

LESSONS FOR LEARNERS

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LESSONS FOR LEARNERS

*Anil K Gupta **

Learning requires discrediting beliefs that one thought were valid. Discrediting can be threatening if the individual concerned assumed that fallibility was the privilege of only the subordinates or the peers. And if we accept that we all have our blind spots which we refuse to recognise, then perhaps the problem is quite general. What distinguishes one from another is the degree to which one is prepared to dispute the logic of the belief system underlying most causal attributions rather than only the casual link.

The "A-B-C-D" model (Ellis, 1978) based on Upanishads implies that if 'A' is assumed the causal factor for 'C' consequence, then one should not dispute 'D' the relationship between A and C (as is often done). Instead we should dispute the belief system 'B' which made us relate A to C. The learning thus requires taking note of the belief systems which enabled us to draw causal arrows between different interdependent variables of development.

It will be well nigh impossible to document various types of belief systems that dominate the thinking of developmental planners and workers.

What I have done is to list the lessons I have learned from the practitioners through my field interactions. The interactional aspects of learning is thus given precedence, over the individual aspects in this note. It is recognized that generating choices for actions for both, the rural poor or the development managers without creating capacity to act may impair the learning abilities of both the poor as well as the managers.

The purpose of this note is to summarise lessons which learners may find useful for increasing their capacity to help the disadvantaged rural poor by unfolding their own learning potential.

A: The Barriers to Learning

- a) the cost of non-learning is borne by somebody else;
- b) benefits from the learning are not sure and sufficient;
- c) learning requires discrediting one's knowledge and demystifying one's expertise;
- d) we believe that 'our learning is not enough, others must also learn';
- e) learning implies changing the accepted way of doing things, disturbing the status quo and treading on toes of others.

There may be many more reasons which prevent us from learning. In the age of information revolution, very heavy demands are placed on us to learn new and newer bits of explanation about different things. 'Learning to Unlearn' thus becomes a prerequisite for removing the barriers that lie in our sub-conscious mind (or what Argyris calls theories-in-use as against the espoused theories).

Learning need not necessarily be liberating. One can learn to be helpless. When one sees corruption, inefficiency and callous indifference towards human life and its dignity; one can genuinely believe that nothing much could be done by any one or few persons. Only a 'total revolution' can change the society. May be that is an accurate description of reality. But as Amartya Sen suggests, an accurate description need not be a good description of a thing. One can learn thus to be insensitive to the problems of others. One can even romanticize one's own learning discounting in the process learning by others. One can decide to learn only from one's own mistakes and in the process end up rediscovering the wheel all the time.

We are not suggesting that reader of this note is not entitled to any of the above privileges. But in case one wanted to lessen the costs of learning, some of the lessons and issues given below might help.

B: Lessons for Learners

1. A Change not Monitored is a Change not Desired :

If we monitored the sectoral lending (i.e. loans for different purposes) by different banks against spatial and sectoral targets (i.e. for what purpose, in which block, how many loans) the outcome could not lead to balance regional development. Likewise if we did not monitor the correspondence between portfolio of lending of various banks in a region with the endowment specialization of the poor, do we really need to hope for poverty alleviation.

2. Monitoring access implies designing counters and not corridors :

We first design a system with back-doors and side-windows, then monitor the access at the front window. Finding not enough people or not enough of the 'target type' we exhort the indifferent excluded ones to organise themselves. To generate pressure/demand, from those who failed to get the services, on the delivery system which failed to deliver became the dominant moral of the developmental story.

Whenever resources were scarce, queuing was inevitable. The issue was, how to define eligibility rules for standing in the queue and **through** whom to monitor the data on exclusion: those who in fact managed to elbow out the rest those who could not participate those who would not participate* despite knowing the pros and also the cons those who were not eligible either because they had too much of resources or too little.

Designing counters also implies defining precise rules of queuing. The exclusion will have to be monitored through those who are normatively desired to be in the queue (even if they chose not to stand in the queue).

* It should be noted that this is not an imaginary category : In many backward districts, as much as 30 - 50% IRDP families refused to take loan.

3. Monitoring 'deviance' to build self-design potential of developmental organisations is sine quo non of building up organic learning systems :

One of the implications of eco-specific planning is to have a wide range of variety in both organisational design, policy content and delivery systems. However, tendency of centralised monitoring systems to concentrate on uniform standard indicators reinforces the risk-averse compliant behaviour amongst the functionaries in organisations.

At the same time, it is inevitable that there would be minority in various organisations, governmental or non-governmental which will deviate from the norms. In our obsession with failures we seldom seem to be capable of anticipating success. The result is the outliers, wherever they exist, are either suppressed or ignored. There are several reasons for this behaviour including a fear that dominant coalition in these organizations may be exposed if their 'standards' of sensitivity towards people were surpassed by some junior people.

Thus, if every other sub-set of society is assumed conflict ridden, should bureaucracy be imagined as a homogeneous system?

The question then arises, how to spot, sustain, and strengthen organisational insurgents! If a minuscule minority in different bureaucratic organizations demonstrated not only its sensitivity to the problems of poor but also recognised the power of other poor having nexus with vested interests to thwart its efforts how to ensure that such a minority in the organisations will not be annihilated?

How to generate a critical network which will provide moral and material support to such deviants and also enable their strategic coalition, tactical retreats, etc. Perhaps only a network of such deviants could sustain each other by providing critical feed back, monitoring their errors, extracting lesson of each failure and moral of each success. It was possible that this network of deviants might not initially get full support of minority of poor in each of the village in the hinterland of these organisations.

- 4. Poor monitor our naivete if they don't organise despite cost effectiveness of organisation assumed by us. They are trying to survive in the short run.**

Using logic of collective action through calculus of benefit-cost ratio or power-inequities, exchange economies etc., some people conclude that emergence of free riders in a collective system was unavoidable as long as there were people who could get away with using common resource without paying its costs. This was inevitable if no third party system to provide assurance against free-riding was available by state or any other social system. On the other hand there were others who wondered why poor did not realise that it was in their interest to organise. Naivete seldom had limits. An illustrative scenario looks like this "if people don't pay bank loans, they must not be aware of the advantages that follow the repayment; those who pay develop, those who did not, were doomed." Having so stated the story we devise the solution of appointing volunteers who would follow up the loans not paid by meek and mighty, organise them at a salary/stipend of say Rs.400 to Rs.600 per month coupled with all the risks and uncertainty of job. Hence, we find National Bank setting up Voluntary Vikas Vahini.

Development on cheap says a learned friend, is a bane of our poverty alleviating programming. We want to spend millions on programmes but not even a fraction on maintaining their learning systems. Poor people monitor our intentions behind these programmes by looking at the investment in the monitoring processes, learning systems etc.

Our vision of the long term interests of the poor and their compulsions of short term survival seldom coincide.

The cost at which we want to develop them, and the costs which they have already paid for surviving so long also very seldom match. It is time, we recalibrate our barometers of learning.

- 5. Converting marginal investors into developmental entrepreneurs requires developing public or common risk absorption mechanisms :**
Different classes of farmers and labourers face different degrees of risk,

have different degrees of risk, have different historical experiences of success or failures and thereby have different futures expectations.

Very often by assuming much lesser degree of investment risks in developmental programmes, the planners passed on the entire burden of risks on the investors. Implementing officials at time quite judiciously recognised this and thus did not choose the poorest for the purpose (At least they deserve commendation for this!)

Numerous examples exist in which government has not provided, any appreciable process of risk absorption. Insurance systems were known for their singular inefficiency. Question thus arises, "how do we develop risk diffusing, negotiating and absorption system as an inalienable component of development policy so that poor don't choose to remain out?"

6. Monitoring context changes the content

There is a famous story of Akbar and Birbal. When asked to shorten a line without rubbing it, a longer line was drawn adjacent to it. The context was changed. Very often we monitor the content without even realising the enormous variety of difference in the meanings which may emerge because of the differences in the context.

It is important to realize that by monitoring the context i.e., the setting in which a programme had to be implemented, we would inevitably design better policies, programmes and projects. But the reverse was not true. The tragedy is that often we monitored only the content. The result was that despite highly heterogenous implementation of the policy, solution often was, more of the same.

7. Camps and campaigns, the ultimate weapon in the arsenal of developmental planners to 'shoot' the 'targets' confirm the contempt that planners have towards the concept of participation

Often in the name of decentralised planning and implementation, bureaucratic machinery chose to organise camps and campaigns to demonstrate its apparent anxiety to deliver results through people's

participation. But what do these camps and campaigns really achieve?

The participation ends where it should begin Routine is converted into celebration People are immobilized in normal times such that every camp generates a greater need for still another camp.

Tolerance or homeostatic level of people as well as bureaucratic officials, increased so much that unless the camps or the campaigns were held, system did not perform its normal activities. People as well as officials were desensitised.

People often interpreted the camps as a sign of helplessness on the part of senior officials who failed to galvanise their machinery to act in the absence of these (the camps).

Need for internal tension to generate pressure for action was met probably by creating external pressure through these camps.

Nobody need be remained about what happened after the camps or campaigns were over. Some of the patently obvious acts of routine nature in various organizations/delivery systems had to be recalled and celebrated through camps e.g., a bank celebrating customer - service week or district collectorate organizing mutation camps.

There is a need to systematically catalogue various camouflage attempts to seek participation of people. While one can understand periodic reminders about major objectives of any organization, treating them as substitutes for regular activities betrayed sincerity.

8. How to generate capacity amongst poor to monitor government- tal programmes/projects and organizations?

Organizational leaders often pass on the blame for inefficient and ineffective functioning of developmental programmes on to the lowest rung of bureaucracy. Credit, unlike blame, seldom trickles down. In the process, the distrust amongst leaders and followers in public organizations transcends the organizational boundaries and is

manifested in the relation between organizational functionaries and the poor clients.

How do we identify role for desired* target group to monitor the extent to which programme reached following subsets of target group:

- a) Desired but devoid of technological as resource potential for using the project/programme resource.
- b) People with potential but not belonging to the normatively defined category of desired group.
- c) People neither having potential nor belonging to the desired group.

Governmental efforts for generating potential amongst the desired target group would also need to be monitored to test the intentions of planners.

9. **Information is Power : Sharing data among people may generate accountability as well as raise demand :**

Displaying outside a veterinary or human dispensary, the list of villages from which patients had been treated, the number of landless provided support, key diseases identified and dispensation provided etc. Sharing of information hopefully would provide concrete anchor for crystallizing the popular discontent and introduce wider accountability.

For which purpose, how many loans had been given by banks in which villages also needed to be shared amongst the people. It will provide access to peer to pressurise the institutions to reorient their portfolios seasonally, sectorally and spatially.

Villagewise birth rates need be publicly displayed castewise and possibly class-wise; literacy levels, proportion of school drop outs, cases of rejected loan applications, names of willful loan defaulters together with cases of genuine defaulters not rehabilitated by banks, etc. were

some of the dimensions which also needed to be monitored by wider publics.

It does not have to be mentioned, how much pressure sharing this information will generate on the professionals/bureau-cratic functionaries.

10. Will markets act as monitors

Those who believe in equilibrium economics assume that markets monitor better, who should get what and where depending upon the demand and supply. Is not it true that market forces often in coalition with bureaucratic forces and state power lead to a system whereby only certain types of needs of certain classes of rural society in only certain regions were responded to?

11. How to monitor 'the monitor'?

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Very often the developmental interventions as well as the developmental programme managers become incapable of being monitored by the people (with small 'p'). It is very crucial that if poor were to become partners in developmental experiments, they must have incentives and capacity to monitor the interventionist. It has enormous learning advantage for both the sides. In addition to being a very important means of generating valid knowledge in a social setting, the process of mutual monitoring or what could be called as a surveillance mechanism also ensured genuine democratic culture. Unless and until leaders in a group were subjected to these mechanisms, it is quite likely that they would become autocratic and insensitive to the interest of the poorer members. First step in this process was to demystify our own assumed expertise in the matter.

Metaphors are powerful medium of communication. By disregarding these we could throw away a great opportunity of learning.

Certain values, beliefs which can't be retained in the explicit form are codified into myths. Monitoring what is explicit, is like monitoring the content. Myth provides the context.

Metaphors are by definition incomplete and are not necessarily in the form of myths always. However, both myths and metaphors provided the meanings which formal language often failed to unravel.

12. By monitoring the metaphors we can access the informal meanings attached by people to different interventions

In any group organised or unorganised; it is inevitable that after a few rounds of interaction on any problem of common interest, the group - dynamics will generate certain motifs, symbols, folklores, acronyms, popular jokes, etc., to codify collective experiences in a manner in which these remain available for reference generally only to the members of the groups. For instance the 'Touch and Vanish' was a popular joke about the T&V system and not entirely without any basis.

13. Reinterpreting Traditional Myths : Rediscovering the Wheel

One of the important concept of information theory is that people tended to interpret new information in the context of their previous knowledge and the two elements, old and new, became fused in memory. Two examples could be given here about how through reinterpretation of traditional myths or stories, new meanings can be generated which provided a language for communication amongst the poor as well as poor and their benefactors.

- i) In Eklavya's story how should we interpret decision of Dronacharya of asking Eklavya to part with his thumb of right hand? What did it teach us traditionally! That subservience to Idols/Ideals of the ruling elite is bliss; Obedience was the best virtue, the tribals should not acquire skills which could threaten the dominant coalition of high caste (Brahmins and Rajputs). Did this incident set the right norms for relating teacher and taught ? What were the dilemma in the mind of Dronacharya and Eklavya if at all ?
- ii) Likewise, another story of King Hiranya-Kashyap having been killed by the faith of his deviant son Prahlad in the God was perhaps intended to generate a false hope in the mind of oppressed that blind faith in the systems' ability to correct itself

would bear fruit. These messages exist already in the mind of people. New messages, values and belief have to essentially contest these dominant stock of traditional moral values.

These are several other such fables which needed to be reinterpreted so that contradictions of current phase of Indian society could be analysed. New emergent meanings would substitute the meanings/context provided by the traditional myths. Monitoring these myths generates tremendous potential for learning about why people would behave the way they do.

13. **Being catalytic agent is to trigger change without being affected oneself.**

Very often developmental analysts assume the role of catalytic agent. I think this is one of the most inappropriate definition of the role. As we all know a catalytic agent in a chemical reaction does not undergo any change in itself, do we then imply that the social activist can remain unaffected by the process of participation in developmental experiments or encounters?

14. **Monitoring transaction costs : By not incorporating the transaction costs in developmental placing these costs do not disappear. They are passed on to the weaker partner**

If the scale and costs at which the services or goods are provided do not match with the scale and costs at which they are needed by the clients ,how will the ensuing transaction costs be accounted for in the respective balance sheets ? These costs vary over time and space and thus projects have to provide for progressive scaling down of the costs if implementation continues properly.

15. **Choices are Historical**

In on-going organizations managerial choices at any point of time are considerably influenced by the choices made or foregone in past.

Projects implemented in past even if unrelated to the new proposed project may influence the response of people. The lessons learned about

the lessons not to be learned are also historical. For instance the rush to spend major part of the budget in the months January to March (or what I call spring spending spree) is one of those lessons of history which for obvious reasons bureaucracies have decided not to unlearn.

16. Learning through networks

If learning in an organization is closely linked to reinforcements or fears available from other organizations then how does one conceptualize inter-organizational context of organizational and individual learning. Is it true that lessons that can be drawn from one's experience are considerably defined by the networks in which they have to be diffused? The learning strategies for the top management network may then have to be different from the strategies for lower level networks. Certain things are 'undiscussable' in each network and thus the learning strategies have to content with these peculiarities.

If the culture, i.e. accepted way of doing things, influences the standard deviations that are generally tolerated in an organization around a particular mean/average behaviour or norm, then is not learning process related to the cultural change and contradictions inherent in this process in the organizations? The often cited case is that of propriety vis-a-vis performance culture in public system. The former is given much more importance over the latter.

17. Is learning reactive?

Model of challenge-response expanded considerably by Arnold Toynabee in his monumental work on History of Civilizations has been used in large number of disciplines and contexts to explain learning by individuals, groups or even societies.

Be it the contingency theory or circular causation the underlying assumptions are similar. Does one therefore, assume that learning essentially is a part of reactive repertoire of human kind? If it were so then how does one devise futuristic strategies or utopia which can counter quite unproductive, inefficient or even undesirable learning behaviours in society.

18. Learning is by chance, try ! try again!

There is a Columbus in each one of us aspiring to discover one's own answer to even universal problems. Calculations that Columbus had made about the circumference of the earth were wrong and had he not discovered America, the sailors would have died on the high sea for want of sufficient provisions. Serendipity and success have so often been together that people even believe that learning could occur by chance and therefore, why try for it or just keep trying the same thing over and over again.

Kalidas while coming back dejected from his wife's place stopped by a well to drink water. On seeing the marks of rope on the stone boundary, he concluded that even stone could register the marks of a soft thing like rope. The message was, try and try again. But trying some thing is different from trying dissimilar things.

Learning from others' mistakes requires following a way that others' have shown. But how to restrain the Columbus in us who wants to discover his own way every time?

19. Learning to peep!

Learning implies being accountable which in turn implies allowing the others to poke their nose in your matters. But shall one erect porous walls to let others peep through?

Learning takes time. Why shall we wait for people to learn themselves if we can standardise and generalise the solutions. Replicating lessons rather than learning processes is one of the greatest bane of modern bureaucracies. When shall we learn to be impatient.

20. Learning From Success

What should one learn from a success; the process of committing mistakes, experimenting alternative solutions, providing room for manouevre to the developmental deviants or the solution per se. The example of operation flood and waste land development are the most obvious cases of learning wrong lessons from the right successes. The

learning process involved in developing Amul model was never replicated. The result was success at one place and point of time became reason of failure at several other places in future. Likewise there are certain very strong features of professionalism in National Dairy Development Board which have never been replicated. What has been replicated is a sequence of steps in carrying out a programme? Likewise if Amul model was a rational response to the socio-ecological and historical forces in Anand no effort was ever made to experiment alternative approaches to achieve similar ends. How does one avoid the possibility of some organizations successful as they are preventing others from developing alternative perspectives. One of the most important role is that of management professionals who often help in legitimising certain lessons or ways of learning them. There is a need for scholars and practioners to pool their insights to demystify the logic of replication as well as scaling up. One of the most important problems of development involve^s generating scaled up version of local successes.

21. Status and Skills are not necessarily positively correlated.

Situation becomes worse when the top level decision makers discount the need to learn skills of learning from colleagues as well as subordinates. In a meeting organised to train rural development managers from all the districts of a country each secretary in charge of a programme or sub-programme part of overall rural development policy narrated his or her expectations to the field level functionaries. None of them considered it necessary to attend each others' sessions and respond to the inter-sectoral problems aired by the participants. Neither was any effort made to ensure that the less articulate participants are provided opportunities of interaction in the smaller groups. The worst part was that the senior policy makers did not have even time and patience to systematically receive the feedback of the participants and prepare their self critical answers. Apparently these bureaucrats believed that their responsibility was only to train.

Summing Up

It is quite possible that many of these propositions have already been discovered by the readers . To that extent this note might add to the

confidence of the reader in his or her ability to discover some of the important lessons for learning .We hope that the desire to be a good learner is quite innate in each one of us . If we are not able to trigger processes that enable others around us also to learn ,then perhaps we believe our learning is enough , others do not have to learn ! Is it really so ? ~~RE~~ (Comments and criticism regarding the ideas presented in this note may kindly be communicated to the author with more examples and alternative formulations)

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