



PraxisNote No. 20

# Organisational Learning Across Cultures

Reflections and discussion on VBNK's experiences in Cambodia and the importance of understanding the cultural perspectives of learning

By Jenny Pearson with input from the Praxis Programme Catalyst Group

January 2006

**INTRAC**  
International NGO Training and Research Centre



# Organisational Learning Across Cultures:

## Reflections and discussion on VBNK's experiences in Cambodia and the importance of understanding the cultural perspectives of learning

**Keywords:** learning, organisational learning, capacity building, organisations, culture, cross-cultural, human resource development, NGOs

### Introduction

VBNK is a capacity building support provider established in Cambodia eight years ago. Within VBNK the working definition of learning is 'the process of acquiring knowledge from a variety of sources and experiences and using that knowledge in a way that results in positive change. It is a way of life, not an add-on activity'. This applies both to individuals and the organisation. VBNK has been grappling with the issues of individual and organisational learning (OL) for a number of years and is still 'learning how to learn'.

At a recent meeting of the Catalyst Group<sup>1</sup> of INTRAC's Praxis Programme, VBNK presented a reflection on its experiences of working on OL in the Cambodian context. This was followed by a group discussion to explore the challenges that local culture and culturally based attitudes towards learning present for the civil society sector in terms of being learning organisations. During the discussion, capacity building specialists from Kenya, Uganda, North America, Cambodia, Denmark, the UK, Hungary, the Caribbean, Peru and France all shared their different perspectives on the purpose and value of learning in

different cultures and the implications this has for organisational learning.

This Praxis Note summarises both VBNK's presentation and the rich discussion that followed, in order to share these reflections with others.

### Perspectives on Learning

At the beginning of the session participants were asked individually to reflect on different questions relating to perceptions of learning within their own cultures and contexts. These questions were:

- What would be a generally agreed definition of learning?
- What is the purpose of learning? i.e. for what reason/s is learning valued?
- Traditionally what are the main sources of learning?
- What are most people's expectations of where and how learning takes place?
- Who is responsible for a person's learning?
- What is valued most: traditional culture, life experience or a certificate?
- What are the cultural constraints and opportunities in relation to learning in organisations?

Below is a summary of the responses from the group. The responses show an

---

<sup>1</sup> The Catalyst Group is an advisory group for the Praxis Programme. The members are all capacity building specialists from around the world. See Annex 1 for a list of the members.

interesting mixture of similarity and difference and highlight the complexity of perspectives about learning, which is especially important for those of us working across cultures to understand.

### ***Definitions of learning***

Group responses covered: a process to develop skills and acquire knowledge, understanding, experience and/or skill (in order to do our mission/duties/work better); change with a purpose and behaviour change based on changed understanding.

### ***Purpose of learning***

The group identified the following purposes of learning in their cultures: for personal development and self-confidence; for improvement of performance, capacity and effectiveness through better or new understanding, knowledge and skills; to increase opportunities for success by gaining qualifications and being outstanding in the market; to generate positive change; to broaden understanding and awareness of your environment/the world/life (so that you can fit in and make changes); for creative destruction and reformulation; and finally to avoid mistakes.

### ***Sources of learning***

Participants stated that learning came via: parents and family; peers, colleagues and networks; formal education systems (teachers, school, college, university and training courses); cultural environment and social/community practices; church and religious practices; literature and other media; experience, observation and reflection in life; and information and knowledge from authorities.

### ***Where and how is learning expected to happen?***

The group came up with the following situations in which learning is expected to take place: in hierarchical and institutional relationships (parent–child, teacher–student, manager–staff); in a classroom

with a flow of knowledge from a ‘fountain’; everyday and everywhere, intentionally and unconsciously; via the media; through in-country training or study tours for NGO leaders; in workplace experiences and challenges and in a friendly environment with other learners.

### ***Who is responsible for learning?***

The people identified as responsible included: self, or parents and teachers in the case of children; the ‘fountain’ of wisdom; the organisation, other colleagues, NGO leaders, donors; institutions and the state. It was recognised by some that both learner and teacher have responsibility (the latter perhaps more for enabling learning to happen).

### ***What is valued – a certificate, life experience or tradition?***

Some people believed that a certificate is valued because it will open institutional doors, and organisational learning requires well qualified people. Others said that practical skills were valued and that tradition and life experience are valued for certain purposes/challenges. It was also observed that generalists can show initiative and independence. Project management requires such originality and creativity,

### ***Constraints and opportunities for organisational learning***

***Constraints*** in the various cultures included: career pressure; the technical product delivery approach; and the lack of a culture of learning or personal development (so no time or space are made for it). People also identified relational and status constraints: bosses don’t learn from staff; ‘professionals’ learn; when you are an adult you are considered ‘learned’. Class and other forms of social marginalisation and exclusion are major constraints in UK. Finally – we often have difficulty in recognising our own mistakes.

***Opportunities*** in the various cultures included: the space for new ideas and

active encouragement for questioning, critical reflection and analysis. Some people mentioned that there were opportunities to learn from colleagues and work experiences, as well as chances to learn from diverse cultures, behaviours and beliefs. Another opportunity for learning is the competitive environment. Finally, the group mentioned the social context (family, community) and formal systems (mentoring, apprenticeship).

## **VBNK: Learning to Learn**

### ***VBNK – An introduction***

VBNK is a support organisation for the social development sector in Cambodia, and as such is a service provider. The services offered are training and facilitation of organisational development processes together with some sector based work such as decentralisation. The vast majority of VBNK services are delivered in Khmer by Cambodians. However, because of the country's troubled history in recent decades and a weak education system, there is a limited pool of skilled and experienced trainers and facilitators on which to draw. So in order to be able to deliver services that help build the capacity of its target sector VBNK has engaged in a continuous process of building the capacity of its own staff.

#### ***VBNK's Mission***

*To be a centre of learning, working creatively with the Cambodian social development sector in order to generate and share innovative practice, knowledge and wisdom that will contribute to positive social change.*

### ***Putting learning into practice***

VBNK started life with a small team of trainers who knew little about most of the subjects in which VBNK was planning to deliver training, but they were by far the best people available at that time. Staff development and capacity building has been an essential and significant part of organisational life ever since. Over the

years a lot of time and resources have been devoted to different internal and external capacity building initiatives.

Initially all capacity building initiatives were undertaken on an ad hoc basis as need or opportunity arose. As the organisation grew it became clear that these initiatives were not achieving the sort of capacity that had been expected and their overall impact was limited. As a result, management recognised that it needed to consider capacity building issues much more deeply and develop a cohesive strategy to support the processes and investment being made in the staff. A Human Resource Advisor was appointed to help develop a strategy and it was during that process that the deep cultural factors influencing this issue came into focus. The organisation recognised the need to explore important questions and assumptions such as the meaning and purpose of learning in Cambodian culture and how individuals learn in this culture.

The three key approaches that VBNK has used to implement organisational learning are:

- Human Resource Development (HRD) strategy
- Creative Holistic Action Learning for Relationship Transformation (CHART)
- Centre for Creative Development

Each approach is described in more detail in the following sections.

### ***Human Resource Development Strategy***

This strategy has been developed in recent years. Its aim is:

*To make VBNK more effective and efficient in providing its services and responding to the changing context of social development in Cambodia.*

The original range of capacity building activities included (not all concurrently):

- Skill-based workshops
- Monthly in-house learning activities (e.g. echo trainings, issue discussions)
- Development of creative practice in a series of workshops led by David Glass
- Regular reflection/learning weeks
- Training in writing skills and creative communication
- Action learning exercises
- Cross team/unit learning exercises
- Support for staff in external study programmes

Reflection on the effectiveness of those activities resulted in the HRD strategy having the following key elements:

- A performance management and development system in which all line managers give regular development supervision to their supervisees
- In-house action learning projects
- Assessment of individual learning styles and team roles
- Regular (at least quarterly) reflection and learning weeks
- Developing a learning resources centre
- Creativity (through the Centre for Creative Development)
- A Staff Development Policy for supporting staff in external study programmes

### **CHART programme**

CHART stands for Creative Holistic Action Learning for Relationship Transformation. It is a project which began to be developed by VBNK in 2002 in response to an important research study 'Learning for Transformation' which articulated for the first time what is happening in development practice in Cambodia at the level of interface between practitioners and beneficiaries.

The goal of the CHART project is to:

*Assess, using action research methodology, the impact of training and supported action learning processes on the effectiveness of development practitioners and development practice within NGOs in Cambodia.*

The first round of the CHART project involved 18 participants from three different organisations. It required a big commitment from these organisations as this was a pilot project and would take their staff out of the workplace for 19 weeks. We also asked them to commit a substantial amount of organisational time and resources to ensuring that the participants had the space and the permission to practise differently as a result of their participation in the CHART process.

The curriculum was much more an experiential learning process than a traditional training. The content focused on issues and themes such as safety, personal values, understanding personal development, critical thinking skills, communication, relationships, exploring culture, and so on. Significant time was given to exploring concepts of development with some time given towards the end of the programme to tools and techniques.

The methods used were many and varied. All workshop time was spent sitting on the floor in a circle. Each day started with meditation, mirroring, journaling and other exercises to support reflection and centring. Processes such as role play, improvisation, art, video, forum theatre, and body sculpting were regular activities.

The participants were given field support and coaching between modules and came back for quarterly reflection weeks for a further 18 months after the main programme was completed.

The recent evaluation of impact on participants identified that:

- Participants have increased knowledge, self-awareness, confidence, self-worth and initiative
- Experiential learning processes have facilitated learning and change in ways that more traditional teaching methodologies have not managed to achieve
- Participants have taken increased ownership of the responsibility for their learning
- Recognising and managing the tensions between learning and change was helpful to the participants
- It is helpful, especially for participants with little formal education, to work with and value multiple learning literacies; physical, oral and visual

### **Centre for Creative Development**

The Centre for Creative Development (CCD) is a project in partnership with the David Glass Ensemble (DGE) from the UK. The DGE is primarily a theatre-based group, but for many years they have been working in developing countries with disadvantaged children under their Lost Child project. This project enables children, and the people who work with them, to explore and co-create various art forms such as theatre, dance, music, masks and especially story as a way for them to express what it may be impossible for them to say verbally. It was when the DGE brought the Lost Child work to Cambodia that VBNK made a connection with them which started a rich process of creativity work within VBNK and beyond.

*The aim of the CCD is to be a place where development practitioners and others can explore and share creative processes in order to enhance development practice and understanding through a holistic exploration of creative methodologies and thinking.*

### **Organisation learning successes**

VBNK has had some success over the years, namely:

- A slow, steady, incremental improvement in staff skills and knowledge
- Some adaptation and adoption of creative practice methodologies
- Expertise in an expanded range of subjects, sectors and practice

### **The challenges that remain**

Understanding of learning in its broadest sense is limited, which works against developing the shared agreement about the nature and purpose of learning necessary to be a learning organisation.

Status issues in the culture create resistance to some learning opportunities. In Cambodian culture the teacher knows all and the student knows nothing – and the perceived qualifications of the trainer greatly influence participants’ attitudes towards training.

There is limited ability to transfer workshop learning into everyday work practices. In addition, there is limited capacity to read the environment and identify new trends, which also means there is little chance of responding flexibly to needs or developing new initiatives. These limitations result in an unhealthy dependence on expatriates to take the lead in these essential areas of programme development.

### **Culture-based issues about learning**

In Cambodian culture the primary purpose of learning is to be able to ‘do’ something, so learning is viewed as the acquisition of tools and techniques in a classroom or workshop setting. Learning is the responsibility of the teacher, not the student.

Everyone in Cambodia over 25 years of age experienced a didactic teaching methodology which actively suppressed independent and analytical thinking. In this culture a question someone can’t answer will lead to ‘loss of face’, so questions (and

especially ‘why?’) tend to be viewed as something negative, rather than helpful. There is an almost universal expectation that everything has a ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ answer, with little tolerance of anything else.

Learning is compartmentalised, with little crossover between work and other spheres of life. This includes external study which rarely gets integrated into work practices.

Finally, Cambodia’s fraught history has a part to play. Trauma affects an individual’s capacity because one of its lasting effects is fear, which acts as a major block to change and therefore to learning.

### **Main lessons learnt**

1. Understanding the culture is critically important because learning cannot be assumed to be happening even when it appears from a Western perspective that all the ‘right’ conditions are in place.
2. Learning is a skill which has to be learned, grounded in relevance to the host culture.
3. VBNK expatriates made assumptions that understanding of learning was shared across cultures, which proved to be inaccurate and unhelpful.
4. There should have been better co-ordination of initiatives to form a cohesive capacity building strategy; staff were confused rather than stimulated by the different approaches and this heightened their resistance to taking risks with new ideas.
5. There should have been much better, long-term follow through to ground good initiatives in practice.
6. The language of learning is of critical importance: we had a major breakthrough when we started talking about wisdom instead of learning

### **What are we doing now?**

Following a comprehensive strategic review and planning process VBNK has now recognised that a culture change is

necessary in order to become a learning organisation. The desired culture change can best be described as moving from ‘delivery of training services’ to ‘facilitation of learning’. An integral part of this strategy is to develop a common approach to both internal activities and programme implementation in order that everything the organisation does is cohesive and has integrity. Key elements of the strategy are:

- Using the Action – Reflection – Learning – Planning model in all internal activities and service delivery and ensuring that this approach is modelled from the top
- Using Cambodian technical advisors to work with the staff whenever possible (though there are few people with the level of skill needed)
- Integrating CHART into the main programme so that it becomes an inherent part of our programme approach rather than something separate
- Slowing down – it takes time to introduce and ground the practices that bring real learning. This can’t be an add-on and workload has to be adjusted accordingly.

In summary it may be said that VBNK’s learning is *not yet a way of life, but a work in progress ...*

### **Discussions and Reflections**

This section summarises some of the comments and questions that arose following the organisational learning presentation at the Catalyst Group meeting:

Is organisational learning useful and can we provide evidence to prove this? What case are we making for organisational learning and do the benefits outweigh the costs? The private sector seems to have a more obvious incentive to learn.

In reflecting on learning across cultures maybe we first need to think about learning for what? Is it to achieve *change*? And if so who says change is what's needed? And who defines the change we are looking for – from what to what? Are we assuming that both learning and change are good? If so, are these assumptions universal or relative? And is there a link between the values and practices of those making the assumptions?

Attitudes towards change are strongly linked to values and power in a given cultural context. In Cambodia there is a relatively weak civil society and a 'don't dare' culture where people are very risk averse. This is partly due to the culture but also to a recent history of conflict and trauma.

Is there a clear link between organisational learning and poverty reduction, and is the understanding of this link shared across cultures?

It is in fact difficult to make a direct link between change in attitudes and behaviour brought about through learning and economic development/reduction in poverty.

The group then split into two (people working across cultures and people working in their own culture) to process the issues in more depth:

### **People working 'across cultures'**

This group addressed the question: *'Do VBNK's experiences resonate with the people involved in building capacity across cultures and in a Northern context?'* The overall answer was 'yes, at different levels'. Given below are some key points from the group's discussion:

- There is a need to be aware of the pace of change and that this may differ in the North and South – and technological change is far more rapid than cultural change. In this sense the

North has been more influential in setting the pace of change.

- We cannot make the assumption that everyone wants to learn. Willingness and openness to learn differs between cultures and even within any one culture some are more ready to learn than others.
- Individual learning is seen as positive but collective learning is more complex and can be construed as negative. There should be a balance between individual and collective learning, e.g. through internal mentoring.
- Learning to learn is a very important part of the process both at individual and organisational levels. It may even involve 'unlearning' to learn where certain learning behaviours or styles are unhelpful.
- Learning is a dedicated, continuous, long-haul process which requires planning. This can make learning expensive – but donors mostly won't pay for this!
- How can we prepare ourselves as the facilitators of learning processes? How can we deal with our own and others' frustrations?
- *Good* processes can be time- and resource-heavy. But there is a problem with the assumption that these always require scale-up – but small processes are also valid.
- Learning needs to be integrated into the organisation and made a way of life.
- There is a need for mechanisms to cope with organisational change to be linked to organisational learning. Does learning need to wait until after the change?
- It is essential to explore whether organisations are *really* learning, or if they are just providing forms to fill in that tick the 'learning' box.
- It is important that power is given to an organisation to make choices about its organisational learning process.
- An organisation is an organism which has a need for inputs such as learning in

order to make sure it continues to live and evolve; without inputs it will die

- Do we know of any organisations that we could say are really good learning organisations? Why do organisations consistently do things which they know are wrong?
- In an era of outsourcing, downsizing and the frequent use of consultants it needs to be asked who or what is the organisation and where is the learning located? Perhaps organisations are becoming more like networks...
- Maybe we don't need processes of critical reflection in order to change. In some contexts an emotional/experiential process of discovery is more appropriate.

### **People working in their own cultures**

The lead question for this group was: *'Do VBNK's experiences resonate with people involved in building capacity in their own cultures?'* The issues explored in the presentation did resonate with many of the participants working within their own cultures and the key points in their discussion are as follows:

In the *Caribbean* they are working in a context which is still heavily influenced by its colonial past. Teachers often came in from abroad and imposed a learning style and content which is not relevant to the local culture. There is also a superiority in organisations where university educated staff may not fully value the ideas of rural staff who have less formal education. Church groups also have a significant influence linked to the varying belief systems of different denominations.

*Uganda* also has a colonial past and an education system based on a language and ideology which came from the 'North'. Individual and development cultures can sometimes clash. First we need to ask some important questions about the way individuals learn: What missions do they have? Are we learning individuals? Are we

willing to invest our personal commitment to learn?

In *France* in the NGO sector, organisational learning is perceived as a foreign, Anglophone concept. In this country there is a focus on building technical capacities, such as human resources, strategic planning and management. These came from the US into the French private sector around 20 years ago but have only relatively recently become common practice in the NGO sector. This is because it is seen as crucial that there is ownership of ideas.

In *Central Asia (CA)* the concepts of development, civil society, capacity building, and so on have all been imported by donors – mainly multi-nationals and US donors. In CA education and study are seen as formal while learning is seen as informal and therefore of less importance. There is a willingness to learn but no willingness to take *ownership* of learning since people are used to didactic forms of 'fed' learning. Along with the other concepts OL is new and 'foreign'. Civil society organisations tend to be young with no real track record and therefore capacity building interventions, including OL, have to reflect this. However, CSOs are already facing problems associated with losing organisational memory and learning because the lack of long-term funding has meant high staff turnovers.

As capacity building practitioners we should look first at how, in a particular culture, learning relates to relationships (e.g. young/old, wisdom/learning), values and power.

Do we need to challenge the status quo to achieve positive change? Does change come naturally? Can we really be neutral? Time is the most crucial thing – learning can't be hurried.

The culture of organisations which provide capacity building services to clients makes

organisational learning particularly difficult. It seems that extra effort is required to ensure that learning becomes a personal priority and is reinforced. In this context it may be important for someone to take responsibility for driving the process but also for individual staff members to hold each other accountable for learning. Formal performance reviews can also be used for this purpose.

In order to adapt capacity building practices to local cultures and contexts it is important to encourage local leaders to become change agents. Identifying local people to take the work forward is a challenge, but the best way to encourage locally appropriate learning and adaptation. International staff can influence this change but to do so it is important for both sides to understand and respect each others cultures. It is just as important for local organisations to understand Western culture since, in an increasingly globalised world, they have to interact with it frequently to get funding and influence policy agendas. However, there is not always a clear divide (or link) between local and international representatives.

How can westerners support local people to lead change? One way is to have parachute trainers who provide support on specific issues over a period of time but then leave to allow local people to implement and adapt the knowledge and skills they have gained. Another is to find a setting conducive to learning – moving the chairs is not enough. For example, in cultures such as Hungary, formal trainings are about ‘giving’ and ‘receiving’ knowledge or information and people don’t often respond to direct or open questions. However, an informal setting in the style of a community festival or celebration can create an environment where people can more informally share ideas.

In some contexts a ‘deal culture’ can work since people are used to negotiating for

what they want. Instead of formally focusing on learning you can find a compromise where you offer something but also expect something in return.

Homeweeks have been used as an example of providing the time and space to focus on organisational learning. However, this is something that few donors are willing to fund. Individual and organisational learning and development seem to be luxuries that few are willing to prioritise and invest in. The preoccupation is to find resources and achieve results. This is impacting on the capacity of capacity building providers to do their jobs effectively. For example, CDRN has had to reduce their five-day homeweek to three days. Routine meetings seem to have been squeezed into these three days and consequently there is even less time for focused learning.

In some contexts, e.g. Pakistan there is an attitude that *I am paid for knowing not learning*. This provides little incentive for organisations to invest in learning.

Concluding points in a discussion between both groups clarified that in order to move forward we may need to:

- Test our assumptions about learning and how it is perceived and practised across cultures.
- Understand whether or not critical reflection is essential for learning. Sometimes it is enough to engage with people’s emotional experience as a key factor in individual and organisational development.
- Recognise that the formality of organisations is changing rapidly, for example many are now working in networks or coalitions and this has implications for how OL is supported.
- Clarify the role of intermediaries – is it more about facilitating a process than prescribing methodologies or tools, e.g. through supporting others to find appropriate solutions to their own

issues? Action learning sets and coaching principles? Can capacity building providers provide a link and act as ‘translators’ between Western organisations and local ones?

- Develop mutual cultural understanding between those delivering the intervention from the outside and the local culture.

## Organisational Learning: Sharing Experiences

The OL discussion was continued in other sessions of the meeting, prompted by questions such as:

- How do we create the space and time for reflection, learning and evaluation?
- How can we embed learning in the organisation’s culture?
- How can we link individual learning with wider organisational learning?
- How open are we to questioning ourselves? Do we just fall back on established ‘formula’? How can we use our ‘wisdom’ or ‘judgement’ rather than pre-defined answers?

An appropriate first step in creating the space for learning is perhaps to gain an understanding of the factors which inhibit learning in organisations.

These may include factors internal to the organisation and pressures from the external environment. For example in the current NGO climate, with organisations openly competing for funding and ‘status’, it is both difficult and undesirable for organisations to reflect on and critique their own work. This ensures that the sector is constantly battling with the demands to deliver results verses demands to learn.

If people are to truly engage with and benefit from learning the right balance must be found. Striking this balance requires a complex set of ingredients: *attitudes* and *inputs* which together provide

the most effective environment for OL to become possible.

### Attitudes:

- Openness to new ideas and approaches
- Willingness to give and take feedback
- Curiosity
- Confidence
- Trusting yourself and others
- Risk-taking
- Willingness to overcome fear
- Exploring/ challenging what we do not understand

### Inputs:

- Time
- Money
- Recognition of the need for ensuring the scale is ‘right’ – small is beautiful
- Need to identify the blocks such as competitive, fearful, reluctant staff
- Need to look at the factors which make it rewarding to stay the same – often perceived to be greater than the rewards for change
- Leadership/leaders modelling
- Relevance of topics to the organisation

We can visualise a ‘non’- or ‘early’-learning organisation as stuck in a hole that it needs to work towards ‘building’ its way out of. The organisation is grounded within the culture in which it operates, and that culture is made up of associated contextual attitudes. Local culture and attitudes affect, and are in turn affected by, the learning whilst an organisation’s confidence and willingness to take risks feed into the cycle which enables or stifles learning.

Within the NGO itself time, money and ‘food for thought’ ideas from others are central inputs into the process of gradually stepping up and out of the hole. For example, an organisation also needs concrete examples of *how* to exchange *relevant* learning, otherwise it’s difficult and pointless to engage. There needs to be

vigilance about the dangers of learning for learning's sake.

Individuals and the connections between them are critical to the effectiveness of learning initiatives. There are inevitably individuals who systematically isolate themselves from OL due to fear, conflicting priorities, etc. Those open to learning require leaders who actively demonstrate their commitment to learning. For example, VBNK have applied the Action, Reflection, Learning, Planning (ARLP) cycle to their own meetings with some success, but time, effort and repetition is needed for these processes to become embedded into the way the organisation learns. Furthermore, without the visible 'modelling' of the ongoing and repetitious learning process by leaders/managers, there is little incentive for staff to prioritise initiatives such as ARLP.

However, certainly in the European NGO context, reflecting critically on your own work in a shared space and, more so, on the work of others, can prove uncomfortable. Giving and receiving constructive feedback is a skill in itself, which could be acquired as part of the 'learning to learn' process. An important part of this is coming to understand that taking the time to reflect can be an expression of valuing each other's work.

Staff's work and capacities may, through the learning process, reveal that an individual has skills which had been 'redundant' or 'dormant'. An organisation must find ways to capitalise upon these skills as they are uncovered.

There need to be obvious channels for openly feeding back on learning to allow individuals to benefit from each other's learning – thus ensuring that individual learning (or HRD) is captured by the NGO as a whole.

## Issues to Explore Further

Below are some of the points raised in the final plenary discussion, some of which are questions and issues to take forward:

1. Exploring the 'organisation in a hole' analogy further, does the organisation have to be in a hole to start to think about OL? Or could they be in another space? The organisation may have self-interest issues that can create no-go areas that must not be discussed openly.
2. There is a need to understand how to unlearn in situations where there is 'bad' learning behaviour.
3. When can it be said that a lesson has actually been learnt? It is not uncommon for there to be a belief that something has been learned but in reality the learning has not resulted in changed behaviour.
4. It can be helpful to explore informal and inclusive channels for learning as it is known that a lot of important decision making takes place outside of formal venues, can this be the same for learning?
5. It would be useful to explore the linkages between OL and evaluation and link with those who are also working on these issues (for example the Programme for Strengthening the Capacity for Monitoring and Evaluation of IFAD's Rural Poverty Alleviation Projects in Latin America and the Caribbean – <http://www.preval.org>).
6. Recognise that OL is not a new concept. There is a need to value traditional and informal ways of learning in organisations across different cultures and to weave traditional methods into learning.
7. Exploring culture can be done better by an insider and an outsider together. How do you get to the right questions to ask people to draw out the 'right' answers?
8. If we are convinced that OL is important, we need also to influence

- donors and their willingness to prioritise and support learning by convincing them that knowledge, wisdom and learning is also useful to them.
9. It would be useful to explore experiences of using action learning and other tools for OL in order to extend beyond a few specific methods such as homeweeks and ARLP. Learning needs to be interconnected and integrated into all aspects of what an organisation is doing.
  10. There is a need to define and measure the value learning brings to an organisation.
  11. What is the loss of learning when organisations go out of business? And why did they go out of business?

## Annex 1: Catalyst Group Members

The members of the Catalyst Group who were present at the 2005 meeting are:

- *Brenda Bucheli*, Executive Director, Pact, Peru.
- *Clemence Pajot*, Coordination Sud, France.
- *Felix Alvarado*, GSD Consultores Asociados, Central America.
- *Jenny Pearson*, Director, VBNK, Cambodia.
- *Julius Oladipo*, CORAT, Kenya.
- *Lola Abdusahyama*, Country Programme Manager, Central Asia, INTRAC.
- *Moses Isooba*, Programme Coordinator, CDRN, Uganda.
- *Nelcia Robinson*, Coordinator, CAFRA, Trinidad and Tobago.
- *Nilda Bullain*, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, Hungary.
- *Peter Morgan*, Consultant, Institutional Development, USA.

Members who were not able to be present at the meeting are:

- *Alnoor Ebrahim*, Assistant Professor, Virginia Tech, USA.
- *Ashok Singh*, Director, Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra, India.
- *James Taylor*, CDRA, South Africa.
- *Mostafa Mohaghegh*, Operations Coordinator, International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Geneva.
- *Roger Ricafort*, Programme Development and Learning, Oxfam-Hong Kong.