1 and 2) had a person or team dedicated to M&E. This unit is associated with some OLMs that are listed in table 13; for example, the M&E presentations, learning briefs, wall of progress etcetera. While I have grouped M&E with implementation, the divide between M&E and implementation was commonly problematised both in the interviews and co-analysis workshop.

The more we look at M&E as a separate island, the more we make the learning process possibly more difficult eh, because people tend to detach themselves from that process. Because this is this unit, it has been set apart, there are people that are probably employed to do it, they are the experts in it. So we forget that it's actually a process that is part and parcel of us all as the people who are involved in the programme design, the implementation and the reporting [...] So maybe we need to integrate all these roles, so that

anyone within the organisation at any one time can actually be able to play this role and appreciate the real value that comes out of M&E.

Irene, M&E Manager, Organisation 5

The integration of M&E and programmes was experienced as an unresolved tension by most. Several organisations mentioned taking steps towards resolving this tension, for example by equipping non-M&E staff with the skills for data collection or analysis and through close collaboration between the M&E and implementation. These reflections suggest that where OLMs are located and which organisational members are assigned formal or specific roles to participate in these OLMs can have deep implications for the way organisational learning is perceived as part of the primary work processes or a separate process. So far, the OLMs have profiled the 'structural facet' of organisational learning Lipshitz et al. (2007). In the next section I zoom in on other facets and field dynamics that affect the shape these OLMs take, as well as the role they end up playing in the normative practice of education practitioners.

4.5 Field dynamics and agency shaping organisational learning

In view of a reflection-in-action paradigm, organisational learning is deeply situational. Therefore, table 13 is not intended as a menu of OLMs from which managers can pick and select mechanisms. OLMs are shaped by organisational members in response to contextual factors. The 'learning by design' model of Shani and Docherty (2003) offers a framework to operationalise this interplay between structure and agency. In this section, I zoom in on two components of this model: learning requirements and dimensions. We could view the learning requirements as an extension of field dynamics; the configuration of an organisation's field will have implications for which learning outcomes are required and desired and what conditions and barriers are in place for this learning to materialise. The design dimensions centre more around the agency side of field theory; what considerations (explicit or implicit) do practitioners apply in creating, shaping or ending OLMs?

4.5.1 *Field dynamics and learning requirements*

In their multifaceted model of organisational learning, Lipshitz et al. (2007) present the 'external context' as one of the facets influencing whether organisational learning is productive or not. This is very similar to the learning requirements of Shani and Docherty (2003). The five components of the organisational context they present are:

environmental uncertainty, task uncertainty, task structure, proximity to the organisation's core mission, and organisational structure. These components are similar to the parameters I used to illustrate the topography of the field of lifelong learning for development. The logic remains the same; there are external forces that influence what is required of learning spaces. These could be positive drivers stimulating learning (such as error criticality) or barriers (such as a fragmented organisational structure). Whereas there were more barriers and challenges to learning than I could include in the scope of this chapter (around 100 codes), I highlight four forces that stood out across the organisational profiles that seem to particularly affect the more critical or transformative forms of learning.

a. Positionality – In chapter 2 I highlighted that part of the reason to look at organisational learning in education NGOs is that they take up a unique position in the field of lifelong learning for development. In the interviews, the practitioners illustrated how this position – in between communities and donors – caused dilemmas, especially where programme targets do not correspond with realities. Practitioners felt constraints to expanding their services to meet the needs of their learners. For example, Mildred explained they cannot work with all interested youth because of an age restriction.

We always have more youth who are interested in our programme, but they exit the age bracket we want, because we deal with 15-25 [years old] [...] So, the donors or the funding also limits us.

Mildred, coordinator implementation, Organisation 6

Several authors have problematised that aid organisations reduce complex processes to linear models of change, which, due to their powerful position, limits the discretionary space of implementing practitioners (Ramalingam, 2013; Van der Linden, 2016). Local communities exert agency too in their relationship with NGOs. Research participants expressed the challenge of receiving 'socially desirable' answers – which could be a strategy of 'dependent agency' to secure future programming (Anderson & Patterson, 2017). Knowing the right thing to say offers communities access to valuable capital.

So, when I go into community [...] one thing I hear most is, 'thank you, thank you for the programme' [...] I can't get anything else out from them.

Joseph, senior manager, Organisation 6

Local communities in which NGOs operate are themselves fields too – at times creating forces against change. Organisation 5, for example, advocated for youth participation in local decision-making processes, but local leaders pushed back on this.

So where decision makers, or any other institution, has got a negative perception about our target group.[...] If you are saying this is what young people want [...] For instance, [...] government should support young people and a, b, c, d... but the decision maker is saying we can't work with young people.

Bernard, implementing educator, Organisation 5

In the web of power relations, NGOs have to be critical about who determines what is at stake and how to derive a solid understanding of authentic learner needs.

b. Value contradictions – Balancing various voices becomes particularly complex when they present tensions at the level of values. NGOs and funders may advance 'progressive' development goals such as women empowerment or family planning, which are not always accepted in local communities.

[Our funding director] was like 'where is family planning, where is maternal and child health?' And, sometimes... is a challenge for us because culturally it is not accepted here. [...] Funders think it's just a problem of access, but it goes much beyond access to just the way people perceive family planning, and family in general.

Priscilla, manager support, Organisation 4

Confronted with these tensions, practitioners need to decide whether to transform local value systems or to advocate for programming in line with them.

c. Accountability paradox – All profiled NGOs rely heavily on external funding, which comes with terms and conditions aimed at resource effectiveness. However, these expectations can be counterproductive in terms of meaningful organisational learning (Blaak & Zeelen, 2013; Guijt, 2010).

"Where there is [...] so much pressure coming from the people bringing in the money [...] Me personally I find it hard to [...] create another way because

if you don't do it... you immediately exclude yourself from different opportunities.”

Alexandra, participant analysis workshop

Alexandra is referring to Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) requirements accompanying grants. To secure funding, progress must be demonstrated along with pre-defined theories of change, which does not necessarily match the information needs of practitioners (Edwards, 1997; Ramalingam, 2013). During the analysis workshop, I posed to participants that most changes reported during the interviews were at the single-loop level. They agreed that double-loop learning occurred less – which was especially associated with the pre-set targets. Members added responses on their feedback forms during the presentation, such as: “Sometimes this is affected by the structure we have to work under, leaving no room for creativity.” And, “Few organisations seem willing to venture into the double-loop learning. Could be driven by donors? Only funding for specific goals and ways to reach them.” Besides inhibiting critical organisational learning, the narrow focus on quantifiable results hinders rich information about the realities on the ground from travelling up to donors – sustaining the accountability paradox. As mentioned in section 4.4, only one OLM was mentioned in which the donor and NGO staff met to discuss their progress. Others referred to reports with no mention of any form of conversation.

d. Structural fragmentation – Education NGOs are commonly divided into support and implementation units. Implementing teams include teachers, facilitators or mentors, as well as team leaders. Support units include human resource, M&E and finance. Practitioners who participated in this research note that this division obstructs the organisation from developing a full understanding of learners’ needs. M&E was mentioned frequently as a unit with insufficient understanding of the primary processes of the education NGOs, but participants also hinted at power dynamics that inhibited members lower in the organisational hierarchy from sharing.

People don't take initiative either to act or to like talk to someone because they are waiting for things to come from the top down.

Priscilla, manager support, Organisation 4

Other participants mentioned that after making recommendations repeatedly, they become hesitant to continue sharing if they don’t see decision-makers act on

recommendations. The distribution of work limits shared spaces for learning, leaving the support units at risk of being out of touch with realities in the community.

4.5.2 Learning design dimensions: Practitioners' considerations

Even though barriers to learning exist, practitioners proactively ensure that they learn at an individual and organisational level. Lipshitz et al. (2007) state: "The OLM concept should help managers focus on who needs to be learning, when it should take place, and how to get the people together for this to happen. OLMs provide managers with choices [...]" (p. 246). It is the type of considerations that (Shani & Docherty, 2003) call learning design dimensions. Though both these works are directed especially at managers, in this research I bring out the considerations of staff at any level. After all, a learning mechanism does not always have to be a formal OLM instituted by the manager. Indeed, as I illustrate below, practitioners shared a reflective account of what is important to them when gathering, processing and utilising knowledge in their work. The most common considerations that relate to critical forms of organisational learning can be grouped into four domains.

a. Facilitating conversational space to overcome power dynamics - Practitioners mentioned several techniques they use to facilitate a conversational space when seeking feedback from learners and others. For example, by using the local language flexibly, using open-ended questions or using a mentoring approach.

The best I do as a mentor is to let the kids know that I am not there to judge them, to let them realise that I am there cause I have seen the problem even worse than them, and I am there to learn.

Kenneth, educator, Organisation 1

Managers, too, utilised strategies to create a safe space for team members – sometimes choosing to stay away to allow a more open dialogue, or on the contrary, to be available in spaces staff are comfortable in. Reflexivity about one's positionality is vital – what power dynamics exist between actors in learning spaces? And how can you share power in these spaces? These considerations were quite explicit and therefore suggest that practitioners already enact what (Kunneman, 2016) calls normative professionalism. Several practitioners expressed an awareness of the ethical nature of their work and the power position they take up, and had tools and competences to create a safe space for

others to share their views. Suzanna, a manager in Organisation 7, mentioned preparing her team to do so effectively before they go out to meet external actors.

The team before they move out, they usually come to me and sit down. We're like: 'So what's the purpose of this meeting? What would you want to walk away with? And why would this person waste the whole hour or two seated with you?

Suzanna, senior manager, Organisation 7

b. Diversifying the knowledge base - In their work, practitioners underline the importance of tapping into multiple knowledge sources, including external research, anecdotal stories, M&E data and embodied knowledge. By widening the knowledge base, organisations seek to overcome bias and gain a richer understanding of needs and change processes.

Because when you go to them [learners] they will tell you good things [...]. So you may not really learn a lot from them. So we would go to the members of the community.

Musa, implementing educator, Organisation 2

In terms of the 'validity of knowledge, different views emerge. In some organisations, reference was made to external evaluators offering more objective insights, whereas others prioritise the knowledge of teachers.

One thing that will never change is that we believe that teachers are the ones who come up with the solutions. So, no matter like how many experts come up to us where that a, b and c... if we hear from teachers that that just doesn't work then we're not gonna do it I think.

Peter, manager support, Organisation 3

Though most practitioners were not explicit about their interpretation of rigour, they implicitly made decisions as to what knowledges to value and include. The inclusion of traditional knowledge, for example, did not appear on the learning agenda of any of the NGOs.

c. Balancing formal and informal learning spaces - A dimension that was discussed at length during the analysis workshop was the delicate balance between formal and

informal learning. Participants highlighted that informal spaces, such as lunch conversations, allow members to share more freely but a disadvantage is that these insights remain undocumented without structural follow up. The balance is difficult to strike, and formalising learning has a risk too:

I'm just wondering if it [organisational learning] is going to become another technical thing like the way M&E has kind of gone. Where then the learning becomes inaccessible to actually the people [...] that are accumulating most of the learning through the actual work.

Nancy, participant, orientation dialogue

These reflections hint at the difficulty to 'plan' new learning norms in OLMs; to truly create a space to share freely a level of spontaneity is needed without hierarchies or agendas.

d. Negotiating terms and conditions for learning with funders - Whereas NGOs rely on external funders, they are not powerless in this relationship. Some organisations expressed having become critical in selecting funding partners or re-negotiating programme activities. An important subject of negotiation is the educational targets. Mildred, for example, proposes that frontline practitioners take lead in programme design.

I think that donors shouldn't be part of the programme design... they should source out for funding yes, but the organisation as the organisation should plan.

Mildred, coordinator implementation, Organisation 6

Also, the role of targets in programme design and implementation can be the subject of discussion. Does the organisation maintain space for unexpected insights and emerging needs? Or do pre-set targets shape the day-to-day practice? What is at stake is determined through social interaction, not just by NGO practitioners, but in dialogue with funders, learners and other stakeholders.

4.6 Critical forms of organisational learning

As illustrated above, the seven education NGOs illustrated a large number of OLMs, though many of these seem to reproduce the technical rationality paradigm rather than

reflection-in-action. In section 4.5, however, it became clear that despite the system pressures practitioners experienced, they kept the learners in mind when shaping their OLMs. Below, I present several OLMs that I consider examples of critical organisational learning and that show signs of alternative paradigms such as the reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) and adaptive pluralism approach (Chambers, 2010). In a way these could be seen as small enclaves, with their own unique power relations and value systems (Friedman, 2011).

4.6.1 OLMs that put learners (and communities) in the driver's seat

Practitioners suggested that an increasingly deep understanding of learners' realities does not necessarily translate into well-aligned education programmes. In a bid to improve this, majority of the organisations introduced mechanisms that give learners and community members influence over learning and action planning. Organisation 5 used action research for this purpose:

We are doing action research [...] we get to see young people interact directly with various people in the field [...] It has shaped our programming [...] research that is informing, probably holding decision makers accountable, or trying to address the gaps that actually exist in the field.

Phiona, manager support, Organisation 5

In other instances, tools such as community scorecards are utilised to let community members articulate programme goals. Organisations 2, 4 and 6 as well constituted organisational structures for learners and communities to have a say – for example in community councils or through learner representatives.

[...] We are looking forward to initiating the [learner led club], and then we shall be having that top most structure called youth advisory council. So it will help us to really incorporate in the issues or views of most of the youth of the community who [we] may not reach out to.

Jacob, manager implementation, Organisation 4

4.6.2 OLMs that interrupt daily routines

Several organisational learning practices interrupted daily routines to allow practitioners to take a step back and reflect. For example, Organisation 3 organises 'strategic drinks' for all staff to discuss strategy in an informal setting. Organisation 5 runs quarterly

retreats to involve staff in reviewing progress and recommending changes in programmes or operations. In addition, managers in organisations 1, 3 and 5 ensure that office staff frequently spend time in the field observing or participating in educational activities. Stepping into each other's shoes sometimes applied to actors outside the organisation as well such as students, teachers or even inspectors. Allowing yourself to see social reality from a different perspective – stepping into someone's shoes and removing yourself from the order of the day - can lead to radically new perceptions.

I was talking to one of my girls [...] from school, and she has not been doing so good in class. [...] She [the student] gave me the task to maybe sit in her class and do the same test with her. And I sat in the same class with her, it was an English paper, and I got 68 per cent, she is in P6, and she got 73. [...] So, I also learn.

Kenneth, educator, Organisation 1

4.6.3 OLMs that are small and powerful

Critical organisational learning does not always require big investments or formal structures, rather this can be organically embedded in primary work processes. Organisations 1 and 6 invest in personal mentoring relationships with learners to enable collective learning – allowing learners to untangle their problems and identify solutions.

When you're working with youth, when you're mentoring them, don't give them advice first. First ask them what they think they can do and then you work [...] with that solution.

Mildred, coordinator implementation, Organisation 6

For managers too, a small gesture can go a long way in encouraging a reflective practice amongst educators. By relating differently, new spaces open up with unique norms, allowing for new meaning and opportunities to act. For example, manager Joseph made a habit of posing spontaneous learning questions to team members:

Joseph is notorious with this, [he] can give you like two questions, like there was a time he told us I want you to go and come up with a report [...] on the importance of brainstorming.

Amos, coordinator support, Organisation 6

What these OLMs illustrate is that OLMs can model a new structural order, not playing by dominant rules of the game – new people get a seat on the table and are given an opportunity to articulate goals (Lipshitz et al., 2007).

4.7 Enclaves and tempered normative professionalism

This chapter set out to explore what barriers and challenges practitioners face in their organisational learning practices in education NGOs, but also to find out what we might learn from these practices. Based on a multiple-case study this chapter illustrated the structural facet of organisational learning as well as the agency of practitioners to rethink and reshape organisational learning as a practice that helps them serve their target groups better. This resulted in three main insights:

i. Learners at the centre - Practitioners centre their practice around the well-being of their learners, but are often hindered in prioritising this due to the configuration of the field. They position the purpose of organisational learning primarily as a process to align their work to the needs of learners, but also as a means to fit in and keep up with the field as-is.

ii. Fragmentation leads to single-loop learning - As a result of fragmentation and the overall structure of positions in the wider field of lifelong learning for development, practitioners continuously face conflicting priorities, leading to predominantly single-loop learning and incomplete knowledge about the realities of learner needs, programme implementation and outcomes. Learning tends to focus on specific target populations and communities – with the risk of developing blind spots for complex underlying dynamics.

iii. Normative professionalism is enacted - However tight the corners that they manoeuvre on a day-to-day basis may be, education practitioners masterfully use any wiggle room to advocate for their learners' needs. As illustrated through various examples, OLMs are not just critical by virtue of the subject of reflection but also by modelling alternative norms. Practitioners shape small, often temporary enclaves through OLMs, in which alternative power dynamics and governing rules enable new meaning giving processes leading to new action scripts rooted in alternative paradigms. Remarkably, such enclaves rarely sit neatly in a department or team, rather they are shaped across team and organisational boundaries.

I would not claim that this study offers a complete overview of organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda. For example, though we covered a variety of NGOs, we did not study larger international NGOs and we did not cover all geographical areas of Uganda. However, in a relatively short period of time, we did manage to unearth important pain points and rich examples of how practitioners shape their organisational learning practice. Unlike many studies on organisational learning, this study documented the voices from practitioners in various positions of the organisation and not only managers. This illustrated that all members are agents influencing the way organisational learning is shaped, though I cannot deny the important role management has in upholding a learning culture and dedicating resources, as is also emphasised in other works (Lipshitz et al., 2007). Using the field theoretical perspective – operationalised through the model of learning by design and multifaceted models of organisational learning – we were able to zoom in on acts of agency and see ways in which this interplayed with the trends in the wider field. We observed that regardless of dominant paradigms practitioners are not powerless in shaping their own normative practice. Practitioners act like tempered radicals to advocate for the interests of their learners (Meyerson, 2001). This chapter provides a first sketch of the normative practitioner in action – a portrait that receives more colour and detail in the next chapters.

Though it was a rapid mapping exercise, the dialogue and co-analysis workshop provided a platform for practitioners to give meaning to their lived realities and to make explicit those processes and considerations that often remain implicit. Concepts such as habitus, positionality, structure and symbolic order illustrate how actions in micro-situations are influenced by forces in a bigger field. Power in this view is not just a macro-dynamic that is out of control of practitioners – all actors exert power to some extent and can share this power. In several cases, practitioners were able to open spaces where power was shared with learners and communities to define what is important. Indeed, OLMs helped: “explain how organisational learning is possible despite apparent conflicts between the dominant cultures of most organisations and the values and norms required for productive learning” (Lipshitz et al., 2007, p. 247). We did see that the web of power relations made it difficult for such efforts to influence decision makers – which to an extent was also influenced by the symbolic order that prioritises short-term, measurable targets, biasing reports that were shared with donors and managers. Conceptually, field theory effectively solves the common omission of power relations in organisational

learning literature. Not only does it provide a vocabulary to grasp these intricate power dynamics between individuals and fields, it also helps connect power and normative complexity in work situations, acknowledging that what is defined as valuable and the norm is determined through processes of power.

The profiles of seven education NGOs illustrated interesting OLMs and action strategies that practitioners in other contexts may consider too. However, since practice is contextual and relational, OLMs may not yield the same effects in every organisational field. Rather than copying exact OLMs, practitioners could experiment with the overall approaches to shaping critical OLMs presented by these education practitioners. For example, shifting position, incentivising new questions or interrupting daily routine. In order to do this meaningfully, practitioners in any field would benefit from reflexive capabilities – becoming aware that the configuration of the field in which they operate is first of all cognitive, and based on this understanding identify opportunities beyond initially observed limitations (Friedman, 2011). Field theoretical concepts, therefore, are not only conceptually valuable, but they can also offer tools for a reflexive practice as I demonstrate in the upcoming chapters. This first stage of the research set up a community of inquiry and participants expressed a keen interest in becoming more critical in their organisational learning practice. They felt constrained and expressed that their efforts to advocate for change on behalf of their learners did not always yield the desired changes and results. On the side of learning from their learners too, dynamics are at play that make it difficult to gain an authentic understanding of learning needs, and those organisational members who have these insights are not always heard. In this sense, this rapid analysis speaks to themes highlighted in the organisational learning literature too; clashing paradigms are causing intricate dilemmas that practitioners do navigate quite skilfully but more is needed (Van der Laan, 2006; Van der Linden, 2016). The suggested focus on double-loop learning with external actors was determined collaboratively based on this diagnostic study, and formed a thread through the remainder of the PAR.

4.8 Conclusion

This mapping exercise formed merely the first step of this PAR and yet it provided a rich account of the life world of practitioners in education NGOs. Their normative professionalism enables them to navigate dilemmas and create spaces to 'do things

differently'. The seven NGOs present a hopeful picture – new paradigms are already emerging, albeit a work in progress. By including such accounts in the organisational learning discourse, we can leverage current practices to advance more sustainable and just futures. This first stage of the research presents cause for optimism; there are OLMs in place that simulate a different order – a different way of relating. Lipshitz et al. (2007) and Friedman (2011) invite scholars to investigate the connection between enclaves and the field, can these temporary and local spaces with a different culture lead to long-term and paradigmatic change? In chapter 5 I explore this question further using an outsider perspective and establish what fields surround the organisation and how these enclaves or OLMs can take shape where the NGO meets the community. Before this, intermezzo 2 illustrates the ecosystem of actors that exists surrounding the NGOs.

Table 13 Overview of OLMs identified by practitioners in seven education NGOs

Category	OLM	Definition	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Learning strategy	Learning agenda	A document that explicitly spells out learning needs and timelines.			x				
	Manager M&E/Learning	Learning is made intentional by dedicating a function at the manager level to this process.					x		
	Informal strategy drinks	A platform where team members meet over drinks while discussing new strategic ideas.			x				
	Flexible budget	Resources are set aside to act on ideas & recommendations emerging from other OLMs.	X						
	Drawing board/visioning	A platform in which members come together to concretise the organisational vision.							x
	Bottom line accountabilities	These are defined goals or targets for organisational departments to assess their contribution to the broader mission of the organisation.					x		
	Management meeting	A platform in which senior managers meet to discuss a variety of matters.				x	x		
	Staff retreats	A platform in which organisational members meet for a longer duration (1-5 days usually) to solve problems, share ideas, etc.			x	x	x	x	
	Periodical reviews	A platform wherein organisational members discuss progress so far and come up with recommendations. Information from various reports, etc. is injected.	X	x	x		x	x	x
Reporting and information sharing	Verbal reports	After an activity, a colleague shares what happened with other colleagues verbally.						x	
	Written report	A written document capturing key findings/insights.	X	x	x	x	x	x	x
	Hard copy files	A filing system that captures hard copy information about learners or programme activities, accessible to team members.	X					x	

	Database	A digital database that stores data over time/across projects.		x				x	x
	Shared drive	An online platform where members store and retrieve information/documents etc.	X		x		x	x	
	Recommendations tracker	An instrument to track action steps emerging in OLMs to ensure ideas are implemented.				x	x		
	E-mail	A platform used to disseminate information within the organisation.	X				x	x	x
	Library	A physical or online space where resources and literature are accessed by staff for professional development or problem-solving.						x	x
Programme implementation	Photos	A media used to document activities and outcomes of the programme.				x			x
	Videos	A media used to capture stories of learners/beneficiaries or educational content (e.g. skills videos). Used by both internal and external audience.						x	x
	Suggestion box	A physical box in which learners, community members or staff can provide suggestions or feedback on the services.				x	x	x	
	Wall of progress	Findings and recommendations from research or M&E are displayed on a visible space/wall in the office for easy consumption by team members.				x			
	M&E presentations	A platform in which the M&E team presents a report with other team members - often including a discussion analysing the results and ways forward.				x			
	Post training reflection/evaluation	A platform created after a training or education activity to gather feedback and ideas from participants either on a form or verbally.				x		x	
	Being in the field/field visits	These include activities in which staff and managers visit learners and communities to gather further information about their situation.	X			x		x	x
	Activity tracker	Information/data on key activities are documented to monitor progress over time.				x			
	Quality framework	A guide is created based on an underlying theory of quality to optimise information gathering and learning during field visits or events.				x			x

	After action review	A space in which staff, volunteers and sometimes learners/stakeholders review an event or cycle of activities usually to discuss successes and areas for improvement.					x		x
	Support supervision	A management method to provide constructive feedback and support field activities.			x	x	x		
	M&E reports	A document presenting M&E results on pre-determined indicators for a period of time.			x	x	x	x	
	Activity forms	A tool used to gather and store information about pre-determined indicators. Comes in many forms - usually specific to an activity, sometimes to gather intake information.	X			x		x	x
	Team/programme goals	A method to formulate goals for teams or individuals against which progress can be reviewed - based on an underlying logic/theory of change.	X		x	x	x	x	x
	Budget monitoring	A process through which resource allocation and expenditure is tracked and reviewed.	X						
Staff development	Question task	A manager gives members a learning question to research a topic or framework.						x	
	Staff retention and mobilisation strategies	The intent to promote staff over time to retain institutional knowledge and allow higher-level staff to understand the realities of implementation.							x
	Unstructured time	In this case, staff's job descriptions are only structured for 90% the remaining 10% of their time can be used for personal interests and innovation.			x				
	Informal staff orientation	New staff are oriented by their new manager without there being a fixed pathway for orientation; the manager uses their ideas to orient the new colleague.				x			
	Staff personal stories	Stories about staff and their experiences and growth are captured for other staff to learn from/pick inspiration from.						x	x

Task force	A team is set up with representatives from different departments to investigate and make recommendations about internal staff issues (e.g. culture, roles).			x					
Handbooks/standard operating procedures	A piece of documentation that captures standards, procedures, guidelines etcetera to guide staff in their roles and activities.				x	x			
Online research and learning	External resources and courses that are set up by other organisations are used by members to advance their skills/knowledge or find solutions to problems faced.							x	x
360/performance review	Staff receive feedback about their performance from colleagues and in some cases external actors.	X						x	
Training by an external expert	An initiative to invite external experts to train staff.						x	x	
Identifying and planning for staff dev't needs	A system through which the organisation identifies skills and knowledge staff need across the organisation.				x	x	x		
Skills sessions/professional development	Skills sessions are specific forms of professional development activities in which staff prepare a short skill-building activity for their peers.		x	x	x	x	x		
Session preparation/role-play/mock	A platform created before an education activity or training in which team members prepare, plan and play out the activity and give each other feedback and ideas.							x	x
Buddy system	A colleague is assigned to assist another colleague to fulfil a task that requires a new set of skills or knowledge.			x			x	x	
Orientation period & guidelines	A document detailing steps and activities used to orient new members to key aspects of their roles.			x	x			x	x

	Champion title & awards	An intentional effort to recognize members who have excelled on values to promote a conducive learning culture.				x	x	x	
	On-the-job training	Facilitating professional development through on-the-job training; a staff practically works on a project/task and is guided by a peer or manager during the process.			x			x	x
	Staff re-induction/ refresher training	A platform created to induct or refresh staff on organisational ways of working.					x	x	
	Check-in/one-on-one	A colleague (usually manager) checks in briefly (sometimes informally) with another colleague about an activity/progress and discuss insights to feed into on-going work.			x	x	x	x	x
Cross-department learning	Team dinners	Teams meet over dinner to connect for informal learning and exchange.				x			
	Department presentations	A platform in which each department presents key learnings to other departments.			x				
	Shared team calendar	A team sets up a shared calendar which informs members about what others are working on and when.							x
	Internal audit	An activity in which internal members of the organisation audit other parts of the organisation (sometimes across countries).					x		
	WhatsApp group	A platform for a team of colleagues to share experiences, insights, praises etcetera.			x				
	International staff retreat	A platform in which colleagues from different country offices come together to exchange experiences and learn from each other.			x				
	Coordinated planning	Colleagues from different departments come together to plan for an upcoming activity sharing insights from their different disciplines.					x		x
	Extended leadership teams/matrices	A structure that allows collaboration and learning across programmes by instituting a cross-cutting leadership team with recurring meetings etc.					x		
	Collegial feedback	Colleagues give each other feedback on activities or ways of working.			x	x			

	Learning meeting	A platform specifically created for members to learn collectively - often structured around a question or highs/lows.			x			x	
	Meetings	A platform created for staff to meet and discuss ideas/ways of working. A variety of participants and frequencies - from all-staff to specific teams and from daily to monthly.	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Research and development	Market research	Information is gathered and analysed about other players in the education segment to inform positioning and programming.						x	
	Learning brief/paper	A document in which research findings or key learnings are captured for easy consumption by staff or external audience.					x		
	Youth-led research	An activity that positions youth as researchers to set a learning question, gather and analyse data and formulate recommendations to improve the situation of youth.					x		
	Analysis frameworks like SWOT, problem tree, community score card	Various frameworks and tools are used to facilitate and deepen the analysis of problems, situations and dynamics. Sometimes with a team of members, sometimes involving community members.				x	x		
	Pilot	An activity through which innovations are tested on a small scale to inform future programming.					x	x	
	Action research	A research method in which people affected by the problem are involved in identifying and implementing solutions.					x		
	Validation and dissemination	A platform bringing together various actors to discuss and validate research findings as well as identifying recommendations or action steps.			x		x		
	Deep dives & sprints	A team is set up to investigate a learning question of importance, usually across departments and even across countries.			x				
	Baseline, midline, end line	Activities through which data is collected about learners and/or the overall situation before during and after the programme to observe and analyse change over time.					x	x	

	Specific studies	Research activities geared towards specific learning questions (e.g. around learner motivation) - these fall outside of the regular M&E activities.			x					
	Tracer study	An activity through which the organisation follows up with learners after they completed the programme to gather information on learning outcomes etc.		x		x			x	x
	Rapid studies	Research aimed at quickly gathering information to inform programming decisions.			x					
	Evaluation study	A research activity designed to gather data and assess the outcomes of an education project/programme.			x	x	x			
External: Learners/ programme participants	Complaints channel	Learners/clients of the organisation have a platform to air complaints about the intervention (either 'over the counter' or through other means.					x			
	Alumni sharing testimonies during events	Bringing in a former learner to share their experiences and knowledge with staff and (potential) new learners.		x						
	Design interviews	Specific interactions with learners/participants to inform emerging design questions.			x					
	Recap	Recapitulate previous training/learning sessions to check on learners' understand and re-align further teaching/training.							x	
	Student/learner representatives	A position is created for a learner/participant to give feedback on activities and communicate back other information from the organisation to other learners.		x		x				
	Teacher portfolios and/or learner reports	An activity through which learning outcomes are analysed based on artefacts such as report cards or portfolios.	x		x					
	Advisory committee with	A structure created to position representatives from the community to inform decision making regarding the programme. Varying levels of decision-making authority - from advice to decision making.					x		x	

	learner/community representatives									
	Shadowing	An activity in which an organisational member steps in the shoes of a learner or other community actor to get a better understanding of their situation and needs.	x		x		x			
	Phone follow up	A platform used to easily gather information from learners or former learners.			x					x
	Informal talks/hanging around	A spontaneous and unstructured platform in which members interact with learners or colleagues to gather new information.	x		x	x			x	
	Mentoring	A relationship that provides a platform to get a deeper understanding of the needs of learners and collaboratively identify solutions.	x					x	x	
	Needs assessment	An activity designed to gather information and insights into the current situation and needs of learners and/or secondary beneficiaries.	x			x	x	x	x	x
	Surveys	A method used to gather information from external parties/learners about activities/their experiences.			x	x			x	x
	Case studies/success stories	Stories about/from learners and/or community members are captured to understand the (usually positive) outcomes and impact of the educational activities on their lives.			x	x	x	x	x	x
External: community members	Parent meeting	A platform in which parents of learners are gathered to either share information about the programme or receive their input on programming.	x							
	Stakeholder meeting	A conversational space for community actors to share information and insights.						x		
	Physical office in the community	An intentional positioning of the office in or near the target community to ease relationship building, exposure to the situation and needs etc.								x
External: government	Government support supervision	The organisation facilitates government officials to visit their programme activities during which they share ideas for improvement.				x				

and regulator	District meetings and working groups	Meetings organised by the district government in which NGOs and/or other actors come together to exchange experiences or be updated on new regulations, etc.								
	Local government reports	Documentation about programme progress shared with local government actors.	x							
External: funders	In-depth funder review meeting	A platform is created in which organisational members meet with funding partners to find solutions.			x					
External: other NGOs/CBOs	Material pair-and-share session	A platform in which various organisations working in the same education segments review each other's curriculum materials and distil lessons for their programming.				x				
	Partner feedback	After an event or activity that involved other partners, a platform is created to get their feedback.								x
	Technical assistance from partners	An initiative to invite an expert from another organisation to get advice/recommendations on the ways of working or for a particular problem.			x				x	
	Partner meetings	A platform created by the organisation to invite various partners and facilitate exchange and collective learning.			x					
	Networking	Intentionally making new contacts with organisations or actors to learn and collaborate.							x	x
	Partner events	Occasions where organisational members attend activities organized by partners.		x	x	x			x	x
	Partner material review	Occasions where organisational members review and utilize resources or reports produced by other organisations/individuals.	x		x	x	x			
	Working groups	Structures set up to connect partners/actors in the same (education) segment - commonly schedule regular meetings to exchange ideas and learn together. Some are formal others informal.	x		x			x	x	

External: mass audience	Website	A platform for the organisation to share information and reports usually with an external audience.			x				x
	Social media accounts	Platforms such as Facebook are used to interact with learners/other community members to share information and receive their ideas/outcomes etc.				x	x		x

Intermezzo 2 | Who are the external actors

In the research question we make reference to external actors, but who are we referring to? In 2017, we conducted a workshop with the case study organisation to conduct a self-assessment of their engagement and collective learning efforts with each of these actors. This intermezzo presents the method used as well as the typology of external actors that emerged.

The metaphor of six blindfolded men and an elephant

In a parable, six blindfolded men were challenged to describe an elephant accurately. To add to the challenge, each man was taken to the elephant alone and allowed to touch only one area of the animal. When they were asked to describe the elephant, they each have a completely different perspective:

- One blind man grabs the tusk and says, "An elephant is like a spear!"
- Another feels the trunk and concludes, "An elephant is like a snake!"
- The third blind man hugging the leg thinks, "An elephant is like a tree!"
- The one holding the tail claims, "An elephant is like a rope!"
- Another feeling the ear believes, "An elephant is like a fan!"
- The last blind man leaning on the elephant's side exclaims, "An elephant is like a wall!"

Because each man was trapped in his own limited perception, none of the six were able to form a clear mental picture of the elephant. If instead they combined their individual knowledge and openly shared their understanding, the blind men would arrive at a more accurate conclusion. What the six blind men need is a learning community - a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection to construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding (Iverson, 2013).

Based on this metaphor I developed an elephant stakeholder map which the members of nine programme teams used to conduct a self-assessment of their collective learning platforms. We used three steps:

1. Note down all the actors that influence the change you want to see. Write down keywords for each actor describing what they bring to the table towards understanding the problem.
2. List existing spaces in which insights of these actors are currently brought together to cause change.
3. Rank to which extent learning is leading to change.

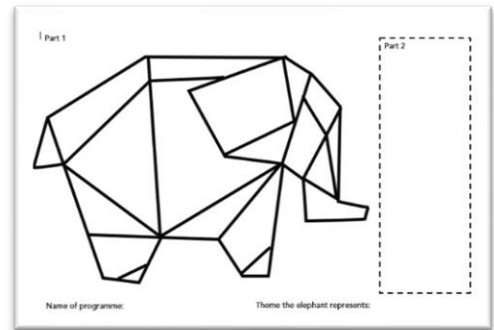


Figure 5 External actor mapping template

Besides the notes documented by teams, participants discussed their experience using the method which was recorded and transcribed. These data were coded using ATLAS.ti and Microsoft Excel. The analysis revealed who the actors within the ecosystem of the case study organisation are and whose knowledge and which knowledge is mobilised or not.

Whose knowledge is mobilised

First, actors mapped by programme teams were organised in the following categories: the case study NGO itself, community actors, government actors, private sector, youth, development partners and social systems. Figure 6 depicts an overall picture across programmes illustrating by size how often actors were mentioned by programme teams and by colour.

These colours represent how teams assessed the extent to which they were learning with these actors. Green (or G) in this case refers to successful learning experiences that lead to positive and sustainable change. Orange (or O) refers to partially successful learning experiences, inconsistently leading to change. And lastly, red (or R) refers to the lack of learning with actors or learning not informing change.



Figure 6 Wheel representing the self-assessment of collective learning

Not surprisingly in the context of this case study NGO, young people take up the biggest share of this wheel. It should be noted that all sub-groups of youth are clustered because different programme teams used dissimilar categorisations of young people. Learning with and from young people is considered to successfully lead to change. A second group that was mentioned frequently is local government. However, like other government actors, collective learning with them is only somewhat successfully leading to change.

Other actor groups that pose challenges are community actors such as parents, religious and cultural leaders, and other groups in the community who are not part of the programme per se. Within the social systems, teachers seem to be a difficult group to engage in learning efforts. Finally, learning efforts are lagging with CBOs and coalitions. It is interesting to note that programme teams referred to colleagues within their own organisation as external actors as well. This is in line with the conceptualisation of environment by Marsick and Watkins (2003), who include mobilising views from across the organisation as scanning the external environment.

On average, programme teams mentioned just over ten external actors influencing the change they want to see, illustrating an ecosystem approach to programming. Two programmes that are coalition-based presented the highest number of actors influencing the change they want to see. Overall, the findings of this mapping exercise suggest there is room for improvement in terms of learning with external actors, given only 47 per cent of actors are being assessed as 'green'. The learning self-assessment did not seem to improve with time, since those programmes that had almost run their course did not assess their learning situation more positively than others. We also did not see a more positive picture for programmes that had more learning platforms than those with fewer platforms.

What knowledge is not mobilised?

Following the self-assessment of programme teams, it seems especially challenging to mobilise knowledge of government and community actors. Failing to facilitate learning with these actors poses the risk of losing out on vital knowledge. Local government actors, for example, are tasked by programme teams with monitoring and coordinating efforts in the locality but these roles are not taken up actively. The national government is ascribed knowledge on policies and regulations and potentially plays a role as a knowledge partner in advocacy efforts. The complicated relationship with the government could be explained by the regulatory structures focused on control rather than coordination and quality assurance (ICNL, 2017). The programme teams acknowledged that their change model is influenced by several community members such as parents or elders, yet their experiences, beliefs and practices are not commonly considered. Forces creating tension with programme objectives can be cultural beliefs and moral practices held by cultural leaders, elders, spouses and parents. This particularly

affects programmes dealing with SRHR and girls' economic opportunities. From a systems perspective, these sources of dissent are vital to solving complex problems. Moreover, community members could possess practical wisdom (or *phronesis*) about how development problems may be addressed in the locality (see for example Flyvbjerg, 2001). Communities are also considered testing grounds for new ideas and innovation – a function that is at risk of being underutilised given the weaker connections with community members beyond youth. Reviewing the platforms for collective learning listed by the teams, it is noticeable that most platforms were uni-directional and that most were organised by separate programme units. All in all, this typology suggests there are numerous parts of the elephant that remain unknown or ambiguous through the current efforts of collective learning with external actors – especially those actors that seem to have divergent views.

5. Towards collective learning between communities and NGOs: reflections on a series of temporary learning spaces in Central-Eastern Uganda¹⁰

Abstract

Contemporary development models present collective learning as an important means to tackle complex problems. NGOs have several mechanisms in place to facilitate learning with and from communities, however, these do not always realise authentic participation and meaningful programme adjustments. In a participatory research in Central-Eastern Uganda, we investigated community perceptions about community-NGO collaboration. In this chapter, we present findings, along with our reflections on the learning spaces that emerged in the research and what these can tell us about collective learning for adaptive programming, taking into account power dynamics, heterogeneity of communities, normative complexity and contextualism.

5.1 Introduction

I think you have also heard from the youths themselves, there hasn't been any programme designed for youths that has succeeded. They come and call

¹⁰ This chapter is based on Blaak, M., Irepu, S. & Zeelen, J. (2021). Towards collective learning between communities and NGOs: reflections on a series of temporary learning spaces in Central-Eastern Uganda. Manuscript submitted for publication.

us to meetings, we dedicate our time, but in the end the programme does not succeed.

Faith, youth, female, community-NGO meeting

In Uganda, the majority of the population is under twenty-five years of age. To tap into the potential of this youth bulge, numerous initiatives are launched to help youth succeed. In Faith's village, for example, eighteen NGOs – largely unaware of each other – offer a variety of youth development interventions. Yet, according to Faith none of them has succeeded. In 2018, a participatory research in Faith's village in Central-Eastern Uganda revealed areas where NGOs did and did not succeed in aligning their programmes to youth development needs and opportunities. This research aimed at understanding how the community prefers to collaborate with NGOs. By doing so, the study sought to support NGOs in improving their collective learning mechanisms towards meaningful youth programming.

Contemporary development approaches stress the importance of collaboration (across disciplines and actor spaces) to solve complex problems (Chambers, 2010; Guijt, 2010; Neely, 2015; OECD, 2019; Ramalingam et al., 2014). Ramalingam et al. (2014) suggest that through adaptive programming, NGOs should search for best fit solutions within specific contexts, rather than universal best practices. Does Faith's remark imply that NGOs in her village are not searching for contextual solutions? A glance at the literature suggests that it is not necessarily the lack of effort that prevents NGOs from learning and making meaningful adaptations (Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013; Roper & Pettit, 2002). Anyidoho (2010) and Cornwall (2002) portray collective learning as a delicate practice and encourage facilitators to be mindful of the situated nature of learning, the role of power and the heterogeneity of communities. As illustrated in chapter 2, others have attributed the difficulty of authentic learning to pressures in the field of aid that incentivise a focus on pre-set theories of change and quick results (Guijt, 2010; Ramalingam, 2013).

In this chapter, we complement existing literature on collective learning and participatory, adaptive development by presenting a community perspective on how collective learning can be shaped towards developing better fitting interventions, particularly for youth. The findings presented here were generated through a participatory research that itself revealed interesting facets of collective learning. As co-authors, we offer different perspectives on what occurred: Marit as the facilitating

researcher, Sophia as an NGO representative and Jacques as research supervisor. At the centre of this paper are insights shared by village members during interviews and dialogues, as well as turning points observed during the research as a result of their agency. Using a field theoretical lens, we reconstruct the learning trajectory that emerged and analyse the dimensions and outcomes of the learning spaces that were created. Finally, we present practical implications for practitioners seeking to facilitate collective learning as a situated practice, in a power-sensitive manner and taking into account diversity of values. We hope to demonstrate an optimistic account to readers; illustrating how one-off spaces for collective learning can facilitate small but significant changes towards meaningful adaptive programming.

5.2 Viewing collective learning spatially

Underlying this PhD research is a field theoretical perspective to illustrate how learning practices of NGOs are shaped, expanded and limited through a dynamic interplay of forces in the field of development and the agency of those involved. Field theorists such as Lewin (1939) and Bourdieu (1977) conceptualise reality as a social space that is formed through social interaction and action. Over time, when these interactions become patterned, fields emerge – which are internalised models of reality. Actors such as NGOs, governments, donors, and citizens, take up various positions in this field, forming an intricate web of power relations. Power is a strong force in the process of determining what is considered meaningful, acceptable and treated as a priority (Bourdieu, 1977). Chapter 4 already illustrated that the intermediary position of NGOs creates a unique force field with clashing interests of donors, governments and communities. In this arena of power, NGOs have to navigate normative complexity caused by ambiguity and value contradictions (Kunneman, 2016).

If we view reality as a socially constructed concept, learning can be seen as a possible force to reconfigure this reality and push perceived limits to action. In this research, we conceptualise collective learning as spaces wherein different actors come together to collaboratively analyse information and through interaction revise beliefs, assumptions, meaning and action strategies (inspired by Lipshitz et al., 2007). These spaces can form fields too, made up by participants, (power) relationships, meaning-giving processes and capital. Potentially, such collective learning spaces can be shaped to reconfigure elements of the field (Cornwall, 2002; Friedman, 2011). Below, we explore

how learning spaces and their outcomes can be characterised from a field theoretical perspective to help overcome common blind spots in collective learning: power and heterogeneity of thought.

By viewing collective learning spatially, several dimensions surface that can characterise these spaces. Cornwall (2002) suggests two dimensions: the temporal dimension and location of impetus. The first refers to the duration of a space – is it a one-time event or is it institutionalised and recurring? The second dimension describes who sets the agenda: it can be those in positions of power extending an invitation to participate or it can be a grassroots effort. Lipshitz et al. (2007) in their work on organisational learning further highlight that learning spaces can be formal or informal; some are spontaneously emerging and others are intentionally designed. They also differentiate spaces according to their location, either embedded in the primary work process or external to these. Lastly, they characterise spaces through the participants, who could be internal or external actors. In short, spaces for collective learning can be defined by who takes part, how participants relate, who sets the learning agenda, durability, location and the power dynamics at play. Cornwall (2002) argues that by being aware and intentional about these dimensions we can strengthen participatory development.

Secondly, from a spatial perspective, outcomes of learning can be characterised in terms of their effect on the field. Friedman (2011) differentiates six pathways of change as a result of learning. Four of these leave the field intact: differentiation, knowing one's place, migration and emigration – these trajectories help people find their way in existing fields. Two trajectories create *new fields*. One is *forming enclaves*: a temporary or localised field with new governing rules emerges within an existing field. The other is *transformation*: reconfiguring an entire field. These six pathways help identify whether learning reproduces or transforms the status quo. The five cycles of value creation of Wenger, Trayner, and De Laat (2011) widen our horizon to ask who benefits from learning and in what manner. The cycle of *immediate value* draws attention to the value inherent to participating – such as having fun or meeting people. Secondly, there is *potential value* in form of knowledge that could facilitate change in future. The third is *applied value*, leading to change in practice connected to the fourth – *realised value*, referring to improvements in performance. And lastly *reframing value* whereby participants redefine success. Together, these concepts help evaluate learning for its

subtle yet substantial influence on the status quo. Before reconstructing our learning spaces, we describe the methodology used.

5.3 Methodology

This paper presents a sub-study of Marit's PhD research on organisational learning in education NGOs. Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach, Marit facilitated cycles of action and reflection with an NGO working in Central-Eastern Uganda. Reflecting on their practice, the team realised some of their collective learning efforts were ineffective and asked themselves: "how do community actors prefer to be engaged throughout the project cycle?" They wanted to investigate this further in the context of the PAR, but designing this sub-study presented two dilemmas related to the authentic participation of community members. First, earlier in the research, the team had problematised not receiving critical feedback from community actors – they felt their involvement would hinder gathering authentic views. Secondly, PAR as an approach seeks to solve problems of concern to participants, yet in this case, an NGO raised the issue, not the community. To overcome these dilemmas, the NGO team and Marit opted to conduct this as a separate sub-study of the PAR. For this purpose, Marit recruited three research assistants to form an external research team and widened the research tools to inquire about all NGOs in the locality, not just the case-study NGO. Most importantly, through the initial research activities, the research team investigated whether the problem identified by the NGO mattered to the community and provided an opportunity to influence the direction of the research.

Table 14 presents an overview of the research activities. Inspired by field theory, the interviews and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) aimed at mapping the field of youth development in the village, including issues youth care about, actors, existing initiatives and ways in which youth and other community members like to relate with NGOs. The tools were developed by Marit and volunteers of the case study NGO helped contextualise these tools. The FGD tool included visualisation exercises – which invited participants to map their village and important places for youth, as well as knowledge networks. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, in the local language, and participants were selected through a snowballing method.

During a community dialogue, preliminary insights from interviews and FGDs – analysed by the research team – were presented for feedback. Based on the proposal from

participants in this meeting, a community-NGO meeting was organised to present recommendations to NGOs operating in the village. The organising committee met a few more times to plan for this NGO meeting. Details on the methodology of these activities are integrated into the findings section.

Table 14. Community research activities and participants

Seq.	Activity	Data collection method	Participants
1	Data collection about community perceptions	Focus Group Discussion Interviews	Female youth group members (9) Local leaders (2) Young male (5) Young female (5) Elders (5) Business people (3) Health worker (1) Head teacher (1)
2	Community dialogue	Dialogue, brainstorm	Young male (4) Young female (5) Adult male (3) Adult female (4) Incl. local leaders, religious leaders, elders, health worker, teacher, youth
3	Organising committee meetings	Action planning, meeting minutes	Community representatives (4)
4	Community-NGO meeting	Community feedback, Dialogue	Community members (37) NGO representatives (15) District and local government officials (4)
5	Spin-off	Field notes	n/a

All recorded interviews and meetings were transcribed and translated. In preparation for this manuscript, Marit analysed these transcripts using ATLAS.ti guided by the theoretical framework presented earlier as well as emerging issues (Hennink et al., 2011). Six code groups emerged: youth development status quo, actors, relationship aspects,

perceptions of NGOs, positionality and agency, and space dimensions. The analysis further occurred during conversations between the co-authors.

Ethical considerations

To enable informed consent, research objectives and the possibility to opt out were explained in the local language. Some members opted out or preferred to remain off-record. Before the study, approval was sought from the district government as well as village leadership. The overall PhD research was cleared by the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology. In line with the promised data protection, only Marit accessed interview and dialogue transcripts. Sophia only accessed the transcript of the community-NGO meeting in which she participated. The data were pseudonymised and the names included in this paper are aliases. Lastly, the research assistants signed a statement committing to ethical data collection and management procedures.

5.4 Findings

5.4.1 Setting the scene

To situate this research, we first describe the village context. In terms of youth development, participants stressed similar issues mentioned in the national discourse: unemployment, early school leaving, lack of skilling opportunities and early pregnancy. Looking at these matters in the local context provided insight into the dynamics shaping youth aspirations and choices: like the influence of gender, religion, industrial development, and role models. Participants mentioned several local initiatives to address these issues. For example, youth groups running income-generating activities, local artisans offering apprenticeships or youth receiving counselling from local leaders. The family unit, too, is a space where youth seek support to advance their goals—mothers especially were ascribed an important role. There is also *parliament*: an informal space where boys and girls meet separately to discuss issues of interest. The interviews not only revealed a large number of community initiatives, but in addition eighteen NGOs were identified by the research participants. These NGOs were known for several programmes such as building houses, health education, vocational skills training, savings and credit, and education support.

Community members mentioned several issues about the way NGOs run programmes for and with youth. Some noted a mismatch between programmes offered and youths' needs; youth would like more support in accessing market opportunities

through capital or vocational skills training as well as talent development in sports. Some mentioned family planning, on the other hand, is less relevant to them.

I don't usually follow, because when they pass around announcing the event, and they say: "the people of [this village] please come to [the village] primary school, there are things we want to teach you about your marriage lives, family planning." Then me who is not married, what would I be looking for there?

Pamela, youth, female, interview 22

Another issue members noted is that NGOs tend to work with the same people and exclude others. This was partly associated with community gatekeepers who influence what kind of participants are selected.

The problem is, most organisations when they come, they select the leaders in the community and they fail to deliver to us here.

Joseph, youth, male, interview 7

Several participants mentioned that NGOs made unfulfilled promises; sometimes these were *briefcase* organisations that solicited money for non-existent programmes. Overall, the first stage of this research helped to consolidate scattered information about the various initiatives for youth development and identify areas of overlap and misalignment. This more comprehensive knowledge acted as a trigger for the research process to become more collective.

5.4.2 Establishing a mutual agenda

The interviews and FGD showed traces of dependent agency – it seemed that some participants adopted a vocabulary aimed at accessing resources of interest to them (Anderson & Patterson, 2017). In six interviews, participants articulated support requests directed at the researcher. Marit had stayed away from the interviews to avoid being associated with NGOs as a white person. Still, despite the efforts of the research assistants to build rapport and create an informal atmosphere, the interviews seem to have mimicked conversations that NGOs conduct in communities. The logic of research apparently looks a lot like the logic of NGOs. The learning trajectory, however, took on a more collective nature during the validation dialogue. At this point, the relationship between the participants and the research team had strengthened during mobilisation.

Members had expressed a sense of surprise to see the research team returning – something they did not expect based on prior experiences with NGOs and researchers.

During the dialogue, the methodology explicitly aimed at collaboratively giving meaning to the findings and identifying the next steps. To open up a conversational space, the research assistants facilitated the dialogue in the local language (Angucia et al., 2010). This led to a lively conversation with members confirming, nuancing or contrasting findings (though young women participated visibly less in the plenary discussions). The dialogue opened a space where community members discovered the extent and implications of the problems surrounding community-NGO collaboration.

My thinking is that the problem has been there, but these people [refers to research team] have given us chance to talk about it.

Bagamba, adult, male, community dialogue

At the end of the meeting, participants brainstormed recommendations for NGOs, themselves as a community, and the local government. Strong recommendations for NGOs included: engage youth from the start and give them leadership in projects, clarify the organisation's agenda, include multiple community stakeholders, facilitate continuous touch-points and feedback loops, and connect with existing initiatives for youth development. Participants of the dialogue also noted that they as community members could more proactively support NGOs in search of better coordination. They recommended that government should regulate the work of NGOs and demand accountability. When the researcher asked what participants wanted to do with their insights, they unanimously answered that the NGOs should come for a meeting so they could share their feedback face-to-face.

The best idea that would work well if there is a chance to call all NGOs [...] and we talk to them face-to-face. It could help better than just report about findings.

Reverend, adult, male, community dialogue

To operationalise this idea, four representatives were elected to form an organising committee – intentionally ensuring equal representation of male/female and adult/youth. During a planning meeting with Marit, the committee suggested that youth should receive the majority of speaking time and that their main recommendation as

organisers was to form a *community-coordinating committee* that could act as a focal point for NGOs. So far, research activities enabled participating community members and the research team to form a mutual agenda, which was realised by organising a meeting to share feedback with all NGOs operating in the community.

5.4.3 *Turning the tables: zooming in on the community-NGO meeting*

Considering NGOs are usually in the driving seat, we could not be sure whether the NGOs would honour the community's invite. Sixteen NGOs were traced and invited through the Internet and district government officer and eventually, eight NGOs and the district NGO network were represented in the community-NGO meeting. In addition, a large number of youths was represented, as well as various local leaders. Whilst this was a diverse audience, one of the youths underlined that we may not be able to speak about representation.

We don't even make 100 but it's like we are representing a whole parish or a full sub-county. Many people are out there in the communities that would have loved to be helped but when they are not aware of the ongoing programmes. [...] If you had organised 'motor-drives' [...] or maybe put up a communal event like football match, many of the youths would be here by now.

Balondemu, youth, male, community-NGO meeting

A fellow PhD student from the region facilitated the meeting. He is well-versed with the local language and the vocabulary of local government, NGOs and the community – an important ingredient for establishing conversational space (Angucia et al., 2010). A research assistant provided real-time translations to enable participation for all. The room was set up in a semi-circle, creating a physical sense of equality. However, an impromptu *high table* was created by a local leader, putting selected senior people in front. After general introductions, youth were invited to share their feedback. In the second half of the meeting, NGOs and leaders were asked to respond. To characterise the learning space that emerged we present three scenarios; two that display a clash of logics and one that presents synergy.

Scenario 1 – Unfilled promises or unfulfilled requirements?

The first scenario illustrates how the logic of youth does not always correspond with the logic of NGOs. In this scenario, Patricia shares how she supported an NGO in mobilising

fellow teen mothers to start a project. She felt swindled by the local volunteer; they had collected money for registration of their group at the district but never received start-up capital as promised.

There was an NGO that came; [...] they even gave me power to lead. [...] So, when it came, I collected the teen young mothers below eighteen years. When we began, they requested for money from us I understand 'for registration', each of us paid. [...] It reached a time, and they sent us money, and it reached a time and they left. [...]. So, it's from that point that I say, for us that they always make to run up and down, how do we benefit from? As the community contact persons keep on eating up the money, they send to us.

Patricia, youth, female, community-NGO meeting

A headteacher supported her point by noting that the NGO volunteer was inexperienced. In response, a representative from the NGO explained that the volunteer was recommended by 'the community' and therefore the NGO could not be fully held responsible for his actions. In addition, she explained the group did not receive capital because they did not meet the requirements in time.

So, most of the things [the volunteer] used to tell them and they could not mind. [...] He told them to register at the sub-county because they give you money after you have registered; they did not. They were asked for a business plan; which business do you want and how are you going to run it? They did not do it. [...] They never did any of those. So, what they did, [the volunteer] got another group.

Agnes, NGO practitioner, female, community-NGO meeting

Agnes' final statement was that ultimately teenage mothers in the community did benefit, just a different group. Both parties had an explanation about what happened that made sense given their positionality. The facilitator framed this as an example of miscommunication, explicitly underlining that the meeting was not meant as a tribunal. As an external observer, Marit felt disappointed – in light of collective learning she was hoping for people to engage in inquiry to find out how such a miscommunication could have emerged, rather than advocacy. For Sophia this moment was uncomfortable too, raising questions around mutual accountability, ownership and responsibility.

Scenario 2 – Why are youth not benefiting from the NGO programmes?

A second scenario illustrates various conflicting perspectives about who carries a responsibility to create *best fit* interventions. Several youths shared sentiments in line with that of Faith: NGO programmes are not relevant for youth or fail to reach those youth who need it most.

They waste our time, like an NGO [name]; they used to pick us from school to go and participate in their programmes, for outreaches. They could tell our parents that they would pay for us school fees and later on they fail to do what they have promised. Yet they have wasted all our time working and participating in their programmes. To people like us, those things hurt so much.

Hasifa, youth, female, community-NGO meeting

When given their turn, NGOs provided several responses to the youths' feedback. In her field notes, Marit categorised these remarks as justifying, clarifying or defending their approach; calling for coordination; requesting youth to participate more actively; or, promising to report the youths' feedback to the headquarters. Joseph, for example, invited youth to actively find out what his NGO offers.

But I also encourage the youth, to really look out for the friends that are working with [our NGO] in the community and ask them: "what is that exactly you are offering and how can we be part?"

Joseph, NGO practitioner, male, community-NGO meeting

William stressed that programmes fail because of various challenges faced by youth.

The youths have frustrated us [...] We sponsor, they drop out with no clear reason. [...] The girls have done so much to get themselves pregnant, as they abandon money invested in them. So, my request to other NGOs, we should address the cause.

William, NGO practitioner, male, community-NGO meeting

Overall, NGO representatives seemed to engage more in advocacy – stating their views on why programmes were not successfully serving youth. This provided insight into the NGO perspective on hindrances faced when trying to engage youth, but did not contribute to an inquiry into causes or solutions. In response, one of the community

organisers introduced the idea of the coordinating committee – though not very elaborately – which could be a lever for collective learning and youth engagement.

If you want these programmes to move, like we equally do, we are requesting that let there be collaboration between NGOs and community members [...] So that there can be a committee to coordinate. [...] Coming to the community when people don't know you, what will be your destination?

Bagamba, adult, male, community-NGO meeting

At this point, no one responded to this suggestion. Instead, what emerged was a back-and-forth between NGOs and the local government about gaps in regulation and coordination. During this part of the meeting, the youth did not participate in the plenary conversation.

I would like to encourage all of the local leaders: [...] you need to take an interest in all the programmes that are running, an active interest. Because quite often organisations come to bring a new programme completely unaware that there were other programmes doing exactly the same thing because no one is sharing that information.

Margareth, NGO practitioner, female, community-NGO meeting

In a reflection interview with the case study NGO, one of their members noted that NGO representatives in the meeting may have been trying to save face for the government officials who could choose to discontinue their programmes. The clash of logics in scenarios 1 and 2 triggered feelings of discomfort and also led to interesting insights about the power dynamics and values guiding lifelong learning interventions.

Scenario 3 – A small synergy

Whereas the second scenario illustrated the conversation straying away from the youth's needs and preferences, at some point a small synergy did emerge. Fatuma, a young woman, expressed that instead of family planning she would like to learn how to make sanitary pads.

So, me I suggest for us that don't benefit from family planning, if you could come up and teach us about things that benefit us as girls. For example, learning how to make handmade pads.

Fatuma, youth, female, community-NGO meeting

Two NGO representatives guided Fatuma on where she may access an opportunity to learn this skill. One of them was Margareth, who explained the local headteacher could be of help.

The lady who said about making pads, I don't know where you are. We have a programme of making pads. So please seek out the head teacher of [school name], and you can come and learn how to make pads.

Margareth, NGO practitioner, female, community-NGO meeting

This scenario revealed how coming together could lead to resourceful solutions – first of all by knowing who is doing what. Several NGO practitioners appreciated this meeting for providing a platform for everyone to learn what NGOs are doing in this locality – leaving some longing for more.

And in my view, it's not also about finding the culprits [...] but to appreciate that there will always be gaps. But then the question is; spaces like this don't need to be events but it should be a process where we come and talk about these things and see, how can we move forward.

Joseph, NGO practitioner, male, community-NGO meeting

5.5 Discussion: taking stock

As illustrated by Faith's quote in the introduction and during the community-NGO meeting, NGOs may not always succeed in meeting the expectations of their participants. In this research, community members had several suggestions for NGOs on how they could engage them in finding best fit programmes that are more inclusive, just and relevant. Overall, community members underlined a motto often used by NGOs as well: 'nothing for us without us'. By reconstructing our short participatory research process, we unveiled additional insights into the dynamic nature of collective learning. For example, developing collective knowledge about the status quo of youth development turned out to be an important stepping stone to set a mutual learning agenda. Although the different learning spaces were all temporary and quite formal, over time the spaces started showing different locations of impetus and included a growing and more diverse number of participants. These spaces were in no way perfect – power

dynamics did bias who spoke and not everyone was fully aligned on the goals. So, we could ask: How much value did these one-off spaces create for improved collaboration between communities and NGOs? And what can we learn from this experience about shaping collective learning spaces? Table 15 provides a summary of the trajectory and our key observations on the dimensions and value of each space. Though we have not followed up with all participants of this research trajectory, from our perspective we particularly identify layers of immediate, potential and reframing value (Wenger et al., 2011). It may seem disappointing that the application of insights gained was limited and realised value remained invisible within our research process, but we do feel that the layers of the value of Wenger et al. (2011) help us appreciate the smaller successes that could trigger realised value in future.

Table 15 Summary of the collective learning trajectory

	Space	Observations about the space	Value creation
1	Interviews & FGD	Unilateral, triggered a dominant NGO modus operandi - acts of dependent agency to solicit for projects/support.	Knowledge capital for the research team: capability to navigate the site; understanding the great variance in the community; knowing who is who and what is important.
2	Community dialogue	The power exerted on community members to influence research direction, though girls less space to speak.	Improved relationship between community and research team, mutual learning agenda. The potential value in form of various action ideas; suggesting reframing value due to changing role of the community in influencing NGO interventions.
3	Committee meetings	Hybrid space: co-led to critically examine ideas for a way forward.	Applied value in form of executing action plans and small steps towards capability development to lead in an initiative holding NGOs accountable.
4	Community-NGO meeting	Community set the agenda and extended the invite – supported by an external neutral facilitator. First half: youth took the lead. Second half: intricate power dynamics	Immediate value in contacts made and success experience for organisers. The potential value in terms of knowledge on who cares for what holding which logic – testing assumptions held about youth perceptions.

between NGO & local government.

5 Spin-off	Grey area of responsibility and lacking capabilities to push forward coordinating committee locally.	Applied value in first steps taken towards coordinating committee and liaison with district official. Small realised value: NGOs returning to provide more information and community members asking local leaders for NGO contacts.
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A spatial perspective helped us view the community-NGO meeting as an enclave (Friedman, 2011): it brought together actors who do not normally meet in one space; the agenda was set by people who usually do not set the agenda, and the rules of the game changed, prioritising the views of youth. Such enclaves cannot be orchestrated; they emerged as relationships strengthened and spaces to provide meaning were opened. By minimising the use of dominant norms, we witnessed interesting clashes of logic as well as synergies that revealed a lot about assumptions held and perceptions about the other. To some extent, the community dialogue can be seen as an enclave as well. Though it mimicked a more conventional research validation setting, this space did allow synthesis of knowledge and creation of new meaning about the work of NGOs and their role in collaboration. The spaces emerging in this sub-study illustrate that – even though temporary – enclaves can result in reframing value as shared definitions of success emerge and relationships change (including power components of relationships). We too have reframed our definition of success; we appreciate the emergent, slow and messy nature of learning and learned to accept change as a series of smaller shifts in the way we relate and understand each other. Power has revealed itself as a multi-directional force – something that can be extended to ‘another’ and something that is not absolute. By untangling hidden encumbrances in the field of youth development we revealed why it is difficult to understand each other and what it might take to achieve a concerted effort between different actors.

While emphasising that collective learning requires a contextualised approach, we do want to share a few insights that could help practitioners in facilitating collective learning. We recognise that there are various practical limits to engage in collective learning – sometimes only allowing short and low-cost interactions within a project period. We hope that the pointers below help to creatively tap into the opportunities for meaningful collective learning amidst these tensions.

1. *Investing in conversational space* – To open up a conversational space, we found it helpful to develop an understanding of the status quo: what field currently emerges around the development problem, who plays what role and how do people currently relate? Some curiosity is beneficial to see beyond a specific programme model; what spaces and opportunities already exist that you could connect with? Familiarity and being present helped strengthen our learning relationship too, dismantling traditional power facets. Rooted in their understanding of the context, facilitators can select fitting methodology and identify who to invite. Certain methods such as dialogue can extend power to those people whose voices are commonly left out. Regarding the venue, in this case, the organising committee chose a place they were comfortable in – but one could also opt to choose a venue that is 'un-normal'. Lastly, choosing a competent moderator can greatly help open up the conversational space. In this case, we involved a neutral person who could open-mindedly explore the viewpoints of various actors.

2. *Embracing emergence* – Collective learning is unpredictable and we encourage those facilitating collective learning processes to be open-minded and leverage both institutionalised spaces as well as fleeting spaces (such as informal encounters at the football pitch). Building on existing initiatives and through continuous interaction, participants can establish a mutual learning agenda. Consequently, for NGOs, it may not be possible to set targets around the number and type of collective learning activities before programme implementation. Practitioners will have to use their discretionary space and adjust plans in conversation with (funding) partners. We are hopeful that the cycles of value and space dimensions provide an invaluable language to make 'small' changes visible and to articulate a contextual approach to collective learning and adaptive programming.

3. *Dealing with discomfort* – Both Sophia and Marit experienced a sense of discomfort during the community-NGO meeting. We imagine NGO practitioners recognise this when value systems clash or when time and budget limits get in the way of acting on

feedback. But these moments can be pivotal in collective learning and it is useful to learn how to embrace discomfort as a learning opportunity. Such conflicts could trigger reflection on underlying logics and assumptions – what could explain someone’s view and why is this important to them? It could also incite personal reflexivity – why does this situation make me feel uncomfortable and how does my response to discomfort affect my ability to learn from others? These reflections and inquiry do not have to happen in the heat of the (emotionally charged) moment, and resisting the pressure to draw conclusions can benefit inquiry. In addition, it may not always be possible to achieve consensus, but an understanding of what is important to whom can help prioritise actions by various actors – albeit collective or independent action.

4. *Creative partnerships between NGOs, communities and academia* – In our case, it was Marit’s PhD research that triggered this collective learning journey. Her being an engaged outsider did help to transcend the project-lens often applied to collective learning (Van der Kamp, 2002). Other scholars too could explore how they could help facilitate communities of inquiry – including participants from various spaces. They could feed the process by contributing external knowledge and, more importantly, synthesising various contributions made by participants. NGOs too can develop their internal capacity to learn in a boundary-crossing way by equipping staff with the required skills set and providing incentives for an adaptive and critical manner of working.

Since collective learning will take a different shape in various contexts, the field of development would benefit from further research into ingredients of meaningful collective learning and enabling conditions (Cornwall, 2002). This could take shape in form of Participatory Action Research, where practitioners test out various methods and reflect on the spatial dimensions, the value generated and enabling conditions. Researchers could also look at how to include actors commonly left at the periphery, such as business persons or community members who choose not to participate or who have opposing views. It would further be interesting to explore whether Argyris (2002) concept of double-loop learning (which is often associated with the question ‘are we doing the right thing?’) and defensive routines can help achieve more lasting transformative results, such as forming enclaves or full transformation (Friedman, 2011).

5.6 Conclusion

Collective learning is often described as the panacea for adaptive programming towards best fit solutions to complex development problems. However, juggling high and diverse expectations from different parties, NGO practitioners have to execute an act of defiance to take those steps that are fitting a particular situation and facilitate learning that creates a critical understanding of the problems at hand. Our experience in Central-Eastern Uganda illustrated barriers to alignment – such as heterogeneity of thought and power dynamics. By viewing learning in a spatial sense, we identified the humble nature of the change which can emerge through short-lived spaces for collective learning. This perspective helped us see the nuances of collective learning, yielding insights for NGO practitioners as well as community mobilisers who seek to facilitate change amidst complexity. If used reflexively, collective learning provides an opportunity for NGOs to find keys to unexplored, closed doors. We encourage our readers to start small in search of the *best fitting* approach in their development context.

Intermezzo 3 | Working between the edges of partners

By Anonymous Volunteer Educator

As a Volunteer Team Leader on a volunteer-led development programme for 3 months, I was an extension of the staff, which placed me in the position of an intermediary. That is to say, swinging between the edges of the organisation and stakeholders. I was like a car shock absorber, meaning that in case a challenge or problem came up either from volunteers or stakeholders, a Team Leader had to appropriately absorb and respond to all its primary shocks before reaching the organisation. I interacted with local government officials, community and district health workers, heads of schools, local political actors, youth group leaders and host parents. Whereas the role was a challenging undertaking, it rewarded me with learning experiences that I am proud to share. The diversity of experiences I had with stakeholders, volunteers and the entire working environment make it rather tricky to clearly narrate and separate the good and tough moments in the course of my duties. Interestingly, every stakeholder had a different version of telling the story and experience of contributing towards the successful implementation of the programme in rural communities. As a Team Leader I then had to promptly document and submit these narratives to the office. However, this implied that the way in which the Team Leader perceived and/or communicated such stories and experiences directly or indirectly posed a bearing on the future cooperation between that particular stakeholder and the organisation.

For example, it proved difficult working with the District Health Officials, who continuously demanded a Progress Report about the programme implementation, which they claimed they had previously requested from the Programme Officer but it had never been given to them. As a result, the Health Officials threatened to withhold any assistance I needed unless the organisation fulfilled their demands for reports. In addition, following a series of interactions and analyses of the situation during that time, I realized that some headteachers, host parents, district officials and local council leaders had lost genuine interest in working with the NGO. Some host parents, for example, confessed their lack of will to host volunteers, as they needed a break from it. Therefore, frequent concerns by the actors did not only jeopardize our working relationship but also undermined the execution and impact of programme activities. To my dismay, I did not

clearly understand why the organisation's management did not address such demands and concerns even though they were aware of some of them. The team leaders hypothesized that management perhaps did not take enough time to look through and discuss what we (team leaders and volunteers) were reporting about, maybe due to inadequate flexibility of the programme and their working schedules.

While my experience may have been challenging, I picked worthy lessons out of this role, for instance, always documenting and reporting the progress periodically, need for effective communication, levelling expectations, fulfilling commitments and promises, flexibility, responding to the feedback as required, to mention but a few. Relating my experiences to organisational learning, the best strategy for a good learner is continued consideration of the feedback they get, as it is important in improving the process of delivery. Creating time to discuss the feedback and finding possible solutions to the negative feedback is indeed a constructive approach. For instance, it can maintain a stable and cooperative working relationship with not only the stakeholders, but also actual beneficiaries, and upholds the reputation of the organisation. This would in return ease the completion of tasks for the extension staff like volunteers and Team Leaders that are always in the field.

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.

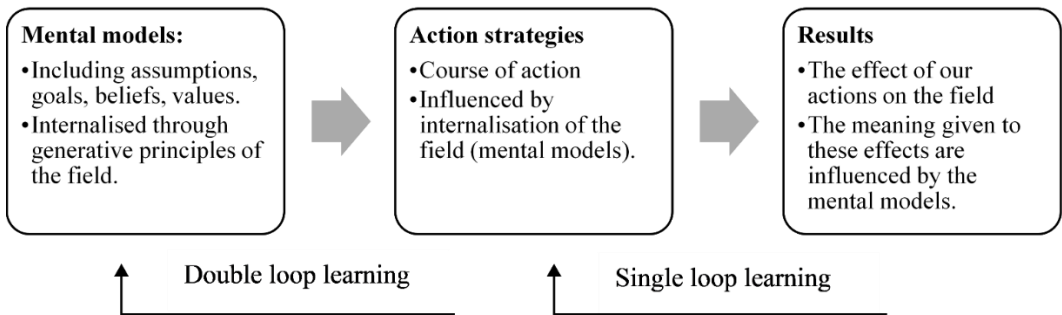


Figure 7 Theories-of-action in light of field theory

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.

7. Double-loop learning towards adaptive lifelong learning programming: making it stick

At the diagnosis stage of this research, participating NGOs established that single-loop learning is more common than double-loop learning; NGOs are more likely to change their action strategies than their underlying beliefs and goals. In the three-year PAR following this diagnosis, one NGO engaged in reflection on their learning practice and innovated with the volunteer role and community engagement approaches to push their limits of adaptiveness. In chapter 6 we have seen how this led to several double-loop changes. In this final empirical chapter, I analyse our PAR experience and outcomes to identify what could make such double-loop learning practices and outcomes stick. Based on these insights I revisit Argyris' theory of double-loop learning and expand several of his concepts to situate double-loop learning as a normative practice for transformative change in the field of lifelong learning for development.

7.1 Introduction

So far, our journey with practitioners in education NGOs has illustrated the swampy lowlands of their work in the field of lifelong learning for development. We have also seen how they shape and utilise Organisational Learning Mechanisms (OLMs) to navigate these dilemmas with a keen interest in developing their learners' capabilities. In chapter 4, a rich portrait was sketched illustrating a plethora of unique OLMs across seven education NGOs. On the one hand, we observed that many of the changes reported as a result of organisational learning happened at the single-loop level, neatly fitting within the pre-scripted programme design. However, we also observed that the NGO practitioners enacted their normative professionalism – opening space for learners' and community members' insights or giving them influence over the intervention design. In chapter 5 we utilised a community perspective to analyse the fields emerging around the NGO. We mapped the perspectives of community members to understand how they

would like to be engaged in the collective learning efforts of NGOs. This sub-study revealed that a high number of NGOs operated in the village in a disconnected manner. The relationship between various community actors and NGOs seemed distorted by a clash of logics; the NGOs' project logic ignored the complex and heterogeneous character of communities. This clash of logics was displayed during the community-NGO meeting organised in the context of this research as well. In the fleeting, temporary spaces emerging in the research, we witnessed defensive routines when NGO practitioners and local government representatives engaged in advocacy for their own logic, rather than an inquiry into the perspectives and experiences of youth. Chapter 6 illustrated the potential of double-loop learning interventions to push the perceived limits of adaptiveness. Through a series of PAR activities, the PAR team was able to reframe problematic situations as well as to reconstruct success experiences and the mental models that enabled these successes. Thus, the PAR resulted in various insights about how critical learning spaces could be shaped to support a normative practice in education NGOs (see table 18).

Table 18 Ingredients of critical learning identified in this PAR, chapters 4-7

Chapter	Data source	Insights about critical learning spaces
4	Interviews and co-analysis of the status quo of organisational learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bringing in multiple knowledges - Taking the position of 'the other' - Utilising informal spaces - Learning-oriented leadership
5	Collective inquiry into community perceptions of NGO-community collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investing in conversational space - Embracing emergence - Dealing with discomfort - Creative partnerships between NGO, community, academia
6	Double-loop learning interventions with the PAR team to investigate their approaches to learning with external actors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Zooming in on micro-situations - Providing conceptual frameworks - Carefully selecting participants - Selecting a dedicated facilitator - Leadership encouraging critical dialogue

In this final empirical chapter¹³, I answer the main research question: How can education NGOs in Uganda create space for double-loop learning involving external actors towards meaningful lifelong learning for development interventions? I particularly speak to an aspect that was largely silent in the previous chapters: did double-loop learning stick? 'To stick' here means both the durability and spread of a learning practice and its results. To distil which factors determine whether double-loop learning sticks, I reconstruct two learning pathways that emerged in this PAR: 1) volunteers as catalysts of double-loop learning, and 2) reframing community engagement. The first is used to illustrate conditions and interventions that enabled durable double-loop learning changes and the second is to illustrate factors stalling critical change. In this chapter, I further support the premise that double-loop learning can function as an emancipatory project which could potentially lead to transformational changes in the field of lifelong learning for development (Bokeno, 2003; Foldy & Creed, 1999). To understand how this might happen requires us to untangle the relationship between learning spaces and their environment. Lipshitz et al. (2007): "we still know very little about the conditions that enable such [cultural] islands to emerge, how they coexist with the dominant culture, and how they might influence it over time" (p. 247). Therefore, I review the emerging spaces in the two pathways in their context and illustrate the interplay between enclaves and the wider field. In doing so, I expand Argyris' original double-loop learning theory by making power and normativity more explicit using field theoretical concepts. In addition, I illustrate a shift in the location of double-loop learning to the border area where the organisation meets its external environment – especially the community the NGO operates in. To provide a foundation for this analysis and expansion of the theory, I first revisit key concepts of Argyris' work. After this, I present the two learning pathways and finally, I present six propositions to expand Argyris' theory towards normative double-loop learning. These propositions are not meant as a universal theory for double-loop learning, rather they aim at situating double-loop learning in the field of lifelong learning for development.

¹³ This chapter presents my personal post-analysis of the PAR process in relation to the theoretical frameworks guiding the research. As such the findings presented here do not necessarily represent the views of the participants.

7.2 Argyris' work on facilitating double-loop learning

7.2.1 *What is double-loop learning and why is it relevant to education NGOs?*

In chapter 2, I problematised that organisational learning does not always lead to transformative change – instead, it can make organisations better at doing the ‘wrong’ thing (also see Pedler & Hsu, 2019). I explored double-loop learning in combination with field theory to argue that organisational learning can be used for positive change if it takes a more critical shape, facilitating reflexivity about problematic beliefs and assumptions that are internalised through processes of socialisation. Double-loop learning is defined by Argyris as: “Double-loop learning occurs when mismatches are corrected by first examining and altering governing variables and then actions” (Argyris, 1999, p. 68). In line with Ernie Stringer’s recommendations, I posed conceptual frameworks to the research participants to ask whether these could help make sense of their life world (Dustman et al., 2014). The most explicit introduction to double-loop learning was made during the leadership workshop in April 2017 and the double-loop learning workshop with the selected programme team in January 2018. In both instances, double-loop learning was introduced in contrast to single-loop learning. Using fictive cases as well as personal experiences, participants tested the usability of the lens of double-loop learning. Communicatively the team confirmed the merit of the concept of double-loop learning and expanded it to fit their context. The team confirmed that they tend to engage in single-loop learning more frequently, which is sometimes insufficient to solve the problems their learners are facing. The team associated double-loop learning particularly with going beyond the predetermined programme activities and theories-of-change.

Not just focusing on hmm probably the activity we had set out to do-
Are we doing it rightly, should we go out for more of these or that but
you're looking at really is that activity actually the right thing for us to
do?

Andrew, double-loop learning workshop

The participants connected double-loop learning to their ideal of investigating what is required to meet the needs of learners and communities and helping them achieve their goals. They noted that double-loop learning would enable them to resist the pressure to

focus on narrow, pre-defined targets, as well as dig deeper into the authentic needs of learners and communities beyond the tokenistic answers.

During the PAR the team expanded the definition of double-loop learning in two ways: moving beyond error-correcting and secondly, moving beyond internal OLMs. Argyris (1999) focuses his definition of double-loop learning on correcting errors. However, when the PAR team was introduced to 'learning from success' (Schechter et al., 2004), this approach to organisational learning resonated deeply with them.

Yeah learning from success, was eh, was a core thing. [...] I always want to critique, to observe and pick out that one thing that sometimes others may not be paying attention to. But I learned to relax, [...] and look at what is that that went well. [...] [...] the other side of the coin that we are looking at now is the success aspect". And the whole session actually was beautiful, to actually get to listen from people's experiences and appreciate what people had done. Riding on the positives there's the energy it creates and yeah so, it's one core thing that I learned.

Andrew, support staff, PAR workshop, December 2018

Learning from success does not mean that learning is less critical – it equally brings theories-in-use to the surface and when done at a group level can lead to others correcting the mental models underlying their action theories. In double column case interviews where the learning from success method was used, we unpacked mental models that helped achieve this success. The action theories that were made explicit were shared with a new cohort of volunteers during their orientation training. In addition, in other interviews where the reframing method was used, success framing came in as a result of double-loop reflection, for example, where several volunteers felt like they had failed to achieve any change, or when Andrew (as quoted above) said he would not consider the event a success unproblematically. What started occurring through redefining success is that we established smaller steps and indicators of success – generating reframing value (Wenger et al., 2011). Double-loop learning to the practitioners, thus, was not simply a process of correcting errors but also proactively scanning for successes and unpacking which mental models enabled team members to achieve this success to find ways to expand this success.

Another facet the PAR team added to double-loop learning is the component of involving external actors. The majority of literature on double-loop learning has focused on internal organisational learning mechanisms (OLMs). Some of these OLMs adopt lenses to scan the environment for new information, developments etcetera (Robinson, 2001; Watkins & O'Neil, 2013) or acknowledge the external environment influences whether organisational learning is productive or not (Lipshitz et al., 2007). In chapter 3 I illustrated that research participants considered double-loop learning and learning with and from external actors two sides of the same coin. Their reasoning was that bringing in the perspective of 'the other' facilitates more critical learning. This external-internal interplay has been the main focus of this PAR. We have gained insights into the theories-in-use of NGO practitioners when they are interacting with external actors – particularly at the community and local government level. We have witnessed the heterogeneity and value pluralism in the communities in which education interventions are delivered. We have untangled clashes of logic and the role of power dynamics between NGOs, their funders and various community actors. Finally, we have seen how learning collectively with 'the other' can boost double-loop learning and change by forming boundary-crossing OLMs. However, as shown in chapters 5 and 6, simply being in the same space is not sufficient. The quality of the relationship, methodology and facilitation style, frequency, venue, etcetera all play a role in ensuring the problematic power dynamics and self-sealing processes are not reproduced. When the conditions are created, such learning spaces can turn into enclaves in which power dynamics and positions shift, new insights can be developed, assumptions about 'the other' tested and – maybe most importantly – new accountability pressures to act on the new theories-in-use can emerge.

Therefore, the initial perspective of practitioners that double-loop learning and learning with external actors go hand in hand offers a helpful expansion of the original focus of double-loop learning. During this PAR we discovered that double-loop learning and collective learning with external actors can be mutually reinforcing in four ways:

- a) Getting data and insights directly from the people affected by the NGO programme enriches the organisation's understanding of the problems (and their root causes) at hand
- b) Presenting an opportunity to collectively investigate and address potential conflicts or discrepancies at the level of beliefs, values and assumptions

- c) Creating accountability pressure to show change on the new theories-of-action and an opportunity to implement these changes together
- d) The enclave factor: directly experiencing and practising ways of relating in a more mutual and inquiry-oriented manner with different power attributes

Throughout the PAR, participants made the concept of double-loop learning their own, but as I mentioned earlier, they also felt double-loop learning was not common enough in education NGOs – leading to mismatches between their education programmes and the needs of learners. In the next section, I explore Argyris’ Model 1 learning theories-in-use which he uses to explain why double-loop learning is difficult to achieve due to the symbolic order that exists in many organisations.

7.2.2 Why is double-loop learning so difficult?

Argyris (1982) noted that double-loop learning is a rare practice that requires intentional effort and skill. He investigated the phenomenon in a variety of organisational contexts and identified recurring patterns in terms of how people respond in learning situations that question their existing mental models. He established that there is a universal theory-in-use across organisations and countries that he summarises into Model 1 theories-in-use (see figure 8).

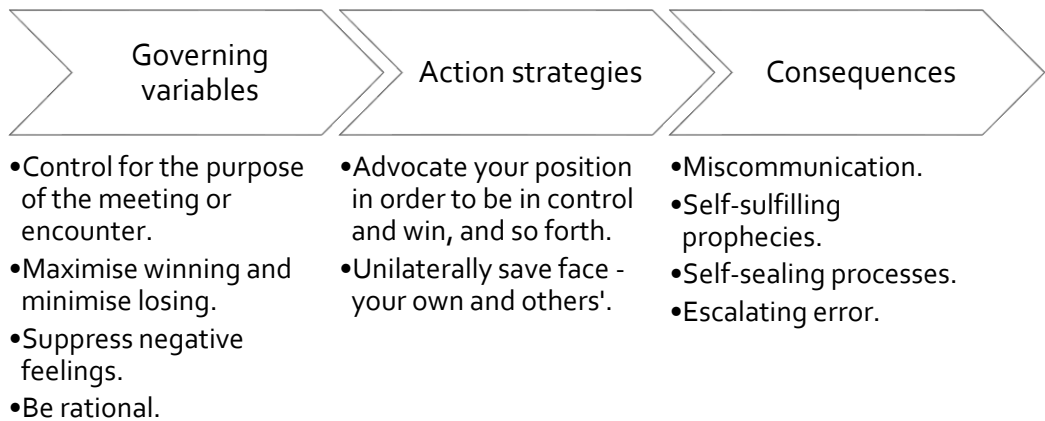


Figure 8 Model 1 theories-in-use (Argyris, 1982, p. 12)

Ultimately, Model 1 reasoning aims at protecting the person against disruptive change – especially in ambiguous and uncertain situations (Argyris, 2010). People internalise and

normalise this theory-in-use through socialisation in the community, education, as well as the workplace. In these social settings, actions in line with model 1 strategies are usually incentivised and celebrated. Model 1 governing variables are self-sealing and self-fulfilling. In other words, whereas members think they act in support of learning and inquiry, their actual actions prevent learning and this goes unnoticed without intentional effort (Argyris, 1977, 1982, 1999, 2002, 2010). In work situations, model 1 theories-of-action can lead to skilled incompetence, whereby people are becoming increasingly efficient at doing the wrong thing and covering up their incompetence.

In broad strokes, we discovered that, when we most need to learn, we paradoxically work hardest at shutting down conversations, shutting down other people, and shutting down ourselves. We tell ourselves and each other, 'don't go there', where 'there' is any sensitive issue that might upset the status quo that envelops us like a cocoon. We have tacitly agreed to rule off limits, to make undiscussable, topics that challenge our accepted sense of self and our comfortable organisational routines. (Argyris, 2010, p. 188)

If a learning situation uncovers an uncomfortable truth about someone's work, a skilled incompetent team may give the impression of being critical without asking about the root causes many may know about. Because the theory-of-action is collectively shared by the team, members will contribute to covering up and saving face of themselves and the other. Some members may be aware of the cover-up approaches, but they too switch on Model 1 learning theories-in-use and cover-up this observation – sustaining the skilled incompetence in an organisation and eventually escalating error (Argyris, 2010). As a result of these defensive routines and miscommunications rooted in Model 1 theories-in-use, people tend to make inconsistent claims or asks – which they (and others) treat as being consistent and make the inconsistency undiscussable (Argyris, 2010).

To enable double-loop learning, Argyris (2010) suggests that organisations need to establish Model 2 learning theories-in-use. This theory-of-action is not focused on protecting oneself but solving problems effectively. He has found that people often espouse this Model 2 reasoning but act in line with learning Model 1; only a few people act consistently on Model 2 theories-in-use.

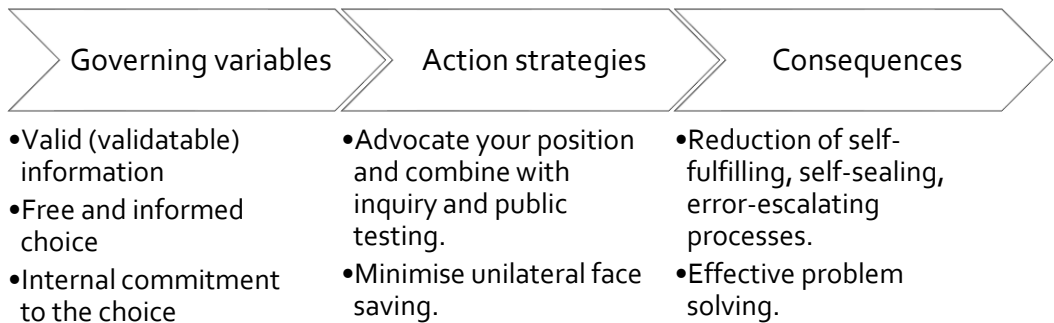


Figure 9 Model 2 theories-in-use (Argyris, 1982, p. 19)

Argyris (1999) warns organisational learning researchers and interventionists not to focus on first-order learning problems, which are those barriers to learning at the level of espoused actions and considerations. Instead, to ensure productive learning occurs, one should address second-order errors, which are those processes through which organisational members cover up their problematic practices and develop taboos, games of control, mixed messages and defensive routines (Argyris, 1999). He proposes that the most effective organisational learning interventions scrutinise the underlying theories-in-use and tackle the problematic elements of Model 1 theories-in-use. By doing so he implicitly touches on dynamics highlighted by Bourdieu (1977) – Model 1 theories-in-use become part of our habitus, forming a durable set of dispositions, harmonising our social activity. Bourdieu in a way speaks of defensive routines *avant la lettre* when he describes the ‘hysteresis effect’: “practices are always liable to incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that to which they are objectively fitted” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78). Though more than Argyris, Bourdieu stresses that the symbolic order in a field – albeit Model 1 or Model 2 learning theories-in-use – are constructed and sustained through processes of power. It could be that Model 1 theories-in-use are sustained because they benefit those in positions of power – whether this is consciously acknowledged or not. In section 7.3 I utilise this field theoretical perspective to link the temporary enclaves emerging in this research that displayed Learning Model 2 and more durable transformation of the wider field.

7.2.3 How can people develop double-loop learning skills?

To help people develop double-loop learning skills and overcome Learning Model 1, Argyris developed a method that simulates situations that trigger Model 1 theories-in-use and then raises awareness of participants about their theories-in-use (Argyris, 1977,

1982, 1999, 2002, 2010). In a workshop format, a facilitator engages participants in discussing a fictive case in which the persona fails to achieve their goals in an interaction with a colleague. The participants are asked to advise the persona on how to handle the situation more effectively, the workshop facilitator eventually uses the conversation that emerges as a way to illustrate that the participants, as well as the main character of the case study, get stuck because of Model 1 theories-in-use. From this awareness stage, the facilitator invites participants to develop their own case studies using left and right columns; on the left, writing what was said in a situation and on the right, what the person thought and felt. This case study is then used to investigate one's own learning norms in a given situation. Though these methods have helped some leaders develop double-loop learning skills, Argyris also concludes that some people are not capable of truly developing double-loop learning skills (Argyris, 1999; Friedman & Lipshitz, 1992).

Friedman and Lipshitz (1992) applied Argyris' methods with their college students and faced challenges in instilling double-loop learning skills. In their classes, they facilitated a similar process that exposed students to the discrepancies between their theories-in-use and espoused theories. Upon realising very few students were able to overcome their defensive routines they fine-tuned a modified approach to building double-loop learning skills: the reconceptualisation model. I briefly discuss this model since it offers interesting building blocks for our contextual approach to double-loop learning. To build new interventions they adopted the conditions for learning identified by Schein (1969 as cited in Friedman & Lipshitz, 1992): disconfirmation, indication of guilt-anxiety and creating psychological safety. Disconfirmation involves raising awareness that the mental models of people of particular situations are inconsistent in one way or another. Indication of guilt-anxiety involves people accepting that they are inadequate in one way or another. Psychological safety refers to reducing the threat and anxiety that can be involved in guilt-anxiety or disconfirmation. Friedman and Lipshitz (1992) noted that by being more intentional about providing psychological safety, defensive routines are less likely to be triggered. They create this sense of safety by equipping participants with the conceptual tools to use when engaging in double-loop learning (sense of competence), using non-personal cases to illustrate these concepts safely, and only engage in analysing their own case when competence had been developed. Furthermore, they attributed the difficulty of developing double-loop learning skills to the educational environment rather than the students – acknowledging

that the conventional learning environments students are exposed to dis-incentivise double-loop learning (Friedman & Lipshitz, 1992).

Inspired by this reconceptualisation model, in this PAR I also aimed at achieving all three conditions for learning identified by Schein (see table 19). For the element of indication of guilt anxiety, I utilised very similar approaches to Argyris, for example, through double-column case interviews and group discussions about our theories-in-use, but like Friedman and Lipshitz (1992) I ensured there was a level of psychological safety to engage in this critical form of learning. Even though we highlighted in chapter 5 that feelings of discomfort can play an important role in learning, at the early stages I intentionally aimed at creating safety, for example, by equipping participants with conceptual tools or starting with fictive case studies before diving into personal experiences. In regards to disconfirmation, however, this research used a unique approach to double-loop learning. Here, the external environment played a much more important role. The voices of the external actors were considered but we also critically reviewed assumptions about ‘the other’. This went beyond just collecting insights, to actually trying out new spaces in the border area of the NGO and the community as I illustrate in section 7.3. Before I present the two learning trajectories I reflect on a final theoretical building block Argyris offered towards improving double-loop learning: how it should be evaluated.

Table 19 Overview of strategies contributing to mechanisms of unfreezing

Mechanism of unfreezing	Strategies to realising this mechanism used in this research
a) Disconfirmation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Documenting and feeding in perceptions of various community actors, government officials, fellow NGOs/CBOs, organisational members and - In-depth analysis of cases and scenarios - Metaphors (elephant mapping, alien map) - Critical questioning by the facilitator - Dialogue - What, why, who inquiry - Collective learning activities between staff and volunteers, NGOs and community actors
b) Indication of guilt-anxiety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diagnosis activities - Co-analysis activities - Double column case interviews

c) Creating psychological safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Voluntary participation - Relationship building, hanging around - Peer-only meetings, one-on-one's to interchanged with multi-actor meetings - Fictive cases - Introducing concepts and tools - Reflexivity of the facilitator
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7.2.4 How can we establish whether double-loop learning occurred?

According to Argyris (1999), learning has only occurred when a new invention has been executed (not just thought of), but he places the bar a little higher than just trying out new action strategies; he promotes changes at a deeper level – second-order errors. In his work on action science Argyris (1999) presents a hierarchy of tests that scholarly consultants or researchers can use, with level 4 being the most rigorous:

1. Predict what will and will not occur under conditions that are consistent with the universe as is – that is, the status quo.
2. Predict the conditions under which the above conditions will persevere.
3. Predict that if the solutions are to be implemented, they will require a context that does not exist in the present universe.
4. Predict the conditions under which 3 will persevere. (Argyris, 1999, p. 314)

Argyris proposes that social scientists should test the alternative theories emerging from their analysis of a social situation to ascertain if it is a viable strategy that actually achieves better results. For this, he promotes an action science approach. "Action science is a form of action research. It shares the values and the participative strategy described above, but it emphasises certain tacit theories-in-use that participants spontaneously bring to situations of practice or research whenever feelings of embarrassment or threat come into play" (Argyris, 1999, p. 433). He refers to Lewin to state that "the development of the theory is critical to the effectiveness of the intervention, and it is the intervention that tests the theory" (Argyris, 1999, p. 437). Though Argyris sets a high bar for rigour in organisational learning interventions, his own research particularly zooms in on the results during an intervention in terms of the quality of the inquiry, but not necessarily what happens after (Robinson, 2001). Therefore, his work does not provide clear

guidance on how to establish whether second-order errors are resolved or a new symbolic order is taking shape.

Earlier in this thesis, I illustrated how field theory can help us track change as a result of organisational learning in various ways. First, by zooming in on individual learning as interconnected with social learning that could have effects beyond the individual onto the wider field. Secondly, by viewing organisational learning as a trajectory in which smaller shifts in thinking, doing and relating can cause transformative change to an entire field (Friedman, 2011). In chapter 5 we utilised the layers of value introduced by Wenger et al. (2011) to trace these smaller shifts over time, depth and sphere of influence.

Table 20 Layers of value created through collective learning (Wenger et al., 2011)

Layer	Examples
1. Immediate value	Meeting new people
2. Potential value	New insights on causes of early school leaving
3. Applied value	Adjusted action plan
4. Realised value	Improved results of an education activity
5. Reframing value	Adopted an alternative vision on quality education

These more nuanced change frameworks enrich the idea that learning could be more or less transformative – just like single- or double-loop learning. They can help identify whether the effects are lasting on the field (second-order errors) or just an issue at the surface in a temporary manner (single-order errors). However, it blurs the lines between single- and double-loop learning as well. Others have cautioned researchers about creating imaginary distinctions between levels of learning. For example, Simonin (2017), who invites organisational learning researchers to gather empirical data to understand the effects and value of learning at each level – cautioning us to consider higher-level learning as better, it could be that single-loop learning is more valuable in certain situations. Foldy and Creed (1999) also illustrate that change as a result of organisational learning is fragmented, multi-layered and often contradictory. They argue that one cannot separate single-loop from double- or triple-loop learning as the three are inter-linked and inter-dependent. “One cannot understand a broader organisational change without attention to individual sites of struggle: how individual employees have participated or resisted, how different work groups have adapted or rebelled, and how

different subcultures have modified the effort. Scholars cannot understand organisational change without detailed attention to the broad and shifting range of reactions and effects it creates" (Foldy & Creed, 1999, p. 225). It is with this perspective in mind that I analyse the effects resulting from the two learning pathways.

7.3 Two pathways to change

Chapter 3 introduced three learning trajectories that emerged in this PAR: 1) volunteers as catalysts of double-loop learning, 2) reframing community engagement and 3) double-loop learning capabilities. Below I reconstruct trajectories 1 and 2 and explore the interplay between the individual spaces and the environment in which they happened (both in and outside the organisation). Based on these trajectories I distil factors that promote or hinder durable double-loop learning. Durable double-loop learning here is associated with conducive spaces for double-loop learning and their effects, but also resolving second-order errors and creating conducive learning norms in wider or related fields.

7.3.1 Learning trajectory 1: Volunteers as catalysts of double-loop learning

Observed outcomes of this trajectory

Early on in this PAR, it became clear that volunteers were key actors in organisational learning; they interact directly with external actors in the community. If this programme team were to improve the way they learn with external actors and feed these insights back into the organisation towards transformative change, the volunteer role would offer a breeding ground for critical organisational learning. Volunteers are gatekeepers at the border of the organisational field; they filter which information comes in, what questions are asked in regards to the education design and they translate the education programme to the realities on the ground. However, as became clear during the volunteer Focus Group Discussion (FGD) in 2017, their recommendations were not being acted on, sustaining several discrepancies and misalignments in the education design. In the PAR several spaces emerged where volunteers and staff – most times together – reflected on the OLMs that involved the volunteers in adapting the programme to unique realities in the various communities (see chapters 3 and 6 for a description of these spaces). Table 21 summarises the original model 1 theory-in-use that we uncovered through the PAR. These theories-in-use were not made explicit in one single seating, rather this unfolded as the PAR process progressed.

Table 21 Examples of how Argyris' Model 1 theory-in-use manifested in managing volunteers¹⁴

Governing variables	Action strategies	Consequences
<p>Control for the purpose of the encounter Beliefs held: <i>"Volunteers won't do anything if they don't have targets"</i></p>	<p>Advocate for your position Strategies used: <i>Continuously remind volunteers of targets. Make bad examples of those who do not meet their targets and praise those who do.</i></p>	<p>Miscommunication Examples identified: <i>'Be creative in the way you teach, but make sure you cover all topics within the timelines and budget', 'Let the groups decide on their own business ideas and plan but only groups who meet the requirements will receive funding.'</i></p>
<p>Maximise winning, minimise losing Beliefs held: <i>"If we don't implement the programme as designed, we shall lose funding and/or positive feedback from the manager/donor".</i></p>	<p>Unilaterally save face (own and the other) Strategies used: <i>Start extra youth groups to ensure at least one is eligible for funding at the end, if I do something people may disagree with, I'll do it without telling others, talk about extremely unethical things to avoid talking about nuanced more common ethical dilemmas.</i></p>	<p>Self-sealing processes Examples identified: <i>Undiscussable ethical beliefs and dilemmas, hiding behind systems and tools that hypothetically fix problems</i></p>
<p>Suppress negative feeling Beliefs held: <i>"As long as you can report progress on the plan you can justify your role and perform well."</i></p>		<p>Self-fulfilling prophecies Examples identified: <i>Activities that do not link to targets are deprioritised – maintaining linear learning and teaching, learning spaces remain tokenistic – receiving socially</i></p>

¹⁴ This table was created by Marit during the preparation of this thesis, it has not been validated by the PAR participants.

		<i>desirable answers, the belief that the donor is not flexible is reinforced by not reporting critical insights to them.</i>
Be rational Beliefs held: <i>“Follow the plan: stick to the targets, follow the curriculum, fit within the reporting template, stay within the budget.”</i>		Escalating error Examples identified: <i>Innovations, improvisation and failure are hidden, confirming that the model-as-designed is effective.</i>

Eventually, the team reframed their action theories resulting in redefining the volunteer role and identified alternative action strategies to set up the volunteers as changemakers. Several of these action strategies were executed – for example in the volunteer training or by mobilising alumni to provide support to new volunteers. Volunteers were given the opportunity to come up with programme adaptations guided by their understanding of the community needs. While I cannot ascertain that these changes lasted far beyond the period of this PAR, the team considered the innovations a success based on the capabilities displayed by the new volunteer cohort to make meaningful adaptations to the programme and solve problems or dilemmas on-ground (also see chapter 6).

Yeah, the difference is, like basically last year we were we were strictly volunteers were strictly following the targets. [...] Now this year some of the placements have gone even beyond like for example, [...] some placements actually invited some health workers to come and offer services, that was even outside the activity, so which means that at least maybe like maybe they, they had that connection.

Elia, implementing staff, reflection interview, May 2019

I categorise this learning pathway as durable double-loop learning because we achieved an applied form of reframing value (Wenger et al., 2011). Not only was the outcome a change at the level of the team’s mental models – but it also brought about lasting spaces in which critical organisational learning could be continued. By reframing the volunteer role as ‘changemakers’ their operations occurred in a space with new norms, their

mission changed, the relationship with staff changed and consequently, space was opened up for insights from the external environment to trickle in and shape the lifelong learning interventions. In terms of the trajectories of change of Friedman (2011) this may not have been a pathway of full transformation, but at least a relatively durable enclave took shape that was more than just a fleeting one-off experience. Reflecting on this pathway I would like to highlight four factors that supported the formation of this enclave.

Factors supporting durable double-loop learning

1. *Direct involvement in the PAR process* – What contributed significantly to the unfreezing of the Model 1 theory-in-use depicted in table 21 was the presence and participation of volunteers in the back-stage organisational learning processes created in this PAR. At first, their views were gathered separately and fed into the process by me, but in April 2018 they joined the table and chaired several of the PAR meetings. Co-researchers and participants mentioned that this enabled them to see things from a different perspective. This is similar to one of the critical learning ingredients mentioned in chapter 4 during the diagnostic stage: changing position to understand issues from the perspective of ‘the other’ is helpful. What could have also played a role is that the proximity of volunteers increased the willingness of the team members to act on recommendations. Their indication of guilt-anxiety in front of the volunteers could have created an accountability pressure to act. However, there was a need for a balance, there were moments where volunteers and staff met separately creating psychological safety to admit more intimate encounters and experiences that usually did not come out during collective meetings. Lastly, the participation of volunteers may have also played a pragmatic role, they generally had more time to implement ideas such as preparing a training session for the next cohort of volunteers. In my experience too, it was easier to schedule meetings and interviews with volunteers compared to the staff whose schedules were full and unpredictable. Though there existed numerous OLMs where staff and volunteers met, this PAR created new learning norms focused on inquiry – something that I facilitated at first as a ‘neutral’ facilitator but something that staff embraced carrying over to the next volunteer cohort.

2. *Planning innovations around natural moments of change* – At the start of 2019 a new cohort of volunteers came on board and a new programme cycle started. This came along with new plans and budgets generating opportunities to revise the volunteer training.

Our December 2018 PAR meeting was organised at the right time to feed ideas, generated through the research, into the planning processes. The team leader showed a strong commitment to integrating as many of the ideas generated in the PAR as possible. As the researcher I was able to consolidate all ideas generated over the past year into three thematic areas:

1. Volunteers use creative methods to deliver out-of-school curriculum and respond to needs emerging in their teen mother groups.
2. Volunteers openly share feedback and engage in problem-solving processes within parameters of community needs, organisational policy and donor requirement.
3. Volunteers use a network of local actors including positive youth role models that can carry on the movement beyond their time in the field.

I presented these to the team leader at the start of 2019 together with a framework of backwards planning – starting with the end goal to determine action steps. She translated the numerous ideas into actionable steps. At this point, she had taken ownership over the change process and my role vanished to the background as I wrapped up the PAR process. The timing allowed for the enclave emerging in the PAR to spread out into the wider field – albeit at the programme team level and not yet the organisational level. Although the latter could still occur through the potential value created as I explain in the third ingredient of durable double-loop learning.

Table 22 Action plan developed to revise the 2019 volunteer training

Goal area	Proposed change	What it would take
1. Volunteers use creative methods to deliver out-of-school curriculum and respond to needs emerging in their teen mother groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include a session on lesson planning together with a mock session. • Institute a WhatsApp group and have volunteers share their lesson plan ideas and questions in advance. • Introduce a monthly award for creative and responsive actions by volunteers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Session on lesson planning. • Communicate expectations of responsive lesson planning. • Communicate award/reward for creativity.

2. Volunteers openly share feedback and engage in problem-solving processes within parameters of community needs, organisational policy and donor requirements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite a former volunteer to share their experiences in the field. • Include a session on problem-solving with real-life scenarios from previous volunteers. • Include team-building activities and informal moments between staff and volunteers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame volunteer role as being problem-solvers and change-makers. • Alumni session. • In the problem-solving session include elements of stakeholder engagement & dealing with challenges. • Staff participate actively in team-building and social activities.
3. Volunteers use a network of local actors including positive youth role models that can carry on the movement beyond their time in the field.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give every placement a report on stakeholders and findings from the risk assessment conducted by staff. • Give specific 'networking' tasks for the first week at placement (e.g., a scavenger hunt in the community or a bingo card). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In parent club session/planning meeting – give a networking task like meet 5 parents of adolescents.

3. *Packaging insights into a transferable product* – One of the steps we took in this process that seemed to contribute to change being durable, was translating the insights into an actionable product: a volunteer training session. The 2018 cohort volunteers prepared this session using curated findings of the research, including quotes from various volunteer interviews. Together with the volunteers, we found a way to introduce the complexities of community engagement to the incoming volunteers. Box 1 presents the five inspiration points the former volunteers wanted to hand over to the new volunteers to encourage them to act as change-makers amidst the dilemmas they would face.

1. **Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) are complex – success starts small and small is beautiful.** The problem is multi-dimensional; it has elements of gender, religion, culture, socio-economic capabilities. Everyone trying to create a change in such a field is up against high levels of complexity, can feel like the walls are closing in on you.
2. **To avoid stakeholders becoming your problem, build positive relationships with diverse actors so that they become the solution.** You can't take the load of the world on your shoulders, moreover your time in the community is short. Work in a humane way with actors, they want to work with you as people not a paper-based organisation. If you only show up when you need them it is likely they treat you like other NGOs, expecting money.
3. **Change starts with you – you can't change other people's actions, reflect on how your actions impact others.** All your actions have an impact on the field you work in, you can either go with the way things are done, do nothing, or change the way things are done. Usually, you can influence aspects of the field through your actions. You can't change other people's actions, but you can change how you impact others. In every case it is important to look at the organisation's capacity to support some changes – discuss this with the programme officer.
4. **Be ready for change as a team, have multiple options and be flexible.** Things may not happen as expected, have a plan B and C ready in case needed.
5. **Involve staff as you are making change.** In case you need more information or you want to know a change is possible, always consult staff. Avoid starting a new organisation in the field, yet you are volunteering for this NGO.

Box 1 Inspiration points for change-makers presented during the 2019 volunteer training

During the session, new volunteers discovered the dilemmas experienced by the previous cohort through quotes from the interviews and discussed how they would approach such a dilemma using the inspiration points. There was also an opportunity for the 2019 volunteers to ask the 2018 volunteers questions, which they utilised actively. By concretising the new framing of the volunteer role, the OLM created embedded in their role was made durable beyond one volunteer cohort. Moreover, by documenting these insights we developed potential value that could influence other programmes. One of the co-researchers working in the head office, for example, shared the training session with all other programme teams that had volunteer training coming up.

4. *Organisational commitment to youth engagement and rethinking volunteer role* – There were signs that our learning process about the volunteer role as catalysts of learning, coincided with an organisation-wide rethinking of the volunteer model. Given the organisation's focus on youth engagement, the volunteer position has been a key strategy to develop youths' capabilities to lead development. During the PAR process, a representative of the international office contacted me to find out what we had learned so far about the volunteer role, their training and their experience. More closely to the research process, all team members were committed and passionate about youth. This passion may have acted as a fuel to scrutinise their own theories-in-use and tackle discrepancies between their current approach and ideal. The desire to make youth engagement more intentional and authentic was displayed by the leadership, as well as the staff and volunteers.

As an organisation that is really putting youth engagement at the forefront, we need to have tangible evidence that demonstrates meaningful youth engagement. If we convene a meeting and say we want young people to come in our annual review, we have to structure it in a way that it is so meaningful they actually coming to improve the review process. We have to deliberately track the recommendations from young people on our program. We may not necessarily implement everything they recommend, but be in position to track and say from this review, we had this number of young people, they recommended the following and because of their recommendations, adjustments were made on these programmes in these areas.

Suzanna, team leader, orientation workshop, October 2017

In addition, because the organisation is so youth-oriented, some of the team members had grown inside the organisation. Some had been volunteers in the past or had implemented other programmes in which 'things were different'. For example, when the training used to be longer or staff had more time to prepare themselves to deliver sessions etcetera. Thus, what made our double-loop learning insights and spaces 'stick' was the presence of other cultural islands across the organisation – including the international level – where similar governing variables were accepted and aspired to.

In brief, besides the ingredients for critical organisational learning spaces presented in previous chapters, this learning trajectory illustrates how different layers of

value, timing and presence of other enclaves can make double-loop learning stick and spread. We cannot say a full transformation of the field has taken place, we did not see the entire organisation take up the framing of the volunteer role as changemakers and instituting the same incentives for thinking outside of the box. Perhaps that is not realistic within the time period either – if anything this process has illustrated that change happens slowly and requires commitment from all parties involved. Beyond the singular, fleeting spaces we have seen how over time enclaves emerged in this PAR. Through the learning norms simulating Model 2 theories-in-use, prioritising inquiry and choice, we saw an unfreezing, increased trust and a new manner of relating between staff and volunteers. However, this was influenced by the wider environment as well, other enclaves were emerging in the organisation promoting similar values and the timing enabled these temporary spaces to stick. This is partly where the second learning trajectory was different, but this is not all that could explain why double-loop learning did not stick in our learning trajectory on community members.

7.3.2 Learning trajectory 2: Towards mutual relationships with community actors

Observed outcomes of this trajectory

This PAR focused on the organisational learning processes that engaged external actors – whether to learn from them or with them – to promote double-loop learning. From the start, the team acknowledged that in many cases they ended up sharing information with the external actors rather than listening to them. Through the PAR meetings and the double-column case interviews, we unpacked what made the team shape the spaces for collective learning this way. This revealed several governing variables that resembled Model 1 theories-in-use – translating into a transactional relationship with external actors (see table 23).

Table 23 Examples of Argyris’ Model 1 theory-in-use in interactions with external actors

Governing variables	Action strategies	Consequences
<p>Control for the purpose of the encounter Beliefs held: "Do not trust the intentions of the external actors (especially local leaders), they are interested"</p>	<p>Advocate for your position Strategies used: <i>Convince external actors to support the plan- throw in 'benefits', overpromise to convince</i></p>	<p>Miscommunication Examples identified: 'Work with communities but make sure to meet the targets'.</p>

<i>in money or other forms of personal gain."</i>	<i>others to join and fulfil your plan.</i>	
<p>Maximise winning, minimise losing Beliefs held: <i>"We would fail if the external actors do not participate in the plan as stated at the on-set of the programme. Ensure they do not opt-out if they do replace them as soon as possible."</i></p>	<p>Unilaterally save face (own and the other) Strategies used: <i>Work within the confines of what is accepted by government, religion and other powerful players, avoid creating spaces in which too much ambiguity or value contradictions would surface.</i> <i>Do not explicitly talk about money in meetings but call financial facilitation 'expectations' or 'motivation'.</i></p>	<p>Self-sealing processes Examples identified: <i>Engagement is limited to pre-planned activities sustaining a simplistic framing of community development and learning agendas. No other questions are asked or information is shared about underlying or related problems.</i></p>
<p>Suppress negative feeling Beliefs held: <i>"It is important that external actors appreciate our work and only speak positively about us."</i></p>		<p>Self-fulfilling prophecies Examples identified: <i>Cynicism about the intentions of the external actors, little exchange of critical/conflicting views resulting in limited learning.</i></p>
<p>Be rational Beliefs held: <i>"Follow the plan: stick to the targets, follow the curriculum, fit within the reporting template, stay within the budget."</i></p>		<p>Escalating error Examples identified: <i>Reinforce the rules of the game (transactional engagement), achieve targets but not durable community partnerships and agency.</i></p>

Through the PAR activities, the team displayed awareness of these discrepancies in their theories-of-action and they brainstormed several ideas to do things differently. One idea was the sub-study presented in chapter 5, to investigate what the community actors would prefer in terms of collective learning. Besides this, small innovations were proposed towards reframing the partnerships with external actors to focus on mutual learning and responsibility. For example, moving beyond only presenting printed reports, but discussing this verbally, sending out greeting cards as a gesture, co-creating a parent

education curriculum with parents, invite community actors as trainers for volunteers or utilising community-led platforms for dialogue. Small steps were taken on each of these ideas, but none were visibly implemented in the shape of new OLMs. Easter cards, for example, were sent out, but no comprehensive feedback was collected nor was it repeated for other holidays or in the next 2019 cohort. During the closing workshop in 2019, we took stock and the team noted that this trajectory of the PAR displayed learning traps they experienced before.

I remember it was that time where we started developing Easter cards, I don't know where we stopped, (people laughed) and that is our challenge. Ya and that's the challenge, when there is an innovation we just start there and then and then, mid-way it just disappears. [...] But here we are, people are saying they don't know us but we've been here for long. So, I remember that discussion it was a bit tough, it went viral in the organisation and then we came up with actions. So, this year I don't know where the actions.... it is, we didn't, we just concluded our Easter.

Staff member, closing workshop team

In a way, this lack of sustained change puzzled me because the cognitive unfreezing of the mental models happened much more explicitly compared to the volunteer track. Both in the double-column case interviews, as well as the double-loop learning and learning from success workshops, we were able to make explicit theories-in-use and the team recognised that these theories contradicted their espoused aspiration for mutual relationships (also see chapter 6). Moreover, the community mapping exercise not only exposed the team to new insights about what the community preferred (potential value) but also caused some interruption, a unique space where NGOs and the community met. This sub-study debunked several assumptions the team had held on to regarding their education programme. Regardless of this cognitive level unfreezing there seemed to exist circular reasoning that served as a self-sealing process. When confronted with a mismatch in their OLMs and the needs and preferences of the community, the team would refer to systems in place that supposedly prevent such an error. They would then mention that these spaces were not sufficient, and eventually referred to external causes such as budget limitations as reasons why the systems were not sufficient. A refreezing of different mental models underlying the team's interactions with external actors thus

did not seem to happen at the team level. In my analysis of this track, I could identify five factors (besides the absence of the four enabling factors) that disabled the enclaves from sticking or growing.

Factors hindering durable double-loop outcomes

1. *Heightened field dynamics in the border area between the NGO and its external environment* – Whereas the learning trajectory on the volunteer role was predominantly inward-facing, this second learning trajectory focused on the border area between the NGO and the local communities or other external fields. In this border area, members operate in a field where multiple logics clash and power relations become more intricate and multi-directional (also see Anderson & Patterson, 2017; Pot, 2019). The theory-in-use displayed in table 23 hints at this transactional nature of the relationship between actors in this border area, dominated by learning norms resembling Model 1. In the team's (and organisation's) espoused theories-of-action, community engagement and mutual partnerships were valued but in reality, these partnerships were squeezed into a tight mould with a specified number of meetings, interaction formats and agenda items. In chapter 5 we illustrated that communities are highly heterogeneous and that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to collective learning. The team recognised this too and mentioned that they used to interact more frequently with the community and that they had a bigger budget to facilitate such engagements. Unfortunately, this budget was cut.

We are sometimes restricted but we always do what we call risk assessment, before we go to the [community], we have to risk assess those schools. [...] But sometimes we neglect them [the visits to the communities]. [...] they were supposed to be three [visits [...]] that is lacking, the only budget I have is Support and Supervision (S&S), and through S&S I am supposed to do all this which is impossible.

Juliana, generalisation workshop, December 2018

The rationalisation trend did not only affect the relationships with community members, it also created self-sealing and self-fulfilling processes within the team. When a gap was identified, the team often referred to a system that is actually in place to deal with it (for example the needs assessment), but then when the team identified the programme design still does not match the actual needs, change was deemed impossible due to the programme design and reporting processes. The team members started acting towards

the transactional relationship model, even if they saw the discrepancies, they would not report this to the donor explaining it did not fit in the reporting format.

Andrew: I think it's also because ehm, mostly the reports are structured in a certain way eh there is certain information that they are specifically looking out for... which may not give freedom to have a dialogue on a different, that for instance someone is just asking you how many people did you reach? How many sessions did you deliver? [...]

Maureen: And in addition, they say in less than 200 words... So, in less than 200 words you need to prioritise what do you want to eventually change.

Andrew & Maureen, generalisation workshop, December 2018

It seems that the dynamics in the field at the border of the NGO and the community was messier than the other lowlands. This could be the reason why the team and other actors adopted the more simplistic logics of change. Tick-boxes and targets helped create the illusion of rigour and methodical working and provide a sense of control.

2. *Delay in discovering the self-sealing functions of the formalised normative systems* – In chapter 6, I illustrated a second-order error emerging around the value contradictions in the field. The programme team's systems and practices that aimed at helping staff and volunteers talk about value-laden topics did not connect to personal values and norms. Rather, the curriculum or government regulations were used as normative compasses to determine what could or could not be included in the education sessions. And like the formalistic procedures used when engaging external actors, this appeared undiscussable. In terms of critical organisational learning, this second-order error must be addressed but this requires substantial time and careful attention (Argyris, 1999), more than was available in this research. In this case, the self-sealing processes regarding SRHR values only emerged in one of the last double-column interviews when the research was coming to a close. The volunteer, in this case, revealed that he was okay with sharing family planning information, but also that he was doing so out of a 'contractual obligation'. His personal belief was that family planning was not the right thing to do. His explanation shows similarities to the teachers in the research of De Haas (2017) who applied strategies of 'compartmentalisation' to handle conflicting schemas according to

different contexts. Since this issue was discovered late, we could not investigate the role of norms and values in-depth with the PAR team. Even though the difficulty of managing different values was mentioned several times, the self-sealing function of the curriculum and regulations were not questioned in the PAR meetings. It may not be completely preventable, but this delay certainly hindered us in acquiring a full understanding of the relationship dimensions with external actors – and thus we did not unravel the second-order errors affecting the collective learning relationships that existed or could be.

3. *Individual versus collective unfreezing* – In this learning trajectory, staff and volunteers unpacked their theories-in-use regarding relationships with external actors much more explicitly than in terms of volunteer engagement. However, this awareness particularly emerged during one-on-one interactions such as the double-column case interviews. In the space of these interviews, participants were able to run through the full cycle from disconfirmation to indication of guilt-anxiety and reframing the situation to identify new action strategies. Most of the information in table 23 was generated in these interviews. Perhaps because these action strategies were generated at an individual level, they never gained much momentum at the team level. Moreover, only two staff members participated in these interviews meaning this did not become a shared experience between staff and volunteers. The co-analysis workshop did seek to bring insights generated in the interviews to a team level, but at this point, the team picked more interest in innovations around the volunteer roles rather than the external actors.

Moreover, whereas volunteers had a seat at the table in the PAR process, the external actors were mostly involved at the periphery. As a facilitative researcher, I mobilised their voices and fed them into the PAR process, but this created very little pressure to be accountable to change. One participant actually mentioned that the feedback from the external actors that I shared looked sugar-coated and less direct since I would not specify who gave the feedback. I did this for reasons of anonymity, but it was perceived as less clear and actionable. Friedman and Sykes (2014) suggest field theory can help bridge individual and collective learning. Indeed, the first two factors I explained illustrate how big the 'fight' was to institute change, doing things differently and more collectively with external actors could have been too far of a leap. Within the collective, there was no incentive or accountability pressure to act differently towards the external actors. This resistance did not only exist at the organisational level but shows in the wider field of development as mentioned in chapter 2. Unlike the learning trajectory on

volunteers, we did not find similar enclaves in and outside the organisation that we could have connected with to move from unfreezing to refreezing.

4. *Finding satisfactory single-loop strategies* – In some cases, the team may have felt more critical questions did not need to be asked. For example, in the case of external actors expressing expectations about money, the team had a series of strategies that helped them deal with these situations. Most of these could be identified as single-loop strategies. Figure 10 for example illustrates the theories-of-action in relation the 'money issue'. Even though the team realised that some of the dilemmas were caused by their very own actions and internalised assumptions about 'the other', they comfortably navigated the situation using the dominant 'rules of the game'. For example, by organising the events more closely to the participants or increase the transport budget in the next cycle. When discussing the upcoming cohort's volunteer training, the team discussed passing on both the single loop strategies as well as promoting more mutual relationship practices that would circumvent the monetary demands – for example, by networking proactively and actively keeping up relationships outside of activities and events.

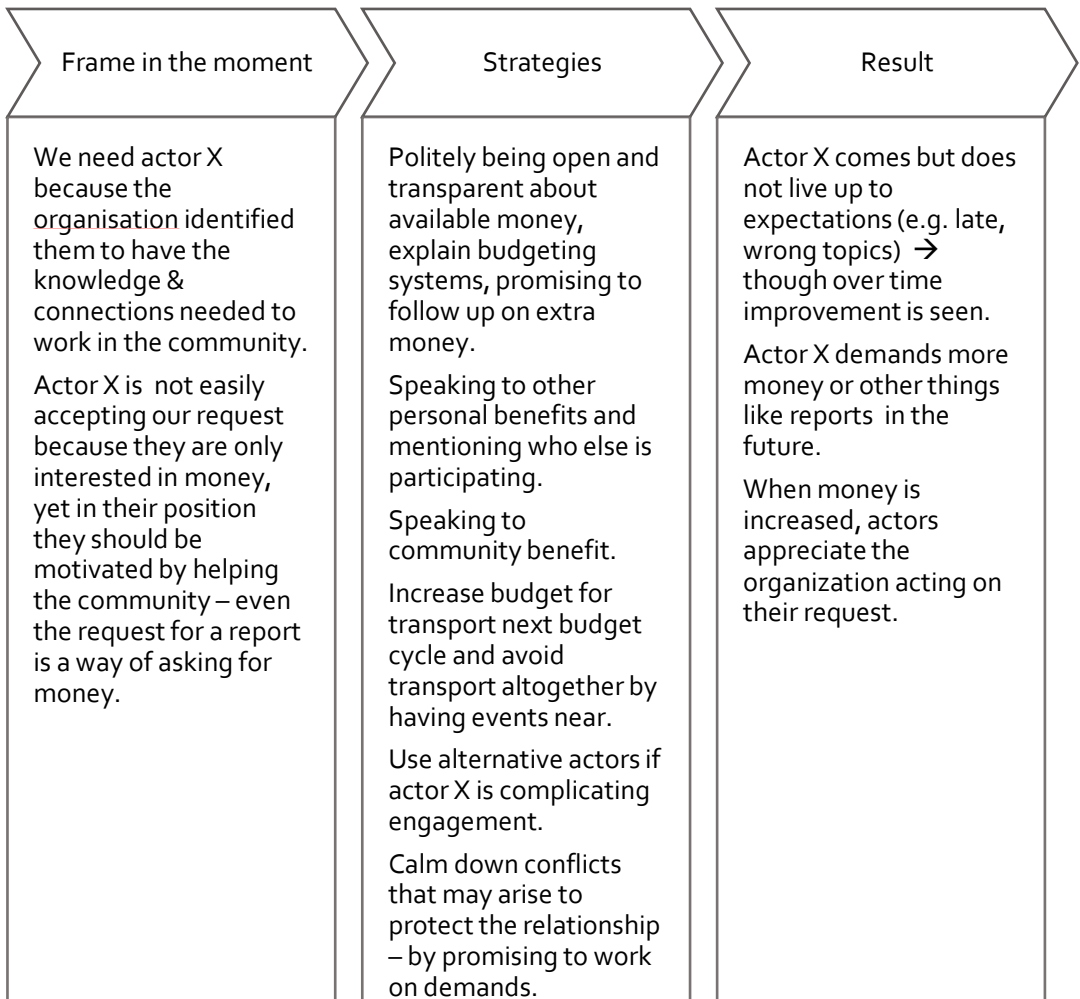


Figure 10 Theories-in-use distilled from double column case interviews

Several PAR participants did acknowledge that some of these strategies could reproduce the persistent challenges they face for themselves, future colleagues or other NGOs.

Like I'm giving this example hmm how did my telling this eh this local leader that [...] maybe you will get some money and in actual sense, it happened he got some money. [...] Does it mean next time when I go back to him of course he will be expecting maybe the same result? So, the question is do we want this to be reproduced that wherever

we go we make these promises and in actual sense we are uncomfortable with it.

Priscilla, volunteer, Learning from success workshop, August 2018

The fact that the team was comfortable with single-loop strategies, however, provides food for thought. Other authors, such as Foldy and Creed (1999) or Simonin (2017) encourage the reader to avoid viewing higher 'loops' of learning as better. Indeed, perhaps a transformation of a field does not require all learning trajectories to reach double-loop learning effects at the same time. Sometimes a single-loop strategy can open the door for bigger changes in the field.

5. *Facilitator's blind spots* – My role as a first-time action researcher undoubtedly displayed blind spots throughout the journey. Perhaps not unique to this track, but I also displayed several Model 1 theories-in-use that certainly did not help in sustaining the insights we gained about engaging external actors. In the PAR I particularly applied the following four strategies to bring our learning spaces to a double-loop level.

1. Make explicit and thereby test possible theories-in-use, either by 1) questioning (e.g., why was that so important to you?); 2) by pointing out a discrepancy between the action strategy and the espoused objective (e.g., you want to facilitate youth engagement but your strategy is to solve a problem for youth not with youth); or 3) by reminding participants of theories-in-use that were uncovered earlier in the process;
2. Feed data, insights and views from various consulted participants into the conversation;
3. Introduce and test conceptual models and metaphors that could help the participants shift perspective and/or test their assumptions;
4. Document, summarise and disseminate insights and findings to keep all participants up-to-date.

When I started writing this thesis and read some of the workshop transcripts I realised that I stepped into some typical learning traps that Argyris (2010) pointed out. Based on the literature, I had developed a mental picture of what counts as double-loop learning, and during the PAR I often felt like something was missing in our conversations. I would sometimes get frustrated by the lack of initiative or follow-through on some of the ideas that in my mind would be ideal double-loop learning outcomes in the education context.

For example, the appointed coordinator for the parent curriculum did not show up for some of our appointments. As a result, I ended up taking some steps without her: choosing a curriculum co-design process and creating a tool for volunteers to interview parents for some initial ideas. I did not want this idea to fail, but I eventually 'gave up' when the coordinator of the activity asked volunteers for feedback instead of the parents themselves. In hindsight, I was able to reframe this. Indeed, it was difficult to find time with the coordinator, but realistically it may not have been possible to conduct a full co-design process, especially not if second-order errors are still preventing staff from working flexibly and adaptively. Moreover, in hindsight, I see that part of the reason why this activity 'failed' was that I had taken steps 'towards unilateral control' to keep things moving and by doing so completely biased the process to how I had defined success.

Besides the feeling of not hitting my own bar of double-loop learning, I also felt nervous to be overly critical and ended up using a few strategies to save face. Especially at the beginning of the research, I felt uncomfortable presenting information or observations that would confront participants with the discrepancies in their theories-in-use and espoused theories. As a result of my Model 1 goal 'to suppress negative feelings', I did not always create the space for people to respond. An example occurred during the double-loop learning workshop where we discussed fictive cases and participants were articulating their proposed action plan and objectives. In one of the scenarios, the team touched on an espoused norm that would recur often in the research process: we value our partners and we want to work on equal grounds. I was eager to unpack this because I had noticed this was not always enacted. After some inquiry, the team revealed that what was actually driving them was the desire to protect the organisation's image – though they did not explicitly acknowledge this discrepancy. Therefore, I concluded that the team was not aware of their theories-in-use. My solution was to share my reading of the actual mental models in use. To soften the confrontational nature of these statements I used a typical 'easing in' approach; I referred to Argyris' research ('it is universal'), my own learning curve, the way aid is set up (your goals are normally not negotiable), and the possibility of unlearning and learning these skills to become more effective as an organisation ('We can learn to take a step back and actually reflect at a deeper level'). I also added a disclaimer that sometimes this deeper type of reflection may trigger discomfort and that we may find instances where we avoid certain critical questions. In the excerpt below you may notice that I try to justify the team's discrepancies – before trying to facilitate disconfirmation. In this scenario, I was

responding to their proposed strategies to deal with a local government leader who complains that the NGO is spreading pro-homosexuality propaganda (a fictive scenario). I was trying to point out that their strategies displayed similarities with common strategies that seek to save face in an attempt to soften the blow of disconfirmation.

But sometimes, many times actually, the situations where we refuse to go here [to double loop learning] is when it's uncomfortable [...] It colours what we do ask and what we don't ask. But ideally, we engage in inquiry not only advocacy. We don't only go to the [local leader] to make a point but also to inquire hmm is it right? First of all is it right I have heard this [rumour] but is it true? Because just because people are saying that doesn't mean it's actually true, so checking that. Allowing the person to also come up with their response to that and then sharing your theory, how do you feel about that? Why is that hard for you to deal with as an organisation? Why wouldn't you say that you mind about your organisational image? Sometimes we feel like we could share half the truth but the other truth is better to remain unsaid...

Marit, double-loop learning workshop, January 2018

I ended up speaking non-stop for five minutes! I remember closing this meeting with a sense of failure, the signs of double-loop learning I anticipated were missing. However, when I reviewed the transcript, I noticed my own blind spots; I did not give the participants a chance to agree nor disagree with my statement. At the moment, I was afraid of being seen as the fault-finder, especially given the solutions the team had thought of made a lot of sense. I could have engaged in inquiry to find out how the team was feeling about hearing such alternative explanations of what they are trying to achieve in an interaction with the district officer. At the end of the workshop, regardless of my own shortcoming, some team members did mention – at a cognitive level at least – an understanding that their mental models play a role and that they are not always sufficiently aware of this. Had I reframed my definition of success earlier, I could have recognised that my approach to the double-loop learning workshop – in which we used conceptual tools, fictive cases and my critical questions and posing my analysis of theories-in-use – did lead to at least some cognitive unfreezing, which for the purpose of the workshop seemed sufficient. In addition, the workshop contributed a shared

language about double-loop learning, helped to conduct a member-check about the relevance of the double-loop learning as a skill to learn and presented me with a status quo – how aware were people and what seem to be the learning norms in their collaboration practices with external actors. However, all in all, my blind spots probably delayed disconfirmation and indication of guilt-anxiety at several points in the PAR. This example shows that reflexivity is an important quality for facilitators of double-loop learning processes. We do not operate in isolation from the field but are equally socialised in this environment that encourages Model 1 theories-in-use.

7.4 Towards a normative double-loop learning theory and practice in the context of lifelong learning for development

At the start of this chapter, I set out to develop a contextual theory of double-loop learning that would best serve the lifelong learning for development practice. I have tried to illustrate, using two learning trajectories, that the basic building blocks of double-loop learning do remain useful in this field. However, we discovered more ingredients to double-loop learning in education NGOs. To conclude this chapter, I present how we might position double-loop learning as a strategy to enhance normative professionalisation and thus critical organisational learning. I should reiterate that the context of this research was one organisation and one programme team specifically. This organisation has a unique history, culture, mission focus, staff and volunteer composition, etcetera. Therefore, I would not suggest the propositions presented below are universal – but they could serve as starting points to investigate and facilitate double-loop learning in similar organisations.

7.4.1 Situating the definition of double-loop learning

Proposition 1: Re-defining double-loop learning

Normative double-loop learning is a collective learning process through which participants examine how their mental models affect their actions and impact the field and commit to beliefs, values, assumptions and norms that guide more just, desirable and productive actions for meaningful results in the life world of learners and communities.

In light of the normative complexity of the work of lifelong learning for development, I propose that values, or the question of what is desirable and to whom, take up a more prominent place in double-loop learning. This position is largely supported by the epistemological premises in chapter 2, however, based on this PAR I would propose another adjustment to the definition of double-loop learning. The search for desirable lifelong learning interventions cannot happen in isolation from the target communities. Therefore, in the definition above I refer to collective learning. As mentioned above, double-loop learning transcends the organisation. Collective learning could happen in spaces within or outside the organisation or in the border area in overlapping fields. By looking at these border areas, we are required to look beyond the theories-in-use of the team or organisation, but also understand the dynamics when different fields meet, perhaps when conflicting theories-in-use 'clash' or where processes of power cause one field to mimic the other. Though I speak of overlapping fields, collective learning can happen in several ways – not everyone may always meet in the same physical space and time. But as demonstrated in pathway 1, it might be more effective to build a community of inquiry that journeys together for a prolonged period, at first perhaps with an external facilitator and then gradually moving into structural mechanisms. Individuals involved in these learning spaces should remain reflexive about the mental models not just in the primary processes of lifelong learning programming but also in these collective learning spaces to ensure that the collective adopts learning norms more conducive to critical learning.

7.4.2 Facilitating normative double-loop learning

Proposition 2: Ambiguity is unavoidable and presents an opportunity for learning

There is an inherent ambiguity involved with normative double-loop learning and therefore, Model 2 theories-in-use should be expanded with the governing variable: view uncertainty and ambiguity as a learning opportunity and intrinsic to good practice.

If we view double-loop learning as a normative practice, to what extent do the ideas of Argyris about model 1 and 2 behaviour and learning environments still apply? As illustrated in tables 21 and 23, we identified the Model 1 theories-in-use in this context and we also identified that these norms hinder transformative change and critical organisational learning. Relatedly, we observed that Model 2 learning norms such as

inquiry and free choice helped sustain transformative changes in learning trajectory 1. This speaks to Argyris' proposition that these organisational models are universal. However, as proposed in proposition 2, I would like to expand model 2 theory-in-use to do better justice to the complex nature of lifelong learning for development. Argyris positions validatable or observable data as a norm in Model 2 theories-in-use. This norm is not necessarily irrelevant in this context but needs to be combined with a tolerance for ambiguity. When we embrace the normative complexity of our work, we embrace that what is desirable depends on whom you ask, and that this answer moreover is shaped by dynamics of power. 'Validatable data' could be hijacked by the same formalistic interpretation of rigour as we have seen happen in trajectory 2 – especially if we use a conventional definition of validity (Lather, 1986).

In this research, some of the self-sealing processes around the ambiguity of values were discovered late – stalling double-loop learning. An intentional effort is required to deal with ambiguity in the organisational context, including the acceptance that some change takes more time and is emergent, unpredictable and requires more flexible programming, including resource allocation. By embracing ambiguity, we accept that participants in double-loop learning spaces will not always adopt uniform theories-in-use. Further research could explore how this pluralism can be leveraged as a force for transformative change (Friedman & Rothman, 2015; Rothman & Friedman, 2001). In light of normative professionalisation, it would also be interesting to investigate the role of formalised structures vis a vis personal reflection (which could lead to more ambiguity in terms of norms and values) in enhancing critical learning spaces. In this case study we have seen that formalised vocabulary and scripts about SRHR issues can be helpful in navigating ethical complexity. However, these could also turn into self-sealing structures whereby the official language makes the complex nature of these dilemmas and one's personal values undiscussable.

Proposition 3: Power dynamics and double-loop learning

Through reflexivity, education practitioners can enlarge their own sense of power to influence undesirable realities, but should also intentionally extend power to the marginalised to exert influence over the way the interventions are shaped.

This third proposition addresses a common blind spot in organisational learning theory: power. Power can no longer be silently assumed in double-loop learning. Rather, power

should become a subject as well as a result area of double-loop learning. As a subject of learning, members conduct an inquiry about how power structures and their positionality hinder or limit change. They also observe how power dynamics shape the spaces for learning and interaction with external actors. As a result, as discussed in proposition 1, normative double-loop learning should lead to new mental models that guide more just, productive and desirable action – this means that one’s actions resulting from this learning process combat problematic power structures. Ideally, this happens at the level of the learning space itself, extending power to those who are normally excluded. At the same time, double-loop learning, because it is reflexive, also opens up the sense of power by opening up the realm of possibility. This is not just abstract reasoning, but something we observed during the PAR. The team realised the influence they have on the field and how they have reproduced the very systems they find problematic and that they have an opportunity to break this cycle. The first part – power as a subject of learning – did not come out as explicitly. Especially given the historical context presented in chapter 2 it could be meaningful to run double-loop learning interventions that seek to deconstruct the influence of northern epistemologies and explore how lifelong learning interventions can be a force of decolonisation of education and learning (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Odora Hoppers, 2001).

Proposition 4: Power and paradigm shift

The learning environment for normative double-loop learning is not only shaped by organisational members but by the entire ecosystem of actors in a field. Therefore, double-loop learning can be further enhanced if there were an overall paradigm shift towards new theories-in-use in the sector of lifelong learning for development including its financing mechanisms.

This, therefore, calls for another proposition about facilitating double-loop learning. Proposition 3 may suggest that practitioners can bring about transformative change just by engaging in critical learning. In chapter 2 I explained how from a relational world view, everyone’s actions and interactions contribute to shaping the structures governing our social reality. This was illustrated in chapter 4 as well; NGO practitioners are enacting alternative epistemologies of practice. However, it is not enough for individuals or single organisations to think deeply and adjust their own mental models. First of all, by viewing the process from the perspective of field theory, one’s mental models are not individually configured. They are shaped over time through processes of socialisation. Some actors

and institutions have more power in determining what is at stake in a given field, in framing meaning, in allocating resources. Therefore, I include proposition 4 to underline the responsibility of those in a position of power to critically review their influence on sustaining problematic paradigms – rules of the game shared by the actors in the larger field. One of the differences established between learning trajectories 1 and 2 is the sphere of influence over the changes to governing variables. When it came to revising volunteer relationships, the team felt much more in control compared to some other aspired changes.

7.4.3 Evaluating normative double-loop learning

Proposition 5: Double-loop learning for normative professionals

Double-loop learning at the individual level is key for educators who will need to engage in skilled improvisation in their unique daily realities. The learning norms of Model 2 may enable this but the outcomes should be framed in a nuanced manner.

Finally, I add two propositions towards a contextualised theory of double-loop learning in the context of lifelong learning for development. Earlier in this chapter, I referred to the five cycles of value created through collective learning (Wenger et al., 2011) and the six trajectories of change (Friedman, 2011). In chapter 5, we showed how these frameworks can help detect nuances shifts in the field as well as bigger changes. Even though I labelled trajectory 1 as a success in terms of double-loop learning and trajectory 2 as incomplete or not durable, both illustrated the various forms of value that were created; a much more nuanced framing of outcomes emerged compared to how Argyris pitches double-loop change. Whereas Argyris defined double-loop learning at the level of actual change being enacted, this more nuanced framing inspired by the authors referenced above acknowledges potential change, time lags in this change being observable and change that sometimes stays at the individual level and sometimes moves beyond this level.

Proposition 6: Double-loop learning effects in time and space

Normative double-loop learning may not have to be evaluated at the implementation stage only, but can be perceived as a trajectory of change over time with milestones such as disconfirmation, guilt-indication and psychological safety, as well as value layers including immediate, potential, applied, realised and reframing value.

Moreover, those changes that result in a more critical and normatively oriented agency result in changes to the field – including the organisational field – but this may take some time. Therefore, the dimensions of reach and time should be added when evaluating double-loop learning interventions.

In this PAR I did not have the opportunity to follow up on changes in the long-term or outside of the boundaries of the organisation. A few changes were observed and documented in the community of the sub-study on community perceptions, but this was only within the research period. In addition, trajectory 1 illustrated the power of multiple enclaves merging together, supporting each other and spreading new learning norms. More research could be done to understand the long-term levers sustaining or enhancing double-loop changes and eventually transformation of a field (also see Friedman & Sykes, 2014). For the lifelong learning for development sector, particular indicators could be used to ensure the double-loop changes are indeed beneficial to the learners and the communities they live in – enhancing critical capabilities. Due to the time constraints and the scope of the study we were not able to observe realised value at the level of the learners and communities (Wenger et al., 2011).

7.5 Conclusion

This research was rooted in the perspective that the way we do things in the field of lifelong learning for development would improve if we embrace an epistemology of practice that does not only revolve around rigour, but also relevance. In this PAR we engaged in various cycles of reflection to understand how our actions shape the field and how mental models are shaped by the field, influencing actions in turn. We explored whether and how double-loop learning could be utilised as a catalyst for a normative practice that is geared towards serving learners and communities. In this final empirical chapter, I answered the overall research question: How can education NGOs in Uganda create space for double-loop learning involving community actors towards meaningful lifelong learning for development interventions? Besides the insights presented in earlier chapters about the methods and ingredients of double-loop learning spaces, in this chapter, I revisited Argyris' theory about why double-loop learning does or does not lead to durable and transformative changes. I reconstructed two learning trajectories to explore what made double-loop learning stick or stall – both in terms of spaces and outcomes. Based on this analysis, I distilled factors that help sustain double-loop learning spaces and those that hinder this sustenance (or breakthrough).

Table 24 Enabling conditions and barriers to sustaining double-loop learning spaces and effects

Enabling conditions	Barriers
1. Direct involvement of external actors in the PAR/learning process	1. Heightened field dynamics in the border area between the NGO and its external environment
2. Timing: feeding into natural opportunities for change	2. Discovering self-sealing processes late
3. An organisational commitment to the issue of inquiry- the presence of similar enclaves in other locations	3. Facilitator’s blind spots
4. Balancing guilt anxiety, disconfirmation and psychological safety	4. Missing connections between individual and collective reframing
	5. Finding satisfactory single loop solutions

As a result, I presented six propositions to contextualise double-loop learning for education NGOs in the field of lifelong learning for development. This can be translated into an adjusted Model 2 theory-in-use to promote normative double-loop learning in this field of work (see figure 11).

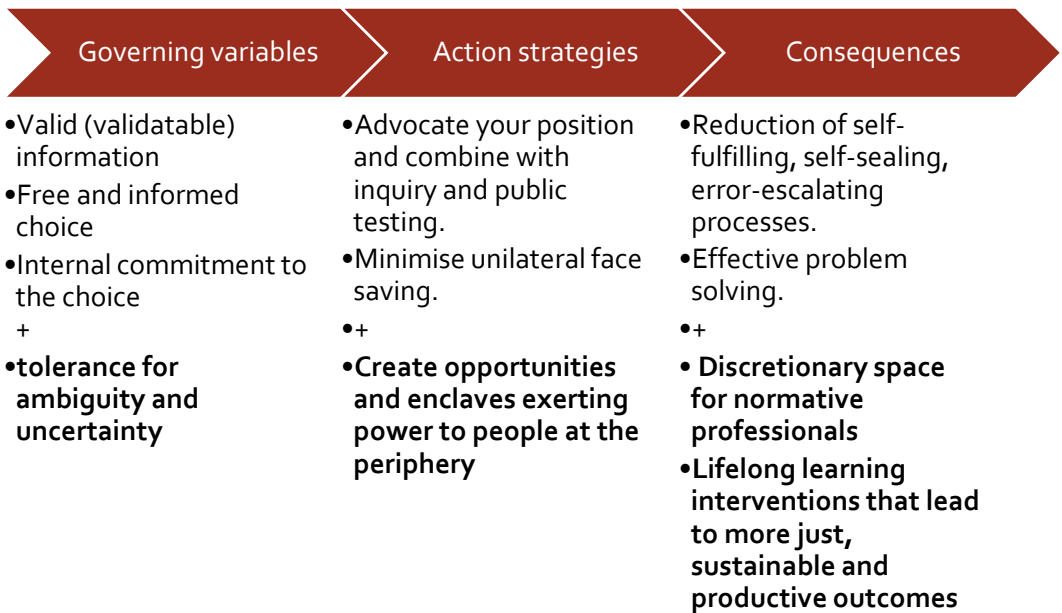


Figure 11 Contextualised Model 2 theory-in-use for education NGOs

This expanded theory of double-loop learning connects the relational view on reality borrowed from field theory and embraces the normative complexity of the field inspired by normative professionalisation. While it may not be easy, hopefully, the conceptual tools and practical recommendations emerging from this research can guide education NGOs in ensuring their organisational learning practices adopt a critical lens towards meaningful lifelong learning for all. And though they may not bring about overnight transformative change, they can help identify why change takes time and which levers can be pushed to make small shifts grow bigger.

8. Conclusion and discussion

8.1 Taking stock: organisational learning in education NGOs

Through the work and experiences of various NGO practitioners, this thesis has portrayed the colourful and diverse terrain of the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda. Numerous education NGOs are offering learning and education interventions for youth and adults aiming to achieve various development goals related to livelihoods, sexual reproductive health and rights or citizenship amongst others. In chapter 2, I problematised that the epistemology of practice dominating the development sector does not optimally set up NGOs to navigate the technical, ethical and epistemological complexities that occur in the field of lifelong learning for development. Therefore, this research aimed at generating practical knowledge that could help NGOs re-position organisational learning as a critical and transformative process that helps them do the right thing in their work context.

The main research question guiding this PhD research was: How can education NGOs in Uganda create space for double-loop learning involving external actors towards meaningful lifelong learning for development interventions? This focus on the use of double-loop learning was guided by a participatory diagnostic phase. Collaboratively, NGO practitioners observed that they predominantly utilise single-loop learning and felt stuck when trying to engage in more critical inquiry or applying their professional knowledge when it would go beyond the prescribed path. The element of collective learning with community actors was also identified in our communicative space as a challenging domain. The practitioners acknowledged the need to include diverse knowledges – especially of the unexpected knowers – and collaborative action for meaningful lifelong learning programming. Based on this diagnosis, we set the following sub-questions:

1. Which organisational learning mechanisms are currently applied in education NGOs in Uganda?

2. What are enabling and limiting factors for double-loop learning in education NGOs in Uganda?
3. Who are the community actors involved and affected by the work of education NGOs?
4. What space is currently created for double-loop learning involving community actors and how does this influence non-formal education programmes?
5. How can these spaces be opened to increase the relevance of non-formal education programmes through double-loop learning?

Previous chapters and intermezzos have accumulated findings that helped answer these questions. Chapter 4 introduced a portrait of seven education NGOs, presenting their various OLMs. This mapping exercise illustrated that NGO practitioners find creative ways to ensure their learners' needs are met – despite system pressures and clashing paradigms of practice. Intermezzo 2 illustrated the variety of external actors affected by and involved in the work of education NGOs. Chapter 5 presented a community-based view on the NGO dynamics emerging in a locality and in specific learning spaces that brought various actors together. Chapters 6 and 7 zoomed in on double-loop learning – both looking into concrete examples of double-loop learning spaces and by distilling factors that make double-loop learning spaces stick or not. Chapter 7 also recapitulated key theoretical implications of this research – situating the concept of double-loop learning in the domain of lifelong learning for development. Overall, insights were gained into the dimensions of currently existing critical organisational learning spaces as well as methodology and ingredients that can help widen these spaces. Furthermore, we learned what ingredients help ensure double-loop learning sticks and becomes part of the mainstream organisational practice. Limitations to fully letting the 'outside-in' were also identified; persistent barriers that prevent the establishment of communities of practice to strengthen collaboration between NGOs and community actors. In this final chapter, I explore a sort-of anti-question to the research question to evaluate what value we have really added to organisational learning in education NGOs and how meaningful this was. I formulate this anti-question as: How meaningful is organisational learning in education NGOs if we want to fix the gaps in the lifelong learning for development field in Uganda?

8.2 The value of organisational learning in education NGOs

At the beginning of this thesis, I presented several premises that suggest that if education NGOs learn more effectively (and critically), they would be able to achieve greater success in delivering best fitting lifelong learning interventions. I am deeply aware that such big claims have been made about organisational learning and becoming a learning organisation in the past; if only they would learn, organisations would help create a better world. Others have tempered this optimism by pointing out that learning organisations could simply learn to do the wrong thing better or create the suggestion of democratic work practices to keep staff sufficiently satisfied to continue serving the leadership's aspirations (Jarvis, 2007; Pedler & Hsu, 2019; Symon, 2003). Based on the findings of this PhD research, what position would I take? Are the premises about the value of organisational learning valid? Using five perspectives I construct my conclusions about the contribution organisational learning can and cannot make to the field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda.

8.2.1 Are education NGOs the holy grail?

First, I would like to revisit whether it is worth investing in organisational learning of education NGOs – are these organisations really the key to improved lifelong learning opportunities? In chapter 2 I argued that NGOs are currently among the major service providers of lifelong learning programmes, especially when it comes to non-formal and informal learning. However, they are not the only providers. There are public and private providers of formal and non-formal education programmes, community-based organisations, as well as spontaneous informal learning interventions in communities, and companies offering learning trajectories for staff and/or actors in their value chain. What is the role of NGOs in this landscape to ensure lifelong learning is meaningful and sustainable? Could it be counterproductive for NGOs to learn their way into offering more meaningful lifelong learning interventions outside of the formal education and learning systems? If there is no connection between the work of NGOs and government agencies the problem of educational exclusion is very likely to persist. Organisational learning, especially those processes in the border regions as I have illustrated in this work, could help transfer knowledge and wisdom and foster synergies between NGOs and Government actors. This calls for a focus on scale and systemic change as part of the learning agenda. This would also demand that government agencies are equipped with the capabilities to act more 'learningfully'. It could also be worthwhile to reposition

companies as providers of learning opportunities, if they learned with a normative perspective they could make a substantial impact on society, the economy and the environment. At the same time, we cannot lose sight of grassroots organisations that could benefit from normative organisational learning practices too to navigate the requirements to survive and being mission-driven. Through collective learning, NGOs can become allies, advocating for those whose needs are underserved. Because NGOs are in such a unique position, and their role is often focused on fostering, supporting, complementing other services we must review the legitimacy question; who and what gives NGOs legitimacy?

In this research, we have seen how the accountability paradox has affected education NGOs in Uganda. Practitioners feel pressure to set up learning systems that produce the data donors ask for. When realities clash with prescribed plans, some educators choose to go under the radar and not report what they are doing. In this context, putting educators' knowledge above 'evidence-based' knowledge almost feels like an act of resistance. Besides accountability, Lister (2003) illustrates that NGO literature commonly refers to legitimacy as a matter of representation or performance. She, however, adds that this is too simplistic and divides the world into 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' – yet NGOs may be perceived as legitimate by some and not by others. Her reference to multiple facets of legitimacy (regulatory, pragmatic, normative and cognitive) as well as her emphasis on the role of power in legitimatising organisations is helpful in this context. In this research, we have seen that legitimacy is commonly operationalised as an accountability matter, especially 'upwards' accountability. So, are NGOs really the change agents they traditionally were presented to be?

Based on the fact that there are hundreds of NGOs offering lifelong learning interventions in Uganda, they are a player we cannot ignore. However, we should rethink their legitimacy and ensure they are critically seeking normative legitimacy from the groups they serve – before anyone else. Critical organisational learning potentially is the key to achieving the real legitimacy goal of NGOs that I can formulate as learning our way out of business. Instead of learning to be smarter in seeking legitimacy from donors and (local) governments who provide funding and/or sign-off on your authority to act, critical organisational learning aims at finding lasting solutions for communities who currently do not access those learning opportunities. Once the NGO figures out how to do this effectively the problem may no longer exist or solutions may be mainstreamed, and

therefore they lose their legitimacy. At this point, critical organisational learning could lead to a loss of legitimacy, but is also the only route to normative legitimacy in my view. Most importantly, critical organisational learning, in the way it is described in this thesis, would also create new connections and partnerships, reposition actors in relative position to other actors in the field, deconstruct problematic power relations, etcetera, thereby leading to new capabilities and new fields that enable the local actors to operate more productively, justly and sustainably. If education NGOs seek to learn themselves out of business, ultimately the results of their learning efforts translate into actions of others, for example, by assisting local government in allocating resources to groups-at-risk or by instituting national-level policies that widen the lifelong learning agenda, or by strengthening communities of practice at the community level that links youth to trainers, etcetera. Education NGOs may not be the only holy grail, but tuning organisational learning to a normative legitimacy could definitely contribute to more meaningful lifelong learning for development practices.

Though NGOs carry a responsibility to strive towards this normative legitimacy, they are not the only actors who carry responsibility. Given the complex nature of change in the field of lifelong learning and development, we may have to draw legitimacy beyond the borders of a single organisation or entity. From a complexity point of view, we could say that no actor is single-handedly responsible for change (and problems). Like Guijt (2010) underlined, the accountability paradigm is not the fault of just the donor, it is systemically upheld. Therefore, it might be important to improve the way education NGOs operate – but it is not sufficient and their learning practice should not be considered in isolation from other actors. And yet, because of their positionality, those in positions of power often do not have access to information about the realities on ground (Chambers, 2010). This means that donors, regulators, CEOs and directors and community leaders need to step out of their comfort zone and engage in reflexive learning. To break through the risk adversity triggered by the accountability wave, these powerful actors should similarly act as normative professionals – ask the tough questions, embrace the discomfort that comes with it and extend power to others who know-in-action – all requiring trust. Further research could investigate the practices of other actors such as donors, regulators, scholars, community actors, etcetera and how they can expand their realms of possibility to push the current paradigm through their day-to-day choices. Related to this could be an inquiry into the role of initiatives such as GLAM or

PDIA in advancing a paradigm shift in the wider field of development cooperation (Global Learning for Adaptive Management, 2019; Harvard University, 2021).

8.2.2 Is organisational learning the only route to transformation?

Authors like Symon (2003) and Jarvis (2007) have warned that organisational learning has often remained a rhetoric or management fad. Should we really think about it from this angle if the concept has been hijacked by the neoliberal interest of companies before? Others have proposed alternative routes, for example Kunneman (2016) introduces normative professionalisation and Van der Linden (2016) hints particularly on professionalisation and practice-oriented research or research communities as pathways to change. We could also place our hopes on new generations of professionals and rethink higher education and professional courses. We could aim at making universities more practice-oriented to ensure their research projects produce the type of knowledge that can help organisations advance their actions (phronesis). And as hinted at in the previous section it may not just be about organisational learning but also about rethinking our standards of organisational legitimacy. For example, regulators could hold NGOs accountable to normative legitimacy – ensuring that NGOs make a significant contribution to their target communities.

Rather than looking at these as alternatives to organisational learning, I would say that organisational learning can be a catalyst for all of these. By engaging in critical organisational learning, for example, NGOs could generate well-defined research questions about specific barriers in the 'swampy lowlands' that scholars could help answer. Furthermore, organisational learning spaces can provide an avenue through which the embodied knowledge of practitioners can be made explicit, documented and disseminated. This is not to fall back into the generalisation that learning is automatically good. We have seen from the account of NGO practitioners in chapters 4 and 6 that they are limited in the adaptations they can make for the benefit of their learners. Thus, for organisational learning to be a catalyst for professionalisation processes, knowledge accumulation and normative forms of legitimacy, it has to be more critical, and for this to happen multiple actors should align their actions. The various empirical chapters in this thesis have provided insight into how this can be accomplished. What is important throughout is that various actors are working towards a manner of working that does justice to the complex nature of development and lifelong learning (where applicable), and that this complex nature of work requires a different definition of knowledge (and

consequentially learning) compared to the neo-Newtonian approach. Learning partnerships are to be fostered with a focus on working complementarily, strengthening learning capabilities, capturing and exchanging phronesis and accumulatively building a better understanding of the complex terrain of lifelong learning. As illustrated in chapters 5 and 7 this requires a new framing towards partnerships - one of mutuality – which requires reflexivity of individuals to address the assumptions they may have about the other. As Zeelen (2015) suggests: “we will have to leave our institutional comfort zones to work on new partnerships to influence national, European and other international agendas” (p.18).

The other element about organisational learning in education NGOs that could be contested is that this implies that agency (through learning) can unlock transformative change. Yet, as the various accounts of practitioners have illustrated, bigger forces and structures are influencing their work, and the continuous advocacy efforts of others display structural inequalities in our social systems such as racism and gender inequality. Should not these bigger structural problems be solved first? Should not the regulators and funders create an environment in which critical learning is encouraged first? This might be a matter of the chicken and the egg: do paradigms change first or do organisations and practitioners work towards an alternative future. Within the relational perspective on practice, the answer is both happen simultaneously. Chambers (2010) for example, centres paradigms around agency: “So paradigm as redefined has to be living and enacted. People are central since it they who give energy and life to make paradigms work” (p. 42). A requirement, however, is that people need to 1] know the current situation is problematic and 2] be able to imagine alternative futures (Finger & Asún, 2001). It is not always possible for grassroots initiatives alone to achieve transformative change in wider fields – what is required is a bot-top-down strategy whereby those in positions of power participate (Rampedi, 2003; Zeelen, 2015). As I mentioned before, those in power positions have the responsibility to scrutinise the realities and their own role in reproducing or transforming the field. But this does not mean that others should wait for further instruction from ‘the top’. Rather, reflexivity as demonstrated in chapters 6 and 7 has the ability to expand one’s power and extend power to others. Since the web of power dynamics is multi-directional there is always an act of empowerment one can facilitate.

What could be researched further is whether alternative assumption grounds (alternative to neoliberal focus on competition and materialism) such as African or Eastern wisdoms can act as a catalyst for such bottom-up paradigmatic change (Pedler & Hsu, 2019). In line with Finger and Asun's (2001) model, this could help people envision alternative futures. This research has been able to show what power organisational learning could have and how this over time could lead to the transformation of fields, but in our communicative space we did not explicitly talk about meta-paradigms affecting the day-to-day work of education NGOs. For example, there is a need for further research into racism and neo-colonialism using an intersectional lens in the lifelong learning for development sector. This is a real threat to ensuring meaningful lifelong learning opportunities for all (Majumdar, 2020; Odora Hoppers, 2001, 2009; Odora Hoppers & Sandgren, 2014).

8.2.3 From small and fleeting to sustainable and big change

In this thesis, I made an argument to widen the definition of productive learning beyond the way Argyris' defined it. It is not just about achieving realised value, it could also be immediate value, potential value or reframing value (Wenger et al., 2011). Moreover, we have seen that 'fleeting' spaces or enclaves can be powerful in changing the relationships, meanings and rules of the game, but does this reframing of productive learning make us less ambitious? If we aim at adaptivity and finding the best fit, are we not too focused on short-term and surface-level alignment? This might indeed happen if we evaluate our learning at the level of espoused theories. Learners and community actors may espouse that a programme is great and fulfils their needs. However, learning and skill development – leave alone systemic change – takes time, and results may only surface after some time possibly when the NGO is no longer 'around' in the community. Therefore, the concept of formative and summative evaluation remains relevant. Such evaluation should look at rapid indicators of social change – such as power relations, access to resources, meaning-giving processes, as well as a long-term change in structural inequalities, etcetera. Evaluation should dig into the theories-in-use and keep a critical eye on self-sealing processes and undiscussable issues. This thesis has illustrated how this might happen both in the community and within an NGO. The layers-of-depth and -width could thus further be expanded by layers of duration – allowing for a time lag in change as well as the undoing of change.

8.2.4 Does double-loop learning equal critical learning?

In this thesis, we explored the utility of double-loop learning to overcome some of the challenges in the lifelong learning for development field in Uganda. In chapter 7, I presented a contextualised definition and learning models for the context of education NGOs. Does this mean that double-loop learning is always equal to critical organisational learning? Would single-loop learning then be an uncritical form of organisational learning? Before closing this thesis, I would like to present a little more nuance to this. If we view double-loop learning as a process that unearths theories-in-use (layers-of-depth) and connections between agency and structure (layers-of-width) then yes it would sound like a critical organisational learning process. However, we have also seen that cognitive insights do not always translate into action and/or durable results. In chapter 7, we have seen that single-loop learning can also lead to satisfactory results; sometimes it is the gaming of the system that helps new actors find ways into a new region of a field (migration) which could be an equally critical outcome of learning. The status quo does not change, but the individual's action scripts do, potentially helping them access new places of power – from which at a later point they could facilitate change. Moreover, there are many other forms of critical organisational learning and reflexivity beyond double-loop learning. For example, unlearning, critical action learning, knowledge democracy, decolonizing knowledge or human-centred design. One of the limitations of this research is that we biased our tool kit to the more conventional double-loop learning methodology of Argyris. Though this was valuable, more structural power dynamics could have potentially been unearthed by adopting a wider methodological lens towards facilitating critical organisational learning.

8.2.5 Muddling through versus generalising knowledge

In chapter 3, I presented a layered, emergent and phronetic approach to PAR. I argued that the practical knowledge normative practitioners require is value- and power-laden, and contextual. The PAR seemingly produced directly applicable knowledge for the partner NGO and co-researchers. It also seemed that a great deal of the knowledge generated was embodied already in the day-to-day actions of these practitioners. So how helpful is it to do a PAR as a PhD research if muddling through is the suggested strategy in complex situations? Indeed, we must be careful not to generalise the strategies practitioners and co-researchers in this study used to overcome dilemmas, nor would I suggest other education NGOs would implement the same organisational learning mechanisms. However, what is transferable is the knowledge about how

reflection can be facilitated to unearth the theories-in-use or which barriers and dynamics occur when implementing lifelong learning in heterogeneous communities. This research showed that as much as muddling through is something that comes naturally to educators from their experiential knowledge, it is a process that can be facilitated, deepened and widened to influence not just the actions of a single professional, but an organisation or community of practice. Though this knowledge can be generated through other research designs as well, Participatory Action Research has proven to be an effective approach, especially because it invites (co-)researchers to learn by doing – to probe, sense and act – in line with the alternative epistemologies of action. As a second- and third-person action researcher, I was able to make connections between actors in different regions of the field and to facilitate reflection through layers-of-depth and layers-of-width. Chambers (2010) underlines the need for a multifaceted toolkit to generate practical knowledge to solve complex problems. It would be very interesting to explore other research methods to investigate how NGOs (and other development actors) could form learning networks or communities of practice. For example, network analysis and modelling could be an interesting approach to study how relationships change over time and who takes which action or who contributes which knowledge. Whichever research design scholars choose to support the cause of lifelong learning for development – it is important to ensure the epistemological underpinnings of their study recognise the professional work of educators for what it is: mixed typography of swampy lowlands and hard high grounds. Though macro level trends can and should be analysed, the day-to-day operations of lifelong learning programming require practical and contextual knowledge that requires a genuinely collaborative process with practitioners (Van der Linden, 2016).

8.2.6 Recapitulation

In conclusion, organisational learning in education NGOs is not the only lens we should use as we seek to facilitate more meaningful learning opportunities for all, but it is surely a meaningful lens. The concept of organisational learning repositions organisations and their members as knowers and could operationalise epistemologies of practice that could help solve complex problems. Organisational learning could be a catalyst to other efforts aimed at improving lifelong learning for development. However, this process should not naively be viewed as automatically benevolent. This research has illustrated that it is not always the interests of the learners that drive day-to-day decision making in NGOs. The accountability paradigm still has its tentacles on the practice of NGOs, even though new

adaptive management approaches are trending and critique is rising about problematic power imbalances between the global North and South, black and white, men and women, able-bodied and disabled (Odora Hoppers, 2001). To push organisational learning as a critical learning process, double-loop learning is a practice to aspire for. However, this should not only be focused on technical solutions or debunking routines that hinder effective performance. These spaces for reflection should also include the value lens – is what we are doing right? And according to whom? This research has presented a variety of methods that could facilitate this reflection in organisations, within communities and between various actors. It has also presented lenses to detect the changes as a result of learning that goes beyond realised value, but also considers relationships and meaning.

8.3 Adding value to organisational learning in education NGOs

The title of this work can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, the title refers to the action research element that sought to contribute to the organisational learning practice in participating NGOs. On the other hand, value refers to the normative and power-sensitive lenses used for organisational learning, and expanding the classic concept of double-loop learning to be a normative practice. I hope that this thesis has fulfilled both meanings of value. Practical knowledge was generated that helped practitioners (and other actors involved) take steps towards what they defined as right, often informed by their interpretation of the learners' needs and preferences. To a large extent this practical knowledge was already present amongst practitioners, though we transformed this by discovering which theories-in-use, defensive routines and self-sealing processes hinder a breakthrough in the status quo. Furthermore, the relationship between the wider dynamics in the field and one's action scripts was a useful angle to enlarge the realm of perceived possibilities. Theoretically, we re-contextualised double-loop learning according to the requirements the current field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda presents to education NGOs. For example, the learning norms should incorporate tolerance for value ambiguity, and power should be extended to participants of learning interventions as well as community actors and stakeholders from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. May this work encourage the tempered as well as the radical radicals and open spaces for critical discussion in and between organisations and actors.

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Summary | The normative practitioner: adding value to organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda

Introduction

In Uganda, the promise of lifelong learning is yet to be fulfilled for many. Despite solid progress in increasing access to formal education, there remain large inequalities in access, completion rates and learning outcomes (Blaak, Openjuru, & Zeelen, 2013; Van der Linden, 2016). Consequently, an excluded majority lacks the possibility of developing those capabilities that help create livelihood development, meaningful civic participation or pursuit of other life projects. By adopting an organisational lens, this research will open the black box of one of the main providers of lifelong learning interventions in Uganda: NGOs. As intermediaries between funders, policy makers and communities, NGOs take up a unique position and have to navigate conflicting interests amidst resource constraints. In chapter 1 of this thesis, I argue that for us to achieve improvement in the field of lifelong learning for development we should find ways to detach ourselves from the risk-adversity and short-term orientation dominating development organisations, which is triggered by the accountability wave in the sector (Edwards, 1997; Ramalingam, 2013). In particular, this research will focus on how organisational learning can be positioned to help NGOs generate knowledge about the complex realities of learners, test innovations and tailor activities to local conditions – and do so continuously and critically of underlying (power) structures. Organisational learning in this context is defined as: “a conscious and critical process of reflection intended to produce new perceptions, goals, and/or behavioural strategies” (Doving, 1996 as cited in Lipshitz, Friedman, & Popper, 2007, p. 16). I draw specific attention to double-loop learning, which I propose could be a critical learning project that could help reposition organisational learning as a transformational process; this form of learning not only changes an organisation’s action strategies, but also the underlying beliefs, assumptions or goals (Argyris, 1999; Bokeno, 2003).

To ensure the research would produce knowledge that helps NGOs strengthen their practice, we used phronetic Participatory Action Research (PAR). This approach enabled us to develop a practical form of knowledge that does also identifies what is 'good' in a given situation (phronesis) (Carr & Kemmis, 2005; Eikeland, 2008; Flyvbjerg, Landman, & Schram, 2012). At the start of this participatory process, research questions were formulated collaboratively with NGO practitioners. The main research question was formulated as: How can education NGOs in Uganda create space for double-loop learning involving external actors towards meaningful lifelong learning for development interventions? Sub-questions were:

- a) Which organisational learning mechanisms are currently applied in education NGOs in Uganda?
- b) What are enabling and limiting factors for double-loop learning in education NGOs in Uganda?
- c) Who are the community actors involved and affected by the work of education NGOs?
- d) What spaces are currently created for double-loop learning involving community actors and how does this influence lifelong learning programmes?
- e) How can education NGOs in Uganda widen the space for double-loop learning to increase the relevance of lifelong learning programmes?

The theoretical foundation, methodology and findings of this research are presented in a series of chapters, (published) papers and intermezzos.

Organisational learning as a normative practice

Chapter 2 – Theoretical Perspectives – puts a spotlight on the 'swampy lowlands' that NGO practitioners operate in and explores which epistemology of practice and conceptual frameworks could help us investigate and shape a critical organisational learning practice. From the perspective of complexity thinking I present a portrait of the contestations, compromises, dynamics and developments that shaped the current field of lifelong learning for development in Uganda. Besides the technical complexity that is acknowledged in contemporary development theory, I argue that the ethical and epistemological complexity should equally be considered if we want to find solutions that offer better and more equal lifelong learning opportunities (Kunneman, 2016; McGrath et al., 2020). Not all NGOs are always dealing with complex problems, but the field in

which they operate does form a complex system. Several authors have criticised that the dominant epistemology of practice – technical rationality or the neo-Newtonian paradigm – inadequately equips practitioners to find relevant and effective solutions in the face of such complexity (Chambers, 2010; Kunneman, 2016; Schön, 1983). Therefore, I extend my call to use an organisational lens towards the transformation of the epistemology of practice governing actors and organisations in the field of lifelong learning for development. I discuss several alternative epistemologies that could offer solace, such as reflection-in-action or adaptive pluralism (Chambers, 2010; Schön, 1983), as well as normative professionalism, which embraces the normative ambiguity of our realities (Kunneman, 2016).

Based on a review of literature on organisational learning in development organisations, I note that despite NGOs embracing organisational learning, the dominant neo-Newtonian paradigm reinforced through the accountability wave has turned this into a mechanical exercise producing insufficient insight into solving complex problems (Ramalingam, 2013; Roper & Pettit, 2003). To help us analyse the interplay between these underlying epistemologies of practice and the way organisational learning is shaped, I introduce field theory as an analytical framework. I highlight concepts such as habitus, positionality, and symbolic and structural order that will guide the inquiry in this PAR to investigate the link between individual and collective learning, the role of power dynamics and the connection between agency and field dynamics (Bourdieu, 1977; Friedman, 2011; Lewin, 1939). Moreover, I point out that field theory can help us monitor the type of change occurring as a result of organisational learning, which may occur in its most critical form as a transformation of the field or more temporarily creating enclaves with alternative rules of the game (Friedman, Sykes, & Strauch, 2014). By illustrating that the mental models being changed through double-loop learning are internalisations of the field, I further support my argument that double-loop learning could be viewed as a critical organisational learning process.

A phronetic approach to Participatory Action Research

Consistent with the epistemology of practice presented in chapter 2, in chapter 3 – Research Methodology – I outline the phronetic PAR approach and methodology used in this research. Aspiring to produce phronesis – practical and contextual knowledge that can guide practitioners in doing the ‘right thing’ – this research facilitated a

communicative space in which practitioners generated new insights through deliberation, inquiry and action. Given the field theoretical foundation of this research and its bias to double-loop learning, action was not only viewed as the visible things people do and say but also the underlying, socially informed mental models (layers-of-depth). The actions in micro-situations were viewed from a field perspective to understand how the historical and current dynamics influence these actions (layers of width).

This PAR took place between 2015 and 2019, during which five stages can be distinguished: orientation, problem diagnosis, entering the case, PAR with the case study organisation and closing. In the research several education NGOs served as cases to learn from and with. In stage 2 a multiple case study approach (Stake, 2006) was used to document organisational learning in seven education NGOs in 2016. In 2017 the layers-of-depth in this research were facilitated with one education NGO that served as a rich case study. We worked with one programme team with whom monthly PAR meetings were held to co-design and co-facilitate the research process. In this stage, three learning trajectories emerged in which double-loop learning methods and other critical organisational learning spaces were tested. The research closed in 2019 with a series of workshops and meeting with the programme team, senior management as well as community leaders involved. Finally, the chapter presents emerging issues when conducting a phronetic PAR, including the ethical task to ensure authentic participation (Angucia, Zeelen, & De Jong, 2010; Boog, Preece, Slagter, & Zeelen, 2008).

A portrait of organisational learning in seven education NGOs

Chapter 4 – Normative Practitioners in Action – presents outcomes of the orientation and diagnostic stages of the research. The findings presented in this chapter are derived from three main data sources: the orientation dialogue, semi-structured interviews in seven diverse education NGOs and a collaborative co-analysis workshop. This chapter confirms that practitioners view organisational learning as part and parcel of their educational practice. Practitioners highlighted various rationales for organisational learning, but a recurring theme was that organisational learning should help the organisation understand the realities of their learners and align their education programmes to address emerging needs. The wide plethora of organisational learning mechanisms (OLMs) mentioned by research participants suggests that education NGOs are very

intentional about organisational learning. By unpacking the learning requirements and dimensions shaping organisational learning (Shani & Docherty, 2003), we further investigated the interaction between agency and the field. From the profiling exercise we identified several learning requirements posed by the field, such as the need to remain critical about who determines what is at stake, navigating the tension between supporting locally held values with advocacy goals and ensuring there are sufficiently shared learning spaces between departments amidst fragmentation. Amidst these challenging requirements, the findings also illustrate that practitioners are able to enact normative professionalism. Actively shaping organisational learning spaces, they consider creating conversational space, diversifying the knowledge base, balancing formal and informal spaces and negotiating programme terms and conditions with funders to open space for critical learning. Whilst analysing the organisational learning practices together, practitioners concluded that single-loop learning was dominant and that more spaces are needed to authentically and critically learn with external actors.

The community's perspective on collective learning with NGOs

In chapter 5 – Towards Collective Learning Between Communities and NGOs – we turn to the communities in which NGOs operate. Collective learning is often presented as a panacea to tackle complex problems, however, collective learning is a delicate practice and facilitators should be mindful of the situated nature of learning, the role of power and the heterogeneity of communities (Anyidoho, 2010; Cornwall, 2002). To find out from a community perspective how NGOs could shape collective learning, I worked with external research assistants using one village in rural Central Eastern Uganda as a learning site. Through interviews and a community dialogue we established that besides a variety of community initiatives, eighteen NGOs were active in the village. Participants noted that these NGOs do not always offer programmes relevant to the needs of youth or tend to leave out those who need it most. Based on these insights, community participants proposed to invite the NGOs and give them feedback towards more effective collaboration. Together with community representatives we invited the NGOs to participate in the community-NGO meeting. Eight NGOs and the district NGO network participated and listened to feedback from youth and engaged in a dialogue. Community members shared suggestions such as working with youth farther away from the village centre, using sports to bring people together, and starting up a community-NGO coordinating committee. Though most issues remained unresolved, the enclave

emerging in this sub-study provided critical insights into the dynamics of collective learning. By viewing this research journey spatially, we observed that although the different learning spaces were all temporary and quite formal, over time the spaces started showing different locations of impetus and included a growing and more diverse number of participants (Cornwall, 2002). As a result, the series of small and fleeting spaces showed signs of generating immediate, potential, applied and reframing value (Wenger, Trayner, & De Laat, 2011). The chapter presents several pointers for NGO practitioners who are seeking to facilitate authentic collective learning. Though it may be difficult and messy, if used reflexively, collective learning provides an opportunity for NGOs to find keys to unexplored, closed doors.

Trying out new double-loop learning methods

Chapter 6 – Pushing the Limits of Adaptiveness through Double-loop learning – zooms in on the lived realities of the PAR team members delivering Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights education. A detailed portrait is offered of four dilemmas faced by the team around: value-contradictions in this culturally sensitive domain, the complex nature of change, programme targets and community expectations. In this PAR we used several methods of double-loop learning to reflect on the mental models and strategies the team adopted in engaging external actors. This chapter particularly focuses on the personal-case interviews which were based on the double column case method developed by Argyris (1982) and further adapted by Action Design (Rudolph, Taylor, & Foldy, 2001). These interviews either focused on reframing dilemmas (Razer & Friedman, 2017) or deriving principles from success experiences (Schechter, Sykes, & Rosenfeld, 2004). The interviews and analysis workshop revealed how inventive staff and volunteers already were in balancing programme targets, budget constraints, conflicting expectations and value contradictions. Moreover, the programme already had carved out 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 private value systems and that of the organisation. 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.

Chapter 7 – Double-loop learning Towards Adaptive Lifelong Learning Programming – builds on previous chapters by exploring how double-loop learning cannot just be facilitated, but also sustained. The chapter starts by outlining Argyris' approaches to analysing, facilitating and evaluating double-loop learning and how a shift from Model 1 theories-in-use (aimed at self-protection) to Model 2 theories-in-use (aimed at effective problem solving) is key to sustaining double loop learning (Argyris, 2010). In this PAR I also discovered that in all learning trajectories emerging in the PAR, Model 1 learning theories-in-use were dominant. In this chapter, I illustrate that in one of the learning trajectories – volunteers as catalysts of double-loop learning – we were able to facilitate double-loop learning and make a shift towards Model 2 theories-in-use. This seemed to be enabled by direct involvement of volunteers in the PAR process, planning innovations around natural moments of change, packaging insights into a transferable product, organisational commitment to youth engagement and rethinking the volunteer role. The same was not visible in the second learning trajectory on mutual relationship building with external actors. Factors that hindered double-loop learning from sticking in this case were: generally turbulent field dynamics in the border area between the NGO and its external environment, delay in discovering the self-sealing functions of the formalised normative systems, individual level unfreezing that did not translate to collective unfreezing, finding satisfactory single-loop strategies and finally my own blind spots as a facilitator. Based on these experiences I revisited double-loop learning theory and connected it with the relational view on reality offered by field theory, and complemented it with elements of normative professionalism. This yielded five propositions to expand double-loop learning theory and contextualise it for the case of education NGOs. Based on these propositions a Model 2 theory-in-use was presented that could support NGOs in ensuring double-loop learning indeed becomes a platform for normative professionalism.

Reflecting on the value added to organisational learning in education NGOs

This thesis started by proposing that organisational learning, and double-loop learning in particular, could enable NGOs offer more meaningful lifelong learning opportunities

that could close the gap. In chapter 8 – Conclusion and Discussion – I revisit the main research question and review whether this organisational lens has indeed proven meaningful. I further present several practical and theoretical implications for NGO practitioners, funders, policy makers and researchers. I conclude that organisational learning in education NGOs is not the only lens we should use as we seek to facilitate more meaningful learning opportunities for all, but it is surely a meaningful lens. The concept of organisational learning repositions organisations and their members as knowers and could operationalise epistemologies of practice that could help solve complex problems. However, this process should not naively be viewed as automatically benevolent. This research has illustrated that it is not always the interests of the learners that drive day-to-day decision making in NGOs. The accountability paradigm still has its tentacles on the practice of NGOs, even though new adaptive management approaches are trending and critique is rising about problematic power imbalances between the global North and South, black and white, men and women, able-bodied and disabled (Odora Hoppers, 2001). To push organisational learning as a critical learning process, double-loop learning is a practice to aspire for. However, this should not only be focused on technical solutions or debunking routines that hinder effective performance. These spaces for reflection should also include the value lens – is what we are doing right? And to whom? This research has presented a variety of methods that could facilitate this reflection in organisations, within communities and between various actors, as well as lenses to detect the changes as a result of learning that goes beyond realised value but also considers relationships and meaning.

Samenvatting | De normatieve professional: over het toevoegen van waarde aan organisatieleren in onderwijs ngo's in Uganda

Introductie

Voor velen in Uganda is de belofte van een leven lang leren nog niet uitgekomen. Ondanks gestage groei in toegang tot formeel onderwijs blijven er grote vormen van ongelijkheid bestaan in onderwijsdeelname, succesvolle afronding en behaalde leerresultaten (Blaak et al., 2013; Van der Linden, 2016). Dit heeft tot gevolg dat een uitgesloten meerderheid de kansen mist om die *capabilities* te ontwikkelen die hen kunnen ondersteunen in het levensonderhoud, betekenisvol burgerschap of het vervullen van andere levensprojecten. Dit onderzoek gebruikt een organisatie-lens om te kijken naar een van de voornaamste aanbieders van interventies voor een leven lang leren in Uganda: niet-gouvernementele organisaties (ngo's). Vanwege hun unieke positie tussen donoren, beleidsmakers en lokale gemeenschappen moeten ngo's zien te schipperen tussen tegenstrijdige belangen en een schaarste aan middelen. In hoofdstuk 1 van dit proefschrift stel ik dat ngo's zich los zouden moeten maken van het kortetermijn denken en risico ontwijkend gedrag dat dominant is geworden in de ontwikkelingssector als gevolg van een algehele verantwoordingsdruk (Edwards, 1997; Ramalingam, 2013). Dit onderzoek kijkt in het bijzonder of en op welke manier organisatieleren ngo's kan helpen in het ontwikkelen van kennis over de complexe leefwereld van deelnemers, alsmede het testen van innovaties en continu aanpassen van activiteiten naar aanleiding van nieuwe inzichten of omstandigheden – en met name hoe dit op een manier kan die kritisch rekening houdt met (machts) structuren. Organisatieleren in dit onderzoek is gedefinieerd als: "een bewust en kritisch proces van reflectie met als doel nieuwe percepties, doelen en/of actiestrategieën te ontwikkelen" (Doving, 1996 zoals geciteerd in Lipshitz et al., 2007, p. 16). Ik breng in het bijzonder *double-loop* leren onder de aandacht, een proces dat ik zie als kritisch leerproject met een potentieel transformerende opbrengst. Deze vorm van leren verandert namelijk niet

alleen actiestrategieën, maar ook de onderliggende normen en opvattingen, aannames of doelen (Argyris, 1999; Bokeno, 2003).

Om ervoor te zorgen dat dit onderzoek kennis oplevert die ngo's helpt om hun praktijk te versterken hebben we een phronetisch participatief actie onderzoek (PAO) gebruikt. Deze benadering heeft ons geholpen om een praktische vorm van kennis te ontwikkelen die ook inzicht geeft in wat 'goed is' in een bepaalde situatie (phronesis) (Carr & Kemmis, 2005; Eikeland, 2008; Flyvbjerg et al., 2012). Aan het begin van dit participatieve proces hebben we in samenwerking met ngo-professionals onderzoeksvragen geformuleerd. De hoofdvraag was: Hoe kunnen onderwijs ngo's in Uganda ruimte creëren voor *double-loop* leren in samenwerking met externe actoren ten behoeve van betekenisvolle interventies op het gebied van leven lang leren voor ontwikkeling? De deelvragen waren:

- a) Welke mechanismen worden tegenwoordig gebruikt voor organisatieleren in onderwijs ngo's in Uganda?
- b) Welke factoren hinderen *double-loop* leren of maken dit juist mogelijk in onderwijs ngo's in Uganda?
- c) Wie zijn de actoren uit lokale gemeenschappen die betrokken zijn of getroffen worden door het werk van onderwijs ngo's?
- d) Welke ruimte bestaat er voor *double-loop* leren met actoren uit lokale gemeenschappen en welke invloed hebben deze leerprocessen op interventies voor een leven lang leren?
- e) Hoe kunnen onderwijs ngo's in Uganda de ruimte voor *double-loop* leren vergroten en zo de relevantie van hun leven lang leren programma's versterken?

De theoretische fundering, methodologie en bevindingen van dit onderzoek worden in dit proefschrift gepresenteerd in de vorm van een serie van hoofdstukken, (gepubliceerde) artikelen en intermezzo's.

Organisatieleren als een normatieve praktijk

Hoofdstuk 2 – Theoretische Perspectieven – brengt de moerassige laaglanden onder de aandacht waarin ngo-professionals opereren en verkent welke praktijk-epistemologie zou kunnen helpen in het onderzoeken en verbeteren van kritisch organisatieleren binnen dit veld. Geïnspireerd door complexiteitsdenken, presenteer ik een portret van de

conflicten, compromissen, dynamieken en ontwikkelingen die het veld van een leven lang leren voor ontwikkeling in Uganda hebben gevormd. Gebaseerd op deze achtergrond, stel ik dat als we betere en meer gelijkwaardige kansen willen bieden voor een leven lang leren, we niet alleen moeten kijken naar de technische complexiteit – welke vaak al wordt erkend in hedendaagse ontwikkelingstheorieën – maar ook naar de ethische en epistemologische complexiteit in deze praktijk (Kunneman, 2016; McGrath et al., 2020). Het is niet zo dat alle ngo's met complexe problemen te maken hebben, maar het veld waarin ze opereren is wél een complex systeem. Verschillende auteurs hebben bekritiseerd dat de dominante praktijk-epistemologie (namelijk de technische-rationele epistemologie of het neo-Newtonian paradigma) professionals onvoldoende toerust om relevante en effectieve oplossingen te vinden binnen deze vorm van complexiteit (Chambers, 2010; Kunneman, 2016; Schön, 1983). Daarom stel ik in dit hoofdstuk voor dat een organisatielens voor het verbeteren van een leven lang leren ook moet kijken naar de onderliggende praktijk-epistemologie. Hiervoor presenteer ik verschillende alternatieve vormen van epistemologie, zoals *reflectie-in-actie* of *meerzijdige adaptatie* (Chambers, 2010; Schön, 1983), alsmede *normatieve professionalisering* dat niet alleen om alternatieven vraagt maar ook de ambiguïteit van onze leefwereld erkent (Kunneman, 2016).

Naar aanleiding van een literatuuroverzicht van organisatielers in ontwikkelingsorganisaties, constateer ik dat ondanks dat ngo's organisatielers hebben omarmd dit vaak tot een mechanistisch proces blijkt te leiden dat onvoldoende inzicht oplevert voor het oplossen van complexe problematiek. Dit proces wordt sterk beïnvloed door het neo-Newtonian paradigma en de verantwoordingsdruk die ngo's ervaren (Ramalingam, 2013; Roper & Pettit, 2003). Ik introduceer vervolgens *veldtheorie* als een analytisch kader dat ons kan helpen in het analyseren van deze wisselwerking tussen de praktijk-epistemologie en de manier waarop organisatielers wordt vormgegeven. Hierbij bespreek ik concepten die leidend zullen zijn in de analyse binnen dit PAO om de relatie vast te stellen tussen individueel en collectief leren, machtsdynamieken en het samenspel tussen agency en de dynamiek van het veld. Deze concepten zijn: *habitus*, *positionaliteit* en *symbolische en structurele orde* (Bourdieu, 1977; Friedman, 2011; Lewin, 1939). Vervolgens leg ik uit dat *veldtheorie* ons ook kan ondersteunen bij het identificeren van de resultaten van organisatielers. Deze veranderingen kunnen in de meest kritische zin leiden tot een transformatie van het veld of het vormen van tijdelijke *enclaves* waarbinnen andere spelregels en normen gelden (Friedman et al., 2014). Verder toon ik

ook aan dat *double-loop* leren als kritisch organisatieleerproces kan worden gezien omdat de mentale modellen die in deze leervorm worden aangepast in wezen een internalisering van het veld belichamen.

Een phronetische benadering voor participatief actieonderzoek

In lijn met de praktijk-epistemologie die ik heb geïntroduceerd in hoofdstuk 2, leg ik in hoofdstuk 3 – Onderzoeksmethodologie – uit hoe ik in dit onderzoek een phronetisch participatief actieonderzoek heb uitgevoerd. Met het doel om phronesis te ontwikkelen – of contextuele praktische kennis die professionals kan ondersteunen in ‘juist handelen’ – heb ik in dit onderzoek een communicatieve ruimte gecreëerd waarbinnen professionals nieuwe inzichten hebben ontwikkeld door middel van conversatie, onderzoek en actie. Gezien de *veldtheorie*, die leidend is geweest in dit onderzoek, en de speciale focus op *double-loop* leren heb ik actie niet enkel gezien als de zichtbare handelingen van mensen maar ook mijn aandacht gericht op de onderliggende, sociaal gevormde mentale modellen (lagen-van-diepte). Deze handelingen die in micro-situaties plaatsvinden, werden in dit onderzoek ook bestudeerd vanuit het perspectief van het bredere veld om te begrijpen hoe historische en huidige dynamieken het handelen beïnvloeden (lagen-van-breedte).

Dit PAO heeft plaatsgevonden tussen 2015 en 2019. In deze periode hebben we vijf fases doorlopen: oriëntatie, diagnose van het probleem, toegang tot de caseorganisatie, PAO met de caseorganisatie en afronding. In het onderzoek waren verschillende ngo’s betrokken die als case hebben gediend om van én mee te leren. In 2016, in de tweede fase, hebben we organisatieleerpraktijken in kaart gebracht van zeven onderwijsngo’s door middel van een multiple case study (Stake, 2006). In 2017 zijn we ons gaan richten op één organisatie en daarbinnen door verschillende lagen van diepte gegaan. In die context hebben we samen met een programmateam het onderzoek ontworpen en uitgevoerd, gecoördineerd middels maandelijkse PAO-bijeenkomsten. In deze fase zijn uiteindelijk drie leertrajecten ontstaan waarin we *double-loop* leren en andere kritische vormen van organisatieleren hebben uitgetoetst. Het onderzoek werd in 2019 afgesloten met workshops met het programmateam, senior management alsmede de actoren uit lokale gemeenschappen die bij het onderzoek betrokken waren. Hoofdstuk 3 eindigt met een aantal belangrijke zaken over hoe onderzoekers moeten

navigeren in een phronetisch PAO, zoals omgaan met ethische verantwoordelijkheid om authentieke participatie mogelijk te maken (Angucia et al., 2010; Boog et al., 2008).

Een portret van organisatieleren in zeven onderwijs ngo's

Hoofdstuk 4 – Normatieve professionals in actie – worden de uitkomsten gepresenteerd van de eerste twee fases van dit onderzoek: de oriëntatie en problemdiagnose. De bevindingen die hier worden getoond zijn gebaseerd op drie databronnen: de oriëntatie dialoog, semigestructureerde interviews in zeven diverse onderwijs ngo's en een collaboratieve analyse workshop. In dit hoofdstuk wordt bevestigd dat professionals organisatieleren als centraal onderdeel zien van hun onderwijspraktijk. Professionals belichtten verschillende doelen die zij nastreven door middel van organisatieleren. Een terugkerend thema is dat organisatieleren de organisatie zou kunnen helpen inzicht te krijgen in de situatie van deelnemers en daardoor kunnen zorgen voor een betere aansluiting bij hun behoeftes. Gezien het brede scala aan organisatieleermechanismen (OLMs) dat door onderzoekdeelnemers werd genoemd, lijkt het erop dat onderwijs ngo's erg bewust bezig zijn met organisatieleren. Door de leer-voorwaarden en leer-dimensies verder uit te pluizen hebben we onderzocht hoe het veld en agency op elkaar inwerken. Met behulp van de organisatieprofielen hebben we verschillende leer-voorwaarden geïdentificeerd, zoals de voorwaarde om kritisch te blijven over wie bepaalt wat van waarde is, de tegenstrijdigheden tussen lokale waarden en vernieuwing, alsmede het voorzien in gedeelde leer-ruimtes tussen organisatieafdelingen in sterk gefragmenteerde organisaties.

Ondanks deze uitdagingen laten de bevindingen ook zien dat professionals al handelen als normatieve professionals. Ze creëren actief ruimte voor organisatieleren en overwegen daarbinnen hoe conversationele ruimte mogelijk te maken, kennisbronnen te verbreden, balans te zoeken tussen formeel en informeel leren en hoe te onderhandelen met donoren over programmavoorwaarden zodat er meer ruimte ontstaat voor kritisch leren. Door de praktijken van organisatieleren samen te analyseren hebben we gevonden dat single-loop leren dominant blijft en dat meer ruimte nodig is om authentiek en kritisch te leren met externe actoren.

Het gemeenschapsperspectief op collectief leren met ngo's

In hoofdstuk 5 – Richting collectief leren met gemeenschappen en ngo's – richten we ons op de gemeenschappen waarmee ngo's werken. Collectief leren wordt vaak gepresenteerd als een gouden oplossing om complexe problemen op te lossen. Echter, collectief leren blijkt een delicate praktijk en facilitators moeten zich bewust zijn van het gesitueerde karakter van leren, de rol van macht en de heterogene samenstelling van lokale gemeenschappen (Anyidoho, 2010; Cornwall, 2002). Om te ontdekken hoe de gemeenschap zelf aankijkt tegen de manier waarop ngo's handelen en hoe volgens hen collectief leren het beste kan worden vormgegeven, heb ik samengewerkt met externe onderzoeksassistenten om een sub-onderzoek uit te voeren in een dorp in centraal-oostelijk Uganda. Door interviews en een gemeenschapsdialoog hebben we ontdekt dat naast een scala aan gemeenschapsinitiatieven er ook niet minder dan achttien verschillende ngo's in het dorp actief waren. Deelnemers gaven aan dat de ngo-programma's niet altijd goed aansluiten bij de behoeften van jongeren ofwel er niet in slagen de juiste deelnemers te mobiliseren. Gebaseerd op de verworven inzichten kwamen de deelnemers van de lokale gemeenschappen met het voorstel om ngo's uit te nodigen in het dorp zodat ze persoonlijk feedback konden delen ter ondersteuning van een meer effectieve samenwerking. Samen met vertegenwoordigers uit het dorp hebben we ngo's uitgenodigd voor een dorps-ngo-bijeenkomst. Acht ngo's en een netwerkorganisatie hebben deze uitnodiging gehonoreerd, hebben geluisterd naar feedback van jongeren en gingen de conversatie aan. Dorpsbewoners deelden suggesties, zoals het betrekken van jongeren die verder uit het centrum wonen, meer gebruik te maken van sport voor het mobiliseren van jongeren alsmede het opzetten van een commissie welke de samenwerking tussen ngo's en de gemeenschap kan helpen coördineren. Hoewel de meeste kwesties niet direct opgelost werden heeft deze deelstudie wel inzichten opgeleverd in de dynamieken van collectief leren. Door dit onderzoekstraject in een ruimtelijk perspectief te plaatsen hebben we kunnen zien dat gedurende het onderzoek, hoewel de ruimtes voor leren formeel en tijdelijk waren, toch een steeds meer diverse groep mensen participeerden (Cornwall, 2002). In de conclusie, geeft dit hoofdstuk verschillende suggesties voor ngo-professionals die collectief leren willen faciliteren op een authentieke manier. Hoewel dit moeilijk zal blijven en niet zelden rommelig kan zijn, kan collectief leren deuren openen die normaal gesproken gesloten blijven, mits dit op een reflexieve manier gebeurt.

Het uitproberen van double-loop leermethodes

Hoofdstuk 6 – Het verzetten van de grenzen van adaptief werken door *double-loop* leren zoomt in op het werk van de PAO-teamleden op het gebied van onderwijs over Seksuele Reproductieve Gezondheid en Rechten (SRHR). Het hoofdstuk biedt een gedetailleerd portret van vier dilemma's waar het team tegenaan liep: waarden-conflicten in dit cultureel gevoelige domein; de complexe natuur van verandering; programma doelen en het omgaan met de verwachtingen van lokale gemeenschappen. In dit PAO hebben we verschillende methodes uitgetest om *double-loop* leren te faciliteren en zodoende te reflecteren op de mentale modellen en strategieën die het team gebruikt in de samenwerking met externe actoren. Dit hoofdstuk focust op de persoonlijke case interviews die waren geïnspireerd door Argyris (1982) en de versie van Action Design (Rudolph, Taylor, & Foldy, 2001). Deze interviews doelden ofwel op het *reframing* van dilemma's (Razer & Friedman, 2017) of het vaststellen van principes die hebben geleid tot succes in het omgaan met dilemma's (Schechter, Sykes, & Rosenfeld, 2004). De interviews samen met een analyse workshop hebben aangetoond hoe creatief personeel en vrijwilligers zijn geweest in het balanceren tussen programmadoelen, budgettekorten, conflicterende verwachtingen en waarden-conflicten. Overigens had het programma zelf al ruimte ingebouwd voor adaptiviteit, zoals gemeenschapsdialogen en onderzoek met elementen van sociale verantwoording. In dit PAO ging het team een stapje verder om de grenzen van adaptiviteit te verleggen door middel van reflexiviteit. Moedig zijn ze de ruimte van *double-loop* leren ingestapt en hebben zo hun eigen opvattingen en handelen onderzocht en op basis daarvan geïdentificeerd wat anders zou kunnen. Als resultaat heeft het team succes opnieuw gedefinieerd, hebben ze opnieuw vormgegeven aan gedeelde verantwoordelijkheid met de gemeenschap en hebben ze meer balans gevonden in het gebruik van hun privé waardensysteem en dat van de organisatie. In termen van de ruimte voor leren hebben we inzicht gekregen in de zelf-indekkende en defensieve routines die vormen van rigiditeit in het SRHR-onderwijs programma's in stand hielden.

Hoofdstuk 7 – *Double-loop* leren richting een adaptieve manier van leven lang leren programmering – bouwt verder op de vorige hoofdstukken door te verkennen hoe *double-loop* leren niet alleen kan worden gefaciliteerd maar ook kan worden onderhouden. Het hoofdstuk start met Argyris' benadering voor het analyseren, faciliteren en evalueren van *double-loop* leren en hoe we kunnen verschuiven van Model

1 actie-theorieën (gericht op zelfbescherming) naar Model 2 actie-theorieën (gericht op probleemoplossend werken) waardoor *double-loop* leren wordt onderhouden (Argyris, 2010). In dit PAO heb ik ontdekt dat in alle leertrajecten van dit onderzoek, Model 1 actie theorieën dominant waren. In dit hoofdstuk legt ik uit dat in één van de trajecten – vrijwilligers als katalysatoren van *double-loop* leren – we erin zijn geslaagd *double-loop* leren te faciliteren en daarmee een shift te maken richting Model 2 actie-theorieën. Dit leek mogelijk te worden gemaakt door directe betrokkenheid van vrijwilligers in het PAO-proces, het plannen van innovatie rondom natuurlijke momenten van verandering en het feit dat de organisatie betrokkenheid van jongeren als een belangrijke prioriteit zag. Hetzelfde was niet zichtbaar in het tweede leertraject over de gelijkwaardige relatie met externe actoren. Factoren die de duurzaamheid van *double-loop* leren in dit traject hebben verhinderd waren: het algehele turbulente veld rondom ngo's; vertraging in het ontdekken van de zelf-indekkende functie van formalistische normatieve systemen; individuele inzichten die niet leiden tot collectieve inzichten; het vinden van geschikte single-loop strategieën en mijn eigen blinde vlekken als facilitator. Naar aanleiding van deze bevindingen heb ik opnieuw naar de theorie van *double-loop* leren gekeken en heb deze verbonden aan het relationele perspectief van de *veldtheorie*. Daarnaast heb ik de *double-loop* leertheorie verder aangevuld met elementen van normatieve professionalisering. Dit heeft geleid tot vijf proposities die *double-loop* leertheorie verbreden en contextualiseren voor onderwijs ngo's. Gebaseerd op deze proposities presenteer ik een Model 2 actie-theorie die het verduurzamen van *double-loop* leren in ngo's kan ondersteunen zodat dit een platform biedt voor normatieve professionalisering.

Reflectie op de waardetoevoeging aan organisatieleren in onderwijs ngo's

Deze thesis begon met het voorstel dat organisatieleren, en *double-loop* leren in het bijzonder, onderwijs ngo's in staat kan stellen om meer betekenisvol leven lang leren mogelijk te maken alsook ongelijkheden weg te nemen. In hoofdstuk 8 – Conclusie en discussie – blik ik terug op de hoofdvraag en verken ik of de organisatielens inderdaad waarde heeft toegevoegd. Ik presenteer verscheidene praktische en theoretische implicaties van dit onderzoek voor ngo-werkers, donoren, beleidsmakers en onderzoekers. Ik concludeer dat organisatieleren in onderwijs ngo's dan wel niet de enige lens is die we moeten gebruiken maar het is zeker een betekenisvolle lens. Het idee van

organisatieleren positioneert organisaties en hun leden als kenners en kan een alternatieve praktijk-epistemologie realiteit maken om zo complexe problemen op te lossen. Hoe dan ook, organisatieleren moet niet als automatisch goed worden bestempeld. Dit onderzoek heeft namelijk ook geïllustreerd dat organisatieleren niet altijd gebeurt met het oog op de leerlingen en hun werkelijke, complexe behoeften. De verantwoordingsdruk heeft nog steeds veel invloed op de praktijk van ngo's ook al is er een nieuwe trend zichtbaar gericht op adaptief management alsook een toenemende kritiek op problematische machtsdynamieken tussen het noorden en zuiden, zwart en wit, mannen en vrouwen, gezond van lijf en leden en gehandicapt (Odora Hoppers, 2001). Om organisatieleren kritischer te maken is *double-loop* leren een belangrijke route. Hoewel, dit niet enkel gericht moet zijn op technische oplossingen of barrières die effectief handelen voorkomen. Deze ruimtes voor reflectie moeten ook een waardenlens opnemen – doen we het juiste? En voor wie is dit juist? Dit onderzoek heeft verschillende methodes gepresenteerd die kunnen helpen met het faciliteren van deze reflectie in organisaties, binnen gemeenschappen en tussen verschillende actoren, alsook lenzen om leerresultaten in kaart te brengen, niet enkel in de vorm van direct zichtbare resultaten maar ook verandering in relaties en betekenis.

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About the author

Marit Blaak (Hoogezand-Sappemeer, 1987), completed her bachelor's degree in Educational Sciences at the University of Groningen in 2008. In her master's programme in Educational Sciences (2008-2010), she investigated the lived realities of early school leavers in Uganda and their perceptions of effective non-formal education programmes. Since 2010, Marit has held various positions with education NGOs focusing particularly on programme design, research and learning. Marit has co-created various education programmes such as the Skills for Effective Entrepreneurship Development (SEED), the Educate! Experience 2.0, the Skilled Learning Programme and the VIP Bootcamp, reaching tens of thousands of youths in East Africa. In her work she has operated especially at the intersection between NGOs, governments, academia and communities. Rooted in these experiences, Marit embarked on a PhD trajectory in 2015 which has resulted in this thesis. Her research and learning interests include lifelong learning, educational exclusion and organisational learning for adaptive programming. She is driven by finding educational solutions that offer just and meaningful opportunities for all.



Annex – UNCST Ethical clearance



Uganda National Council for Science and Technology

(Established by Act of Parliament of the Republic of Uganda)

Our Ref: SS25ES

13th December 2016

Ms. Marit Blaak
Principal Investigator
C/o Gulu University
Gulu

Dear Ms. Blaak,

I am pleased to inform you that on **13/12/2016**, the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST) approved your study titled, **Learning for Change: Promoting Organisational Learning in Education Non – Governmental Organisations in Uganda**. The Approval is valid for the period of **13/12/2016** to **13/12/2020**.

Your study reference number is **SS25ES**. Please, cite this number in all your future correspondences with UNCST in respect of the above study.

Please, note that as Principal Investigator, you are responsible for:

1. Keeping all co-investigators informed about the status of the study.
2. Submitting any changes, amendments, and addenda to the study protocol or the consent form, where applicable, to the designated local Research Ethics Committee (REC) or Lead Agency, where applicable, for re-review and approval prior to the activation of the changes.
3. Notifying UNCST about the REC or lead agency approved changes, where applicable, within five working days.
4. For clinical trials, reporting all serious adverse events promptly to the designated local REC for review with copies to the National Drug Authority.
5. Promptly reporting any unanticipated problems involving risks to study subjects/participants to the UNCST.
6. Providing any new information which could change the risk/benefit ratio of the study to the UNCST for review.
7. Submitting annual progress reports electronically to UNCST. Failure to do so may result in termination of the research project.

Please, note that this approval includes all study related tools submitted as part of the application.

Yours sincerely,

Hellen Opolot
For: Executive Secretary

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