Learning Brief

What does successful learning and adaptation look like?

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Contents

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Lighthouse Partnerships is a not-for-profit organisation that supports for-purpose organisations to increase their effectiveness through participatory approaches to evaluation, strategy and program design. We have specialist expertise in migration and displacement in the Asia-Pacific region, including labour migration, human trafficking, refugees and people seeking asylum.

In partnership with Porticus

Porticus is a philanthropic organisation that aims to create a just and sustainable future where human dignity flourishes. Their work aims to strengthen the resilience of communities so that all people have ownership over their future, and natural resources are used in a sustainable way. They realize their objectives through strong networks of partners including local and global NGOs, communities, people with lived experience, policy makers and co-funders.

Photos by Aizen

What is this Learning Brief about?

This brief was produced as part of Lighthouse Partnerships' 2022-2023 evaluation of Porticus' 'Refugee Cluster' funding initiative in Asia. It summarises key insights from a literature review and evaluation activities about factors for successful learning and adaptation for NGOs and funders. Contact us at www.lighthousepartnerships.org to share feedback or find out more!

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What does successful learning and adaptation look like?

Learning and adaptation was a key focus of the evaluation of Porticus' 'Refugee Cluster' funding initiative in Asia. To evaluate how well the Refugee Cluster conducted learning and adaptation, we first needed to know what successful learning and adaptation looks like for NGOs and funders. To find this out, we conducted a rapid review* of literature about good practice in learning and adaptation in the not-for-profit and philanthropic sectors. We used this knowledge to develop evaluation criteria and standards. During evaluation interviews and workshops, we also heard from NGO partners how the ideas from the literature related to their experiences. This learning brief shares insights from the literature review and partners' experiences and perspectives.

Learning and adaptation: essential for achieving complex systems change

Learning and adaptation are essential ingredients for any attempt to address a complex social problem or achieve systems change. The dynamics of a complex system cannot be entirely knowable before implementation, making learning and adapting crucial activities for the success of any systems change effort (Darling et al., 2018; Easterling & Metz, 2016; Guijt, 2010; Patrizi et al., 2013; Reichenbach et al., 2021). As Patrizi et al. write, "learning *is* strategy" when organisations are operating in complex systems (2013, p.50, emphasis added). Guijt describes the need to "learn one's way towards a solution" in dynamic, unpredictable, and non-linear change situations (2010, p.279).

There are a range of terms used in the literature to describe the types of learning and adaptation required, including "strategic learning" (Carr et al., 2019; Patrizi et al., 2013), "adaptive learning" (Desai et al., 2018), "organisational learning" (Winkler & Fyffe, 2016), "emergent learning" (Darling et al., 2016), "emergence" (Darling et al., 2018; Darling et al., 2019), "emergent philanthropy" (Lynn et al., 2021), "adaptive management" (Desai et al., 2018; Rogers & Macfarlan, 2020; USAID, 2021), and "learning-oriented accountability" (Guijt, 2010). These overlapping but distinct ideas each carry a slightly different emphasis and somewhat different recommendations for how an organisation should go about successful learning and adaptation in practice.

Definitions

Learning
A "process of continual reflection about visions, strategies, actions and contexts that enable continual readjustments"
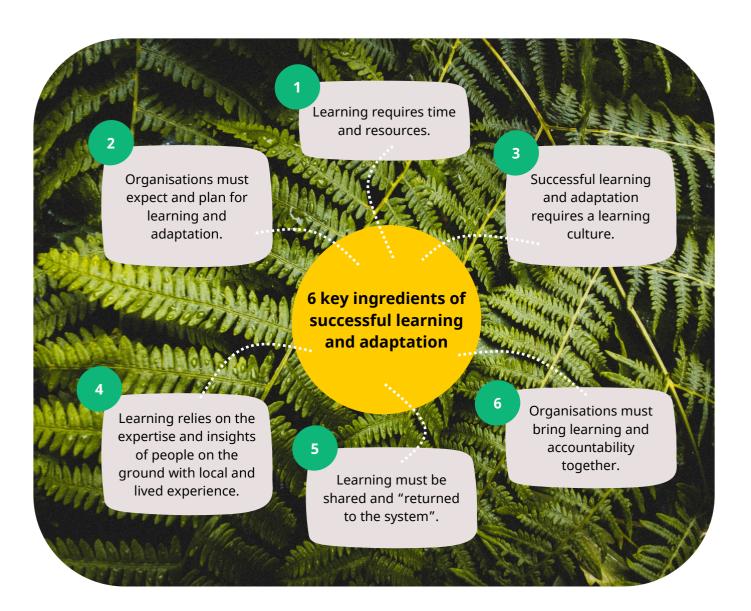(Guijt, 2010, p. 281)

Adapting
"using the information that we gather through collaboration and learning activities to make better decisions and make adjustments as necessary"
(USAID, n.d.)

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* A rapid review aims to produce quick insights and evidence to inform decision making (Gannan et al., 2010).

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Despite these differences, we distilled six key themes common to most or all of the literature we reviewed on this topic. The next section provides a brief analysis of each theme.

Overall, this literature review exposed that successful learning and adaptation, while crucial, is also very difficult. There is no clear blueprint for "best practice" in this area in the philanthropic sector, despite the acknowledged importance of learning and adaptation when attempting to drive systems change. Even organisations with advanced learning and adaptation practices reported difficulties embedding workable tools in the context of philanthropic work (for example, Carr et al., 2019). The most effective tools and practices are likely to be situation-specific and need to be tailored to the context, resources, and culture of an organisation. However, the six key themes emerging from our rapid review provide some guiding principles for effective learning and adaptation in the sector.

1 Learning requires time and resources.

2 Organisations must expect and plan for learning and adaptation.

3 Successful learning and adaptation requires a learning culture.

6 key ingredients of successful learning and adaptation

4 Learning relies on the expertise and insights of people on the ground with local and lived experience.

5 Learning must be shared and "returned to the system".

6 Organisations must bring learning and accountability together.

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1 Learning requires time and resources.

Learning and adaptation require time and resources to be done effectively (Carr et al., 2019; Guijt, 2010; Patrizi et al., 2013; Reichenbach et al., 2021; Rogers & Macfarlan, 2020). The literature was clear that lack of time and resources is a major barrier to learning and it can be helpful for organisations to reduce workloads and administrative burdens (Reichenbach et al., 2021; Rogers & Macfarlan, 2020) and provide dedicated funding for learning and reflection activities as part of project funding (USAID, 2021). Learning processes should also be efficient and embedded in day-to-day work, and focused on providing direct and immediate value to partners and staff (Carr et al., 2019; Darling et al., 2018; Guijt, 2010).

In the Refugee Cluster
Many organisations felt they needed more resources and support for learning, particularly to document learning, embed learning in their organisations, and share learning with others.

Several people proposed that grants should include a dedicated amount for improving monitoring and evaluation, and two people felt that Porticus should require this to be considered in the application.

Some people also argued that Porticus needs to move beyond project-based funding to more "core" funding to really strengthen internal learning practices and help organisations to build learning cultures.

"...[it] requires in itself a resource and time... project bound fundings usually have very little implications for that part of the work... because it's not part of the funding, it's just not going to happen."

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2 Organisations must expect and plan for learning and adaptation.

Learning and adapting work best when organisations expect to have to do it and have a vision for how and when it will happen. This includes expecting that things are unlikely to go exactly as planned, being explicit about areas of uncertainty and issues that might have to change, having processes and practices that create time and space for learning and allocating resources to those processes, whether it's formal trial, pilot or testing periods, or informal feedback and reflections.

Various papers highlight how learning and adaptation can be seriously impeded by theories of change or program logics that obscure rather than explicitly acknowledge the unknowns that exist at the start of a project, and the likely places where change and adaptation may be needed (Desai et al., 2018; Guijt, 2010; Patrizi et al., 2013; USAID, 2021).

USAID (2021) recommends "complexity-aware theories of change" that support learning and adaptation by articulating areas of uncertainty and how they will be addressed. Reichenbach et al. take these ideas much further and argue for the use of a "foresight practice", to "help philanthropy shift from predicting a future to being prepared for many different futures" (2021, p.43). Several sources also stress that contract and funding structures need to be designed in advance to facilitate rather than impede learning and adaptation, including through "rainy day funds", inception and testing periods in contracts, and dedicated innovation or adaptation funds (Desai et al., 2018; Rogers & Macfarlan, 2020; USAID, 2021).

In the Refugee Cluster

Although the **grant application form** asked partners to describe project risks and mitigation strategies, it did not explicitly ask about areas of uncertainty or any likely need for flexibility that would arise during a project and the logic model template guided applicants to express their project as a pre-determined set of inputs > activities > outputs > outcomes.

Several people said that the sense of having to "pitch" projects to a funder is a problem for acknowledging and planning for uncertainty.

Some people suggested that one way to manage this pressure could be for grantees to pitch a "process" to donors (a process for how they will work in pursuit of their goals and how they will learn and adapt) rather than pitch specific outcomes.

"...there is that temptation to make very grand statements about the change that will happen... then there's sort of an arms race of grand objectives between grantees...."

"...there wasn't much consideration of, well, in the event this doesn't work, what are we going to change? Like, how are we going to adapt?"

*"...it kind of felt like, look, if this is what you're **pitching**, you better make sure that you deliver on it."*

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3 Successful learning and adaptation requires a learning culture.

All the literature we reviewed consistently emphasises the importance of a learning culture or learning mindset for successful learning and adaptation (Landers et al., 2019; Winkler & Fyffe, 2016). Common features of a learning culture appear to be:

- Trust, caring and psychological safety, to allow people to share information and learnings and be open to feedback, failure, and uncertainty (Carr et al., 2019; USAID, 2020)
- Leaders that celebrate learning and accept uncertainty (Rogers & Macfarlan, 2020)
- Openness to risk-taking and openness to experimentation (Carr et al., 2019; Guijt, 2010; Lynn et al., 2021; Rogers & Macfarlan, 2020).

Ideas for how funders and grantees can promote a learning culture
- Give core funding or funding for organisational development
- Set practical and realistic expected outcomes
- Use participatory practices
- Ask regularly about uncertainty, risks, doubts, and required changes
- Be accountable for learning, not for outcomes

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4 Learning relies on the expertise and insights of people on the ground with local and lived experience.

The people in the best position to generate insights and learnings are those working on the ground – the change makers and partners with local expertise and context-specific knowledge, including people with lived experience, local communities, grassroots organisations, frontline workers, and other program staff. All the literature we reviewed stresses the central importance of stakeholder, grantee and frontline perspectives in the processes of learning and adapting.

However, in relation to funder practices, some literature argues funders need to consult with grantees and incorporate grantee information to generate learning within a centralised strategy and accountability framework (Desai et al., 2018; USAID, 2020). In contrast, other writers push for a radical shift of agency and power to grantee partners, where funders perform the role of a "thinking and learning partner" but do not otherwise direct learning and adaptation within a project (Darling et al., 2018; Lynn et al., 2021; Reichenbach et al., 2021).

This literature argues that complex systems change requires "emergence", which is only possible when funders cede centralised control, and agency moves to grantees so there are many agents acting and interacting to create change. Darling et al. use the metaphor of chess players compared to a soccer team to illustrate this point:

> "In a chess game, there are only two agents: the chess players. The chess pieces don't get a vote. In a team sport like football or soccer, there are many agents on the field. While their goal is to work toward a shared outcome, each player has a point of view and is capable of making decisions of their own volition, based on what they are seeing in the unfolding environment. The more the team plays, the better individuals become at recognizing patterns in their very dynamic environment, and the smarter their individual decisions become. The more they talk about and practice with each other using what they are discovering, the more successful they become as a whole team" (2016, p.61).

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In the Refugee Cluster

Several partners felt they had a good relationship and open communication with Porticus, and that Porticus was "**flexible**" and "**understanding**". Nonetheless, some partners still felt that there were **missed opportunities to adapt** their projects, in particular, to rethink their projects in the face of COVID-19 and other major external events.

Due to the **power imbalances** between funders and grantees, one partner felt that Porticus needs to do more than just approving grantee requests for project changes; funders should proactively initiate conversations about adaptations.

Another person commented that both funders and grantees tend to think they are being led by the other, and both parties could do more to claim the power that they have, rather than thinking that the other party is leading them.

"...it's really helpful to have that open channel of feedback with Porticus"

"...we want to be a learning organisation"

"...the dynamics of funders is such that, unless you initiate the conversation, I won't assume that that's possible"

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5 To be effective, learning must be shared and "returned to the system".

We heard that systems change requires different change makers learning from one another frequently and rigorously - sharing what they are seeing, what is working or not and why - so that people can compare stories, see patterns, and make meaning from them. Darling et al. (2018) called this "returning learning to the system", which could include sharing and embedding learning within an organisation and outside an organisation, including with local and lived experience communities.

Horizontal communication, collaboration, cross-pollination and knowledge pooling among staff, grantees and partners is an essential ingredient for efficient learning and adaptation (Darling et al., 2018; Desai et al., 2018; Rogers & Macfarlan, 2020; USAID, 2020). Desai et al. (2018) state simply "programmes cannot iterate and evolve absent mechanisms for sharing and using lessons" (p.12). Lynn et al. take this further and argue that "transformative capacity" to learn and adapt requires:

- "...multiple organisations with the ability to engage in ongoing system sensing;
- transparent, trusted, and timely communication within the network, so the subset of organisations with strong systems-sensing skills are not isolated from the actions of others; and
- organisations being 'porous, to permit information, ideas, and perspectives from the outside' (Sussman, 2004, p. 8–9)" (2021, p.59).

Similarly, Darling et al. write that:

"...the rate at which a system of actors adapts to produce better outcomes depends on how frequently and rigorously the actors learn from one another—about what they are seeing and what is working (or not) and why, in service to their shared outcome" (2018, p.10).

Darling et al. (2018), Carr et al. (2019) and Rogers and Macfarlan (2020) all emphasise the importance of knowledge management systems in this context, to capture and transmit shared learnings. Interestingly, both Darling et al. (2018) and Carr et al. (2019) identify this aspect of learning and adaptation – which Darling et al. (2018) call "returning learning to the system" – as one of the most difficult things to do well in practice. Darling et al. write:

"What is needed, and what was most often missing, is a way for agents in the system to *easily* and *regularly* communicate to peers, "Here's what I saw, here's what I did, and here's what happened as a result," and a way for the community of peers to compare these stories, begin to see patterns, and make meaning from them" (2018, p.26).

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Embedding lessons learned

Most partners reported it was difficult to capture and embed and institutionalise lessons learned to make sure they were not lost.

Several partners said this was partly linked to lack of monitoring and evaluation resources. Some suggested that Porticus could do more to ensure organisations have sufficient resourcing as part of the grant funding to reflect on, capture, and embed lessons learned.

Porticus agreed they could do more to push for such funding, but that grantee organisations also need to push to make sure it happens even though they are busy with implementation.

"We try to have project check-ins and stuff that is not just focused on deliverables... but very often we're just busy with implementing things and then only talking about that "

"...[our monitoring is] a place for us to reflect and give pause and think about...why we've made the decisions we've made. But at the same time...it ends up being this process where you're constantly justifying"

"...So I think that's a big problem - a lot of the things is in our heads. We're very bad when it comes to documentation"

"...the next time something happens, 'Oh, hey, did we have this conversation before?'"

Sharing lessons learned

Many partners had strong **day-to-day collaboration** and sharing, particularly through existing relationships. However most felt **sharing *strategic learning*** was more limited. Partners raised barriers including time, resources, not knowing who other partners were, a competitive culture between NGOs, lack of trust, and smaller organisations hesitating to share ideas with larger ones. Both Porticus and partners suggested Porticus could be a movement builder and learn to 'play on the same team', beyond the individual funder-grantee relationships.

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6 Organisations must bring learning and accountability together.

Many writers have observed that the way funders and organisations think about accountability can conflict with learning. Often accountability is considered as a top-down process of requiring organisations to demonstrate how they're using funds and ensuring funds are being used for agreed purposes. But that can inhibit flexibility and ability to respond to local conditions, and undermines the power and responsibility of people who are closest to the issues (Carr et al., 2019; Desai et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2019).

A more helpful and meaningful way to think about accountability, several people argue, is to see accountability as taking responsibility for oneself or as maintaining a strong line of sight to your goal - knowing what your goals and strategies are and <u>why</u>, knowing what you're doing and what choices you're making and <u>why</u>, and asking yourself - Did we act as effectively as possible?

Guijt (2010) proposes a way to resolve the tension between learning and accountability. She writes:

> "Critically important – and one of the places where accountability and learning converge – is that accountability can also be taken to mean taking responsibility for oneself. Understanding what you've done, being able to respond to questions about the basis of strategic decisions, the underlying theory of change and, of course, how money was spent. Such strategic accountability seeks to answer the question 'Did I/others/organisations/institutions act as effectively as possible?' In this sense, accountability is intrinsically about identity – feeling committed to one's ideas and strategies (2010, p.283)."

Darling et al. echo this idea, although using different language. They argue that a "strong line of sight to a clear and shared goal" is one of the three crucial enabling factors for emergent learning (the two others being freedom to experiment and a mechanism for returning learning to the system) (2019, p.9). Such a "line of sight" could be the kernel of the type of strategic accountability Guijt (2010) proposes, allowing all participants to take responsibility for themselves, their efficacy, and their strategies.

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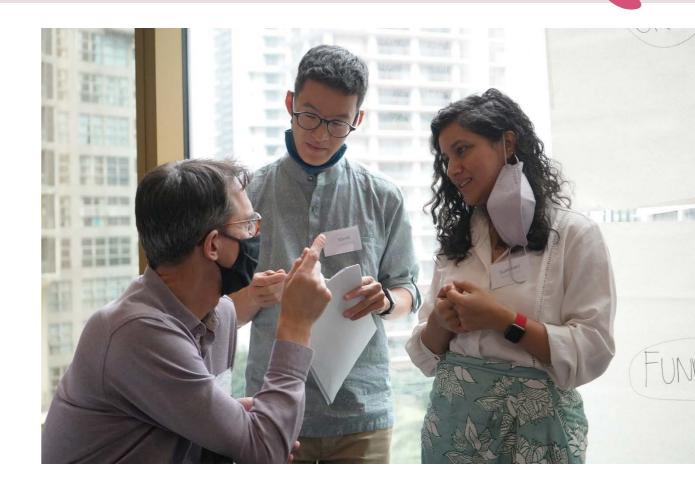PARTNERSHIPS

In the Refugee Cluster

Partners were split on whether they found their logic model a useful tool for **accountability** or something that prevented adaptations. All felt Porticus' reporting requirements were reasonable and several found reporting processes helpful for reflection and learning.

At the same time, there was not much description in grant reports about what partners were learning, risks or challenges that were arising, and how partners were responding to those situations by adapting their strategies and activities. Some partners did this, but not many.

Adapting "traditional" accountability processes like logic models and progress indicators so they work for a flexible project that is still being developed could be more equitable and transparent, rather than relying entirely on trust and relationships, which could exclude those not "in the circle".

"The logic model has been... helpful in setting the big picture"

"...the logic model being so restrictive... so different from the realities on the ground."

Tools for learning and adaptation

The literature review uncovered a range of tools used by different organisations to support learning and adaptation (described in the table below).

Tool description & source	Details
Before Action Review / After Action Review Carr et al. (2019); Darling et al. (2016); UNICEF (2015); USAID (2021)	Quick reflection exercises (30 minutes) before and after key pieces of work. A Before Action Review aims to articulate intended results, imagine what challenges might arise and how they could be overcome. The After Action Review looks at (1) what was supposed to happen, (2) what actually happened, (3) whether (and why) there was a difference, and (4) decide what to do next. Can be done by individuals, informally in teams, or through more formal facilitated sessions, and can happen in regular repeated cycles during the life of a project.
Emergent Learning Tables Darling et al. (2016)	A tool to map and pool what different people in the system know about a complex problem and decide what to do next.
Annual Learning Report Carr et al. (2019)	Focuses on key lessons from the year with specific examples to bring them to life.
Learning Champions Carr et al. (2019)	A team member from each team is nominated to be a learning champion, responsible for embedding a culture of learning and reflection in team meetings and discussions.
Annual Learning Loop meeting / annual learning events Desai et al. (2018); Reichenbach et al. (2021)	Annual gatherings of funders and partners to share and learn from each other. Most effective when structured to ensure a focus on "learning", not just "sharing" (e.g. through facilitated peer feedback sessions, analysis and discussion). Key limitation is difficulty of extending learning to other staff not able to be present.

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Tool description & source	Details
Learning Plans / Learning Agendas Carr et al. (2019); Reichenbach et al. (2021); USAID (n.d.)	A learning plan outlines two to three specific learning questions for the year, and how the team will find answers to the questions. A learning agenda includes (1) a set of questions addressing critical knowledge gaps (2) a set of associated activities to answer them and (3) products aimed at disseminating findings and designed with usage and application in mind.
Learning logs / Pivot logs Carr et al. (2019); Darling et al. (2016); USAID (n.d.)	A formal process, template or platform for recording and tracking significant changes to an activity or project.
Fail Fest Carr et al. (2019)	An annual workshop where staff members share a story of failure to increase trust and support a risk-positive culture.
Learning working groups Desai et al. (2018)	Regular multi-partner sessions to share information and learning on specific thematic areas. Effectiveness enhanced by clear learning objectives and learning questions, as well as funded time to participate.
Periodic project reviews / midcourse stocktakings / "pause and reflect" opportunities USAID (2021)	Formal mid-implementation review discussions between funder and partners in a particular project to compare results to goals, share learnings and agree on any mid-course corrections to improve outcomes.

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