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The Power of Connection:

A PAX joint learning pilot with partners



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1. INTRODUCTION

It is very easy to talk about mutual capacity strengthening. Most international NGOs would agree that learning with partners should be a two-way process. But it is so much easier said than done. There are embarrassingly few examples of international NGOs investing in learning programmes that explicitly aim to make this happen.

This paper describes a courageous and innovative ‘joint learning pilot programme’. Over nine months spanning 2020 and 2021, PAX¹ from the Netherlands and 12 interested partner organisations from Syria, Lebanon, Sudan, South Sudan, Iraq, and Palestine worked together on a shared learning process. The aim was to increase participant’s understanding of the theory and practice of non-violent movement building. INTRAC provided technical support to the process as a learning partner.

The programme was both successful and difficult. The evaluation indicated that PAX staff saw a 39% improvement from their baseline ratings and a 24% improvement for partner staff in terms of knowledge, awareness, and experience of non-violent activism and movement-building. There was clear evidence of participants applying their new knowledge and skills in action. It took a reflective learning approach that brought hope and encouragement – two intangible, yet absolutely essential ingredients in change. As one participant put it powerfully:

It motivated me and made me dream about what could happen tomorrow, the change we could achieve here, even if it is only the next generation that will achieve it. This program encourages you to step out of your comfort zone and try new things. It changed me, increased my confidence, made me dream and speak more boldly with others about non-violent action. Before, I never imagined that I could mobilize people, influence them, have them create a movement, but now I see it is possible.

But the initiative also highlighted the political complexity of a shared learning process between a European agency and partners from conflict contexts. Participants had different roles and positions within the partnership system. The learning programme staff had to work hard to cultivate ownership from different groups; make difficult decisions about whose priority takes precedence; and while having bold ambitions, remain realistic about what changes were likely.

This paper shows summarises five key takeaways for INGOs:

1. **There is value in intentional shared learning programmes.** Shared learning between INGOs and partners may be hard due to differences in roles and power, but is worth striving for. Shared learning helps shifts the power and turns mutual capacity strengthening jargon into reality.
2. **Reflective *peer-to-peer* learning amongst partners worked well.** But the extent of learning depends on how much time people put in, and the level of external facilitation.

¹ PAX is the largest peace organization in the Netherlands, and works to protect civilians against acts of war, to end armed violence and to build inclusive peace. It works in conflict areas worldwide, together with local partners and people who believe that everyone has a right to a dignified life in a peaceful society. PAX doesn’t identify as a donor organisation, but as an active partner in peace-building processes.

Peer learning requires time and investment, and is different to 'shared learning'. Ambitions need to match commitment.

3. **Ownership should be relentlessly cultivated throughout the learning programme.** Ownership is not once-and-for-all, but a continuous process with key stakeholder groups. You have to be as clear as possible about what success looks like for different stakeholders.
4. **Experiment with lots of learning methods, but adapt quickly to what is working for your particular group of participants.** It is about creating varied opportunities for participants to engage, and regular reviews in order to adapt your approach.
5. **Learning should be linked to practical action.** Where possible, support participant commitments to put learning into practice with the funding to make that feasible in real time.

2. THE SHARED LEARNING PROGRAMME

At a partner roundtable meeting in September 2019, several PAX partners asked for more structured joint learning opportunities between themselves and PAX staff. PAX was already running some short learning seminars, but partners wanted something more systematic. That request contributed to a new Partnering Policy, which put the concept of shared learning with partners at the centre. This commitment was further encouraged by the emphasis on learning and on local ownership that PAX's main funder, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had put in its new strategic framework.

PAX contracted INTRAC to help them co-design a joint learning pilot programme on non-violent movement building for PAX staff and partners. A participatory design process brought together the felt needs and aspirations of 23 potential participants from all seven countries. This listening resulted in a learning programme over nine months with three core elements:

1. A single overarching 'learning question': *"How to build active non-violent movements & mobilise large numbers of people?"*
2. An online learning platform loaded with activities/resources including recorded interviews, inputs from participants, prompts for reflection and homework assignments
3. Seven live two-hour full group webinars, focusing on different elements of movement building (e.g. How to start a non-violent movement? How to build a movement in an extremely repressive context?). These Zoom sessions took place every six weeks, combining technical training, exchanging personal experiences and time for personal reflection.

In addition to these, we experimented with:

- An optional training session on non-violent movement building run by PAX staff
- Two partner-only calls to discuss their own organisational issues and how PAX was supporting them and any changes they would recommend
- Two PAX-only calls for staff to reflect on the support they provided to partners, and any changes it felt needed to be made in its own approach
- Monthly remote chats over coffee with randomly selected other participants to build trust and exchange
- One action learning 'pod' – a mix of partner and PAX staff working together on a specific programme reflecting, share feedback, reviewing learning and planning their next actions

- A WhatsApp group – for informal communication between the participants.

2.1 What difference did it make?

Approaching shared learning through a reflective practice approach was equalising. One partner reported that they had “*never witnessed such a close relationship*” between an international agency and its partners. In some cases, it shifted staff mindsets in Europe. One PAX staff member said: “*It was really broadening my horizon with respect to the countries in the Middle East especially... I really noticed how little I knew, and I still do, but at least it’s a bit more*”.

The learning activities enabled people to discuss common questions from distinct perspectives. Hearing others’ experiences was incredibly powerful, not only for sharing ideas, but also for inspiration, encouragement, and practical application. As one participant said:

“I have new ideas and a better understanding of what worked well elsewhere and what didn’t, as well as a better approach of confronting similar realities in my context. I immediately transferred learning to others. People are organising to overcome an obstacle in their way.”

The endline survey showed that the average score across all learning objectives had increased, indicating that participants improved their knowledge, awareness, and experience on non-violent activism and movement-building. On average, PAX staff saw a 39% improvement from their baseline ratings, compared to 24% for partner staff.

More importantly, it inspired participants with hope. Many of the participants were isolated, working in incredibly challenging contexts. The appreciative, reflective practice approach gave people a sense of possibility; and left them feeling supported, as part of a global community of people doing this together. As one participant said:

“When colleagues from other parts of the world were sharing, their examples were really touching and gave me energy to say ‘Yes, this can be done. I can move up to their level and contribute.’ It was so inspiring”

Another described how they heard through this programme that with just 3.5% of the population supporting non-violent action it is possible to achieve serious political change. That gave him hope, whereas “*before I did not think it was possible to create a non-violent movement.*”

Of the 27 people who originally started the programme, 17 finished. 15 were actively engaged throughout, which is impressive given that some were sick, others moved jobs to other organisations and all were busy responding to the demands in some of the most volatile and unpredictable contexts in the world. Furthermore, the learning programme took place at the height of COVID restrictions inhibiting participation.

3. WE LEARNED THAT SHARED LEARNING IS A POLITICAL PROCESS

Box 1: Shared learning and peer learning

- **Shared learning:** is when people from different organisations, working in different positions and jobs come together to learn from each other
- **Peer learning** is when people working in similar positions doing similar jobs (again often in different organisations) come together to learn from each other.

Shared learning between international and national partners is an inherently political process. Learning is affected by the power dynamics that are present when funding is involved.

Any shared learning process therefore has multiple audiences – each with different interests, needs, perspectives and day-to-day roles.

When different groups have different aspired outcomes, who decides who is the primary client (particularly when one participant group – in this case PAX – is also the sponsor)? Some of the PAX programme staff felt: *“we prioritised the needs of the partner participants”*, based on information from the participant needs assessment and feedback on the initial learning activities. Not surprisingly therefore, partners were more satisfied as they found it easier to apply the learning to their day-to-day work. Even within groups, there were diverse priorities. Partners from different countries were operating in distinct contexts. And even amongst PAX staff there were different perspectives and priorities between thematic advisors; programme staff and management. The pilot was an important reminder that ‘shared learning’ is not the same as ‘peer learning’ between people in very similar positions doing similar jobs.

It was vital to continuously cultivate ownership amongst the different groups – particularly within PAX. Ownership can easily fluctuate over time in response to new pressures or new staff joining. For example, throughout the programme, people within PAX had differing hopes for the outcomes. Consequently, it was never fully clear what success looked like for PAX as a whole. The learning initiative had started with the intention to try out a new learning approach, based on partners’ wishes as expressed in the partner meeting. Even though the topic was agreed with programme staff, the programme did not actively emerge from the programme priorities or needs. This may have contributed to some programme staff viewing this learning as an optional add-on to their core work. Ownership is not a static, once-and-for-all achievement, but an ongoing challenge to continuously address before, during, and after the programme.

The following actions helped with ownership:

- To regularly meet with and feedback to management
- To create a Steering Group of two PAX staff and two partner staff to act as a sounding board
- To take a tailored, individual approach to inviting, reminding, and sometimes persuading participants about the shared learning programme at regular intervals. This was time consuming, but meant that we had a better sense of what was working for them and what the barriers to participation were.

4. WHAT WE FOUND TO BE THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE SHARED LEARNING

4.1 Time commitment and openness to reflective learning

Reflective learning is a new approach to learning for many who have only experienced a more didactic education system. It takes commitment to stop and reflect, which may not be intuitively appealing to many 'activist learners'. It takes discipline to carve out time amidst already busy schedules (for example PAX staff were consumed with preparation for a large five-year funding application at the start of the programme). It was also not easy for partner staff to create time for reflective learning when having to respond to their volatile contexts.

4.2 Diversity and trust between participants

The most effective learning took place through exchanges of experience between people from different contexts. Learning came through difference; hearing perspectives from people they never normally spoke to. But learning through difference requires trust. In this programme not being able to meet face-to-face (the programme took place at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic), impacted on trust levels between participants, especially when they came from low-trust cultures. So the learning programme had to create trust-building opportunities within the online sessions. Trust also grew more when people shared their failures and vulnerabilities rather than simply successes. Hearing about hard circumstances and real life failures brought connection between participants.

4.3 Highly applied to practice

The learning programme was highly applied. Having one learning question: "How to build active non-violent movements and mobilise large numbers of people?" helped focus on a clear issue of mutual interest. Even within that single issue, shared learning was most effective when both international and national organisations had a similar implementing role (such as with advocacy).

One important area where the programme could have been improved was connecting the learning to funding opportunities. Partners hoped and expected that PAX would be able to fund efforts to implement the learning that the programme was generating. In some cases, the application of learning was undermined when this funding was not immediately forthcoming.

4.4 Varied opportunities for engaging

It is not always clear which elements of a learning programme will work at the start, particularly in a complex and dynamic environment. So the programme experimented with a wide range of online learning methods with reviews for real time adaptation. The most popular learning method proved to be the seven live Zoom webinars for the full group. Focusing on different aspects of

non-violent movement building, each webinar combined technical training, exchanges of personal experiences, and personal reflection. Scheduling them six weeks apart allowed participants time to engage in the learning activities on the online platform. A key learning from the online sessions was the need to be disciplined in creating and holding space for interaction. We were often tempted to fill the planned reflective space with activities. But facilitating shared learning, and creating conversations between people online who didn't know each other well, required time.

The online Moodle learning platform housed a wide range of learning activities (including recorded interviews, prompts for reflection, and assignments). Participants appreciated the quality of the reading and video material – particularly the pre-recorded interviews between participants. But the online platform did not become the interactive space that we had hoped for. For safety reasons we felt we should prioritise security over ease of access or connectivity. Some participants struggled to access the platform due to poor internet connections.

The programme also trialled other ways to engage. These included partner or PAX-only calls, remote coffee chats, WhatsApp groups, and action-learning pods. For some participants the variety was initially overwhelming and confusing, but became clearer over time. The methods did not work so well when it was left up to participants to schedule and facilitate these themselves. Shared learning often needs more facilitation than expected. Frequent reviews, however, enabled the programme to identify and focus on those methods that were proving most helpful.

5. FIVE TAKEAWAYS FOR INTERNATIONAL NGOS

PAX's impressive and unusual attempt to put the rhetoric of shared learning into practice generated important learning for international NGOs and foundations. It clearly demonstrated five key things:

1. **There is value in intentional shared learning programmes.** Shared learning between INGOs and partners may be hard due to differences in roles and power, but is worth striving for. Shared learning helps shift the power and turns mutual capacity strengthening jargon into reality.
2. **Reflective *peer-to-peer* learning amongst partners worked well.** But the extent of learning depends on how much time people put in, and the level of external facilitation. Peer learning requires time and investment, and is different to 'shared learning'. Ambitions need to match commitment.
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