

Praxis Note No. 53

Using Action Learning Sets methodology in an NGO capacity building programme



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1. Introduction

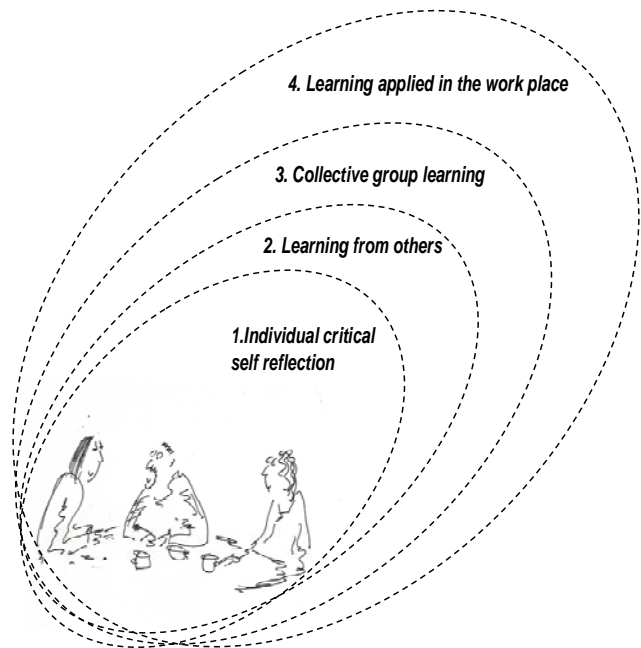
This note describes how the use of Action Learning Sets (ALS) in Central Asia has enabled NGO leaders and staff to become effective in addressing organisational and operational challenges. This approach has contributed to the overall strengthening of their organisations.

NGO leaders and staff involved in this initiative were drawn from a group of experienced INTRAC partners working on poverty reduction and democracy issues in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, funded by the Ecumenical Consortium of Central Asia (ECCA)¹.

ALS is a dynamic and powerful approach which works at a number of levels. Firstly, it helps individuals develop critical reflection through the process of listening and asking exploratory questions. Secondly, it creates a structured space for individuals to work with others on developing solutions to problems they face. Thirdly, it creates a forum for the group to learn from each other as they take turns to work through an issue. Fourthly, it builds individual confidence through a sense of mutual support and encouragement from peers struggling with similar issues.

In the context of Central Asia, ALS has subtly challenged the traditional ways of learning by being experiential and involving several loops of learning. This, together with the creative style of training, has created a model for promoting a similar kind of learning back in their own organisations.

By bringing NGO leaders together in small groups and participating in the sharing of organisational issues they have started to trust each other and network more which



Loops of learning in Action Learning Sets (Bill Crooks 2008)

is starting to counter a culture where NGOs tend to be competitive and suspicious of each other.

The experience of piloting ALS in Central Asia has shown it to be an invaluable tool for enabling NGO staff think through key programme issues of sustainability in self-help groups. It also helps with exploring internal organisational issues such as how to strengthen management systems and accountability.

In the ever changing geopolitical context of Central Asia the ALS approach is essential for enabling NGOs to adapt and continue to be relevant and effective.

The ALS project in Central Asia had three main stages. First, a preliminary feasibility study was conducted with the partner NGOs. Second, a pilot phase was organised with groups in Kyrgyzstan. Third, the methodology was adapted slightly and new groups formed in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

¹ The programme was entitled "Strengthening NGOs to Support the Self Help Movement". ECCA is made up of three donor agencies: ICCO (Holland), Christian Aid (UK) and DanChurchAid (Denmark), all of which have been active in Central Asia for over ten years.

2. Problems faced by Central Asian NGOs

1. Many Central Asian NGOs are busy implementing projects and programmes and find it difficult to devote sufficient attention to organisational and institutional development. "Carried along with the flow" of their daily tasks, such NGOs are not always able to cope with unexpected situations and factors.

2. Sometimes NGOs get stuck on particular thorny problems and lose momentum in trying to solve them. For example, many have not been able to really tackle cultural issues (often referred to as "traditional mentality") around gender and social inequality. This greatly reduces their effectiveness in implementing development projects. NGOs involved in the self-help movement have not been able to find an effective way of making self-help groups sustainable. They lack a clear mechanism for disengaging from communities where the self-help concept has long been accepted.

3. Competition between NGOs remains an important factor, despite their gradual specialisation in different spheres, with their own target groups. The fear of losing face or the leak of confidential information prevents discussion of sensitive "internal" issues.

4. The heads of NGOs have little time for more thorough analysis and often doubt their own skills in this area. This means that they fail to develop the right strategy or consider alternative solutions to the challenges facing them. Despite attending a variety of training courses, NGO staff find it difficult to apply theory in practice.

5. Prioritising problems to tackle in a period of change, instability, rapid growth or diversification is difficult for NGO staff. The challenges facing them are on various levels – individual, team and organisational. This has led to difficulties or delays, for example, in developing strategic plans, diversifying funding, launching advocacy and lobbying at area (regional) and national levels.

3. The Action Learning methodology

In Central Asia, our starting point was that ALS could be a powerful tool to help both individuals and groups at work. The methodology strengthens individual listening skills and the ability to investigate and reveal problems through the use of open questions. These are important qualities not just for leaders of NGOs and government agencies, but also for staff working with local people and self-help groups.

ALS is both an approach (philosophy) and method (technology) for developing organisations and their staff. By developing a self-learning organisation, it helps resolve current problems organisations face. It is a social, collaborative process that changes people's behaviour through suggesting new ways of acting on problems. It involves rethinking what was already known rather than acquiring new knowledge.

The adult learning cycle

Action learning uses the traditional cycle of adult learning:



Key elements in the process

- A challenge (problem) – a difficult and complex task that has no single solution
- A person – an employee who is ready to assume responsibility and try to solve a problem and develop themselves
- The group – made up of 4-6 people supporting each other throughout the process
- Time – a strictly set period of time (usually 30-40 minutes) that each person has during the meeting to explain their challenge and progress made and answer questions from other participants
- The meetings – 5-6 meetings, each lasting half to one day, at intervals of 1-2 months
- Action – steps taken by each participant to work on their challenge before the next meeting of the group
- Learning – understanding gained from the experience of action and the learning process itself

We were not sure that the approach would work, so in early 2006 a local consultant was engaged to undertake an extensive assessment with four NGO partners. This revealed that employees had attended a great deal of training – but still expressed very wide training needs. In recommending a pilot ALS, the assessment made the point that some training needs could be covered by exchange between partners with different skills. “The pilot can be expected to provide useful lessons as an experimental component in a cross-cutting capacity building program... ALS builds upon the successful experience of small group work in the region and also meets expectations of a clear structure.” (From interim evaluation, 2006)

4. Our strategies

We adopted four main strategies to ease the introduction of this new methodology and reduce the risk of failure:

Adaptation of the methodology

To introduce this entirely new tool and approach, in May 2007 INTRAC invited Bill Crooks, an expert from the UK, to help train people on ALS. The first training

course was held for staff of partner NGOs, who then developed a preliminary plan to implement ALS in Central Asia. Other preparatory work included developing a (crib-list) booklet, translating and mailing background material to partners.

Attention paid to views of partner NGOs

Further meetings were held with partners to discuss this technique. We addressed their fear of loss of confidential information by formalising an Ethics Code and ensuring it was discussed in a way that took account of the particular nature of our learning groups.

Build on inter-organisational trust

The project benefited from the close links between NGOs in the ECCA-funded programme. We consciously built on the shared learning approach that had been developed over a number of years in the Ishenim network (focusing on self-help methodologies – and where INTRAC was involved closely).

Careful formation of groups

It was essential to involve at least 3-4 NGOs in each location so as to make up mixed groups. INTRAC decided to aim at three levels: top management (directors and chief executives of organisations); middle and project-level managers; and community outreach staff. It was decided that groups would consist of between four to six people. In the first phase of the project groups were formed in Bishkek and Osh (Kyrgyzstan).

Ethics code for ALS in Central Asia

- Voluntary participation
- Maintaining a positive attitude
- Honesty and sincerity in discussions
- Attention to and caring for each other
- Trust and confidentiality (no information received during an ALS meetings can be passed on to others outside of it)
- Respect for time (be punctual, turn off phones during group meetings)
- Commitment to help your fellow participants with the issues they raise

5. Analysis of difficulties in the pilot phase

1. Participants (regardless of the level of the group) did not know how to ask "open questions" and constantly tried to give advice. To develop these skills we had to give them homework: preparing standard questions in advance. They realised that asking good questions is actually a "science".

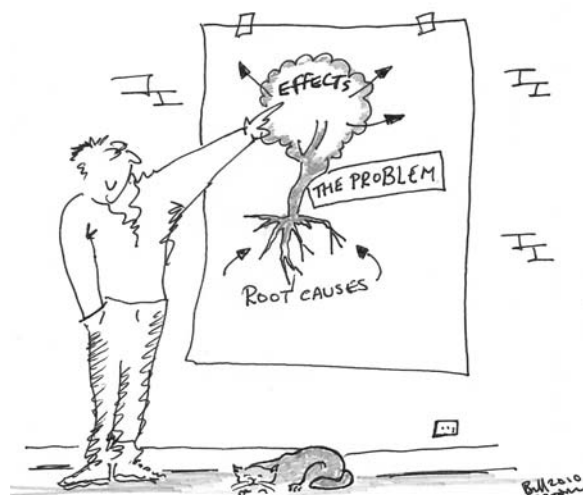
2. Participants found it hard to define their challenges and to link them to wider issues or priorities in their organisations. They lacked confidence that their work could bring about higher level changes in their organisations.

3. Getting expectations right. As one participant in the pilot noted: "We do not believe that our challenge was completely overcome, nor can we say that the ALS programme was 100% effective. What we gained from the programme is that we are now more aware of our shortcomings and as a team began to overcome them, took fundamental decisions and are going forward."

Based on this feedback, INTRAC made a number of changes in the second phase, a year later:

1. Using a more structured approach

The facilitators had to make extra effort to point the participants in the right direction. One practical solution was the introduction of the "problem tree" as an aid to defining individual challenges during the first meetings.



2. Focus on organisational development themes

INTRAC asked participants to focus on organisational development themes identified as priority within the wider capacity building programme – for example, monitoring and evaluation, or resource mobilisation. This helped to bring in staff from NGOs where the top manager was not yet convinced about this more informal way of learning.

3. More attention to group formation

In the second phase, we defined an extra level to ensure that the discussions were relevant to all. As well as top and middle managers, groups were formed with a community outreach focus. It is undesirable to have more than one participant from a given NGO in each group.

4. Use of facilitators from the NGOs

Successful participants from phase 1 now became our colleagues as facilitators in phase 2.

5. Avoidance of narrow subjects

Despite the need to focus on concrete tasks of value to the NGOs, it was agreed that the challenges should have a broad character, accessible to everyone in the group. They should not be too technical.

6. Learning from the programme

Learning 1. The key role of facilitators

In the first phase, two INTRAC staff acted as facilitators and the external (national) consultant who had developed the project with the NGO partners, was facilitator/coordinator². Each group was double-staffed with one of the facilitators as the regular lead.

In the second phase, one INTRAC facilitator took on the coordination role and three individuals involved as participants in the first phase joined the team. This

² Kulnara Djamankulova and Charles Buxton (INTRAC) and Nuriya Omurbekova (external consultant).

included two people with special experience of work in the self-help movement. The new arrangement removed one weakness from the first phase: the feeling of one or two participants that INTRAC facilitators were, despite the promises of confidentiality, in some way representatives of the donors. Having NGO staff as facilitators helped them to relax.

The role of facilitators was quite wide. It included organising the process, involving group members and helping them focus on the challenge itself. The facilitators had to explain ALS and create the best atmosphere for it at the outset. They helped participants to adopt the code of ethics, group work rules, etc. They played the key role in creating the conditions in which the group could function effectively, openly and with sensitivity to the issues raised. The facilitators were responsible for creating an atmosphere of trust, mutual understanding and support. According to the participants, they achieved this. As well as this, the facilitator was responsible for managing the moment when discussion heated up and became "volatile".

The new NGO facilitators gained confidence from practice, learning from any mistakes and supported by the coordinator. Once the groups began to settle down, the facilitators could focus more on the content of the challenges being discussed. They could play a more background role, monitoring the group discussions and helping participants to adopt concrete actions to be undertaken before the next meeting.

In some cases, the facilitators had to spend a lot of time guiding work on particular challenges, especially when the group was less experienced or where participants proposed ambitious projects beyond their own sphere of responsibility and covering the whole of their organisation.

Learning 2. Group dynamics helps individual problem-solving

The participants had to follow the rules of group work and the ethical code. At first participants were very focused on their own challenge – how to define and address it – and less concerned with the other challenges raised. However, as the meetings progressed they began to see that they could learn almost as much from the work being done by their fellow-participants. The more the process advanced, the more marked were the changes in the groups. At the beginning of the programme, they found it hard to remember about the stages in the learning cycle, some arrived without full preparation and unable to address open questions to their colleagues. But as time went by, their degree of self-control and participation in the group improved greatly. They learnt how to ask questions properly and to refrain from offering advice during the limited time available for each challenge.

Whereas at the first meeting participants found it difficult to assess problems or to look at things from different points of view, by the last meeting they were analysing the problems with a variety of approaches and each person was taking concrete actions to achieve their goals. Each person drew their own conclusions about how they would perform their tasks. At the same time, the joint control over the action learning process had led to increased commitment from all.

Learning 3. Importance of venue and time factors

An important factor for ALS is the meeting place. A comfortable and well-organised venue helps participants feel at ease. We carefully chose venues that were a little more informal than with a usual training event. ALS should be organised locally (e.g. in a provincial centre) since travelling long distances to a half or whole day meeting is unrealistic.

Equally important was time planning – especially at the first meetings. These meetings are crucial to the success of the programme, because the group has not

yet sufficiently opened up and the participants do not trust each other, there are fears of "information leakages", and more questions than answers. This can take a lot of time to work through. In later meetings, the disciplined use of time is no less important. Managing time effectively means being fair to everyone – each person gets the same time to present their challenge and try to answer the questions posed about it.

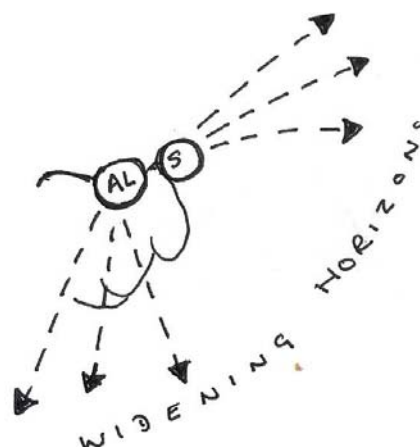
Learning 4. Home-grown strategies

ALS helps NGO staff to become more sensitive and responsive to change and to find creative solutions to common problems. Correctly and consistently used, this method allows employees to feel good about themselves and helps them develop collective reflection about their organisations as a whole and the situations they individually encounter at work. In discussions during the programme, participants noted how the results largely depended on themselves. Action learning makes it possible to improve one's knowledge and skills by searching through literature, listening carefully to others, and adapting good practice from other organisations and individuals.

The following comments by participants in the second phase capture many of the most important and successful aspects of the action learning process.

Teamwork. "I really liked this method of learning, its uniqueness lies in teamwork, when you can sort, filter and choose the best answer for yourself."

Reflection. "Personally, I gained experience and knowledge that has made me wiser and more confident...I now have no fear of unforeseen challenges, for me or the organisation as a whole because for every situation there is a way out and one just needs to sit down and think, then decide what needs to be done and take action; and my friends and colleagues will support me."



Widening horizons. "If the activity is something I understand then the challenge and asking questions is much easier. In the beginning it was very difficult to work out challenges concerning the management of programmes. I hope that in future I will be able to facilitate challenges concerning organisations themselves..." (NGO facilitator)

Planning. "You need to think carefully about the steps to be taken in a month's time and not just remember them in the last three days or limit yourself to the action plan and work flexibly, depending on the situation."

Asking for help. "You must be realistic and honest with yourself so that you understand what you can and cannot do without help and learn to be very demanding and forceful to ensure they respect you as a partner and treat you accordingly."

Recognising your emotions. "I felt as if I was in a small boat being tossed about in a stormy sea and my boat almost capsized, but the participants and facilitators were able to help me and I was able to swim ashore and relax."

7. Project impact

As with any capacity building initiative, it was hard to show immediate impact, especially since the team was determined to preserve confidentiality. However, almost all the participants provided written feedback on the programme and a few wrote short case studies describing how they had worked on their challenges. At the individual level, the impact was quite remarkable, as the quotes below show:

Problem solving. "My fellow participants asked me questions and I was able to solve the problem." "I can say with certainty that ALS helped me solve this problem..."

Self confidence. "I have changed and become more positive, active and confident in my own abilities and I want to improve my work in general."

Delegation. "As a result of having worked out an action plan for each of the set tasks in each seminar, I was able to clearly allocate responsibilities and accountability, whereas in my previous job as a project coordinator I did most of the work myself, as I thought only I could do it properly, and eventually I didn't have enough time or energy to do my job".

Negotiation skills. "I learned to look for ways of finding a compromise and consensus and acting effectively in the interests of our foundation."

Three case studies (two from Tajikistan, one from Kyrgyzstan) illustrate how ALS changed the situation on the ground.

Improving individual skills: writing quality reports

One ALS participant aimed to tackle a perceived weakness in writing reports. Often her reports would be criticised by her bosses and sent back to be revised or rewritten, which made her lose interest in her work. At the ALS meetings she talked about her challenge with other participants and drew up a plan, which included looking at reports written by other staff, using resource from the internet and within

her own NGO, attending a report-writing seminar, and together with colleagues developing a new report format.

By participating in the ALS programme she learnt to write good quality reports that are now approved first time and she has regained her interest in her work. "By using the ALS tools and participating in this innovative programme, I was able to solve my challenge. Many similar problems exist in Tajik NGOs and using this programme in the future would make it possible to increase capacity and efficiency in the civil sector."

Improving management and teamwork

A senior manager in a large NGO faced problems with staff motivation in her team. Questioning by fellow participants in ALS led her to give more attention to staff members' individual personal development, in contrast to her original plan to conduct a formal review of job descriptions. As a result of the greater attention given to individual needs and performance, team members began to feel more valued.

The ALS participant was able to take advantage of professional courses already being undertaken by two team members to gain support for her proposals for improvements in work being done by the team as a whole. Not only had she "accomplished a kind of revolution" in the challenge she had identified at the start, she also took on more management tasks, standing in for her own line manager for a while, and did this confidently and successfully.

INTRAC's experience shows the particular value of action learning techniques for outreach community and social work strategies; and with women – as the third case study shows.

Developing social work around domestic violence

An ALS trainee wanted to find ways to help reduce violence against women in rural areas. In the area where she lives, violence against women is common and takes the form of beatings by parents, husbands and other relatives. After discussions in the ALS group, she began a series of training seminars and awareness raising sessions on women's rights and violence against women and improved cooperation with rural self-governance and law enforcement bodies, the media and religious leaders.

This work has had positive results. In the course of community meetings and workshops with rural women it became clear that they had significantly improved their knowledge on women's rights and gender issues. The level of violence against women and girls in the family was being reduced. Husbands had started to take into account the views of their wives more positively and more open discussions had helped improve relations between wives and their in-laws (parents of the husband) with whom they lived. Careful work with religious leaders had brought them into the campaign against domestic violence.

There were several other examples of how action learning skills proved invaluable for NGO staff working in communities. One participant in Kyrgyzstan used the programme to improve feedback from self-help group members, taking up ideas that came up in the action learning meetings (improving questionnaires, preparing herself better, organising joint review meetings and inviting external experts to assist).

In another example from Tajikistan, NGO staff used ALS tools to build the capacity of *mahalla* (neighbourhood) committees to

solve problems at local level. The committees that they worked with were barely active, with problems that nobody seemed able to tackle. The villagers had lost all confidence in them. Based on the skills acquired in ALS meetings, participants discussed the problems, taking into consideration the views of all concerned, and drew up an effective action plan to address the situation. One action taken was to organise a general meeting of community members and to bring some examples of successful results obtained by other *mahallas* to it.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

We have shown above how useful Action Learning Sets can be in helping NGO staff to implement lessons learned in formal training, to take their organisations forward when problems have brought them to a dead halt, and to win greater attention to difficult issues from colleagues, managers and the wider community. Project participants improved their knowledge, skills and abilities. The project had an impact at both the personal and the professional level.

Organising ALS within a broad capacity building programme, with NGO partners who knew each other and shared many of the same organisational and work challenges, gave INTRAC the chance to pilot a new methodology. It took a lot of preparation and relies on developing a core of enthusiastic and capable local practitioners. INTRAC now has a group of 5-6 ALS facilitators who could help develop this approach. We know it works within the Central Asia development context.

How can ALS be taken further? Undoubtedly, this approach could be useful and relevant, not only with other donor programmes and NGOs, but also in other sectors.

Recommendations

- Donors and capacity building providers should consider carefully the size of programme in which to test this methodology (less than 10 participating organisations may not provide the range of participants needed).
- Voluntary and full attendance is a prerequisite for this type of staff development, so while the “sponsorship” of the programme by

NGO managers is vital, so too is the “bottom-up” commitment of key staff attending – and they must be allowed the time and space in which to do this.

- Cultural aspects need to be taken into account throughout: thus, in Central Asia we were able to build on good collective work traditions and at the same time we “tightened” up ALS to meet the need to show structure and practical results.