

Praxis Note No. 61

The Jigsaw of Mayor Clement Stories and lessons from an action learning programme in West Africa

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Introduction

In 2008, Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)¹ and PSO² came together to support an approach to organisational development in the south that is more meaningful, relevant and sustaining for the people involved. Our challenge was to counteract the concern that lessons learnt in development are not always put into practice and shared. This motivated us to look for ways to support practices that incorporate not only planning and implementation of interventions but also reflection and learning. This led to the launch of the Action Learning Programme, first as a pilot and later extended into a programme. The Action Learning Programme focuses on strengthening the learning capacities and practices of VSO and its partners in Cameroon, The Gambia and Ghana. The aim is to improve these organisations' practices related to service delivery to their beneficiaries.

This note presents three stories about African people who used Action Learning to bring about change in their own selves and communities. These accounts from Ghana, the Gambia, and Cameroon demonstrate that people have the capabilities to make their communities better places. They also show that, in change processes, Action Learning might be a useful approach to adopt, in the face of complexity of development work and practice. Action Learning, on the other hand, empowers organisations, individuals, and communities and develops capacities to continually reflect and learn. Four development and learning facilitators from VSO and PSO who accompanied this journey share these three stories with you, and conclude with the challenges and lessons we have learnt while working with the approach.

¹ VSO is an international development organisation that works through volunteers to fight poverty in developing countries. See www.vso.nl and www.vsointernational.org

² PSO, an association of sixty Dutch development organisations, engages in capacity development support for civil society organisations in developing countries. See www.pso.nl

What is Action Learning?

Action Learning is a cyclic process in which people and organisations again and again go through four stages of learning: planning, action, reflection, and learning. It is a nonstop process of acquiring knowledge and improving actions. An essential characteristic is that it does not come to an end after lessons have been learnt, for then the cyclic process starts again. The end of each learning phase is the start of a new planning phase, while in the planning phase lessons are translated into new actions, and reflecting on the actions will result in new lessons learnt. Over and over again, people and organisations can take these four steps. When implemented systematically and consciously, the learning process can be intensified. Practice shows that it is useful to go through the Action Learning Cycle alone and with others. When working in groups, it is helpful to appoint a facilitator to manage the learning process.



The disabled safely cross the roads – a story from Ghana

In the streets of Ghana's Ashanti region, something inspiring is happening. Public drivers stop and come out of their cars to help people with disabilities to cross the roads. Previously, the blind and other disabled Ghanaians had to wait for long periods to cross the street and were often hit by vehicles while rushing to reach the opposite side of the road. Moreover, in the Ashanti region of Ghana, front seats of public transport are now reserved for people with disabilities, so that they no longer have to struggle with others to board vehicles. And, nowadays, more road traffic offenders are prosecuted, which benefits disabled Ghanaians.

What triggered people to show more respect for the disabled?

Radio messages made the public aware of the challenges of traffic use by the physically disabled in Ghana. The broadcasts urged people to show more respect for this minority group. As a result, institutions, such as the Public Drivers Union, were prompted to develop plans to minimise road accidents involving people with disabilities. All this was realised within a period of only six months, thanks to the advocacy work of the Women's Wing of the Ashanti regional branch of the Ghana Society of the Physically Disabled (GSPD).

How did the Women's Wing achieve these results?

It all started with the identification of an alarming connection between disability and road accidents by GSPD's Women's Wing. GSPD operates countrywide, in 137 districts in all ten regions of Ghana, and has a membership of more than 8,500 people. GSPD champions the cause of people with disabilities regarding their access to education, employment, health, transportation, sports, and cultural activities. Its advocacy work takes place at national, regional, and community levels.

In the Ashanti region, GSPD's Women's Wing decided to form an Action Learning Set, inspired by its participation in VSO's Action Learning Programme. Action Learning Sets are groups of people, usually about five to ten persons, who regularly meet. They support each other in their learning process, in order to take purposeful action on work issues and in their personal lives. Together, they reflect, learn and act. A proven method in meetings is to ask questions, and not to give instructions on how to act. In this way, individual listening skills as well as the ability to discover problems through open questions are strengthened.³

The Women's Wing's Action Learning Set was made up of eleven women. Their aim was a reduction of road accidents involving physically disabled people in

³For more information, see Praxis Note No. 53, 'Using Action Learning Sets methodology in an NGO capacity building programme' (2010) Available at: www.intrac.org/resources.php?action=resource&id=689

their region. The women met once a month to discuss and further explore the issue. They asked each other probing questions for reflection. By systematically creating time and space for reflection, they collectively made a good analysis of the problem and discovered opportunities for change. One activity led to the other. They decided to target the media, the Public Drivers Union, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Authority, and the Traffic Unit of the National Police Services.

Subsequently, messages and activities were designed. The starting point was a media campaign. The Women's Wing successfully lobbied for free air time on three radio stations that operate in the environs to carry out their educational campaign.

As a result, the Women's

Wing managed to interact with Ghana's Road Safety Campaign Coordinator. The women showed evidence of road accidents involving people with physical disabilities, and they discussed how these could be reduced and prevented. This contact provided easy access to the selected target groups.

The constituents were impressed by the women's ideas, and decided to take action. To cut a long story short, the general public and significant Ghanaian institutions are now committed to ensuring safety for the physically disabled on the roads of Ghana's Ashanti region. This is the result of the enthusiasm and hard work of the Action Learning Set of GSPD's Women's Wing.

The benefits of Action Learning

Action Learning has empowered GSPD to improve its work and meet the needs of its members. First of all, the organisation has learnt to embrace innovative practices. Moreover, GSPD realises that ownership is essential. As the advocacy idea



emerged from the Action Learning Set itself, the commitment was enhanced. Also, the significance of collaboration and networking is recognised. In fact, road safety for the disabled is only a start. The Action Learning approach will be extended to other wings and other advocacy initiatives of GSPD. Action Learning made GSPD decide to continuously strengthen its skills to reflect and learn.

The liberation of innocent children – a story from the Gambia

Numerous Gambian girls and boys have been released from isolation and illiteracy. In the past, many healthy and intelligent children were locked up in their homes. They did not go to school, never communicated with others, and were not expected to ever lead an independent life; because these children are deaf. The deaf are socially excluded from their communities and their prospects of leading dignified lives were limited in the Gambia. But nowadays they master the Gambian Sign Language and have ample opportunities ‘to conquer the world’.

What helped these children?

The Gambia Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (GADHOH) played a major role in this emancipation process of deaf people in The Gambia. GADHOH is one of the actors that contributed to the development of the Gambian Sign Language and more and more deaf children are now educated in this language. The Association also provided its deaf members with education in other subjects, such as English and health. And it assisted deaf persons to find jobs, offered training to become teachers of sign language and literacy, and provided education opportunities for parents of deaf children. Furthermore, GADHOH developed awareness-raising activities for the wider public, so that deaf persons are respected and diversity is valued. By joining GADHOH, many deaf children were helped to come out of their isolated position. Their membership also stimulated interaction with their peers. Ladiam, a deaf boy, explains:

‘I met Sang Bass at a GADHOH deaf club held at Kanifing. We became acquainted and I came to know him intimately and grew fond of him. Sang happens to live in Farafenni, a place which is very far away from my home in Kanifing. Despite the distance and transport costs, I visit him there very often. I never had a real desire to go out of the area for fear of not meeting anyone like me with whom I can communicate and feel at ease. My association with Sang has changed all that.’

How did GADHOH membership increase?

In the past, the national secretariat of GADHOH had weak links and relationships with its membership branches at the grassroots level. GADHOH had little knowledge of the needs and expectations of their constituency. Therefore, it was difficult to reach out to deaf people and create awareness for their needs.

The start of the GADHOH’s change process was through its partnership with VSO in the Gambia, and participation in the Action Learning Programme. GADHOH used an Action Research approach to strengthen its membership base and participation. The research was implemented by staff of the national secretariat and the local branches. Jointly, they analysed and reflected on the number and location of deaf people in different areas and their specific needs. This resulted in other activities, such as joint training and exchange of knowledge and ideas. Deaf people associating with other deaf people was stimulated, and more deaf children felt confident enough to go to school. Moreover, deaf people were encouraged to effectively run a local GADHOH branch and reach out to many more deaf. This created more visibility in the Gambian communities where GADHOH is active. Thus, the outreach to the Gambian deaf and their families has been increased considerably. And the effectiveness of awareness-raising among the wider public has been strengthened.

A key achievement of GADHOH is the rise in membership, from 800 to more than 1,300 deaf and hard of hearing people,

since 2008. The more the membership grew, the greater the number of deaf sign language users, deaf couples, deaf employees, and deaf participants in recreation and sports. Moreover, amongst the deaf, there is a boost in self-confidence, acquisition of social skills, and the desire to pursue personal economic independence.

The benefits of Action Learning

The small GADHOH branches have been reactivated. Action Learning rekindled the spirit of coming together, to be recognised, and to fight for the rights of the deaf and hard of hearing, especially the young. GADHOH discovered that joint action research and reflection on action result in more and effective actions to be taken. A GADHOH member in Farafeny said:

'We are planning to mobilise more people, visit more communities and houses, talk to more people who have deaf and hard of hearing children but are keeping them under lock, so that these children can also enjoy their life and participate in social activities.'

The jigsaw of Mayor Clement – a story from Cameroon

In Santa, a municipality in North West Cameroon, young people enthusiastically volunteer to work as teachers and health workers within their communities. Although they do not receive salaries, they are excited about the opportunity to contribute to the wellbeing of the people. It was Mayor Clement's unexpected visit to the hospital that was the start of this initiative.

What did the Mayor encounter?

Councils in Cameroon are responsible for the supply of education and health services, including staffing. However, too often they do not have the required personnel at hand. In 2010, Mayor Clement of Santa experienced the seriousness of the personnel shortages for himself when he visited the local hospital. He also knew about the alarming unemployment numbers among young people. The Mayor saw the connection between the two – the need for skills and

the skills that were being wasted. For him they were like two pieces of a jigsaw that could be put together to make something bigger than their parts. And this is exactly what he did.

What made the youth volunteering scheme successful?

After his shocking experience in the local hospital, Mayor Clement motivated the Santa Council to tackle the problem by involving young people from the communities. Before starting the new initiative, the Council decided to self-assess their way of working within the communities. They systematically went through the Action Learning phases. After a number of Action Learning sessions, the Council realised that they needed to engage the youth more than they had done previously. This became the action point which motivated the development of the Youth Engagement Through Volunteering Scheme. Some funds were allocated to start the scheme. Young people were offered the opportunity to gain experience as health workers and teachers in their own communities. They did not receive salaries, but received other in-kind incentives, such as free accommodation. The Council made sure that all involved shared the vision of volunteering. The scheme was not a way to make profit for the volunteers, but rather a commitment to make their communities better places. Many young people embraced the idea.

Mayor Clement realised the value of Action Learning while developing a new initiative. He made sure time and space were available to continuously monitor and adapt the youth scheme initiative. Due to his strong leadership, others were convinced and motivated to adopt the Action Learning approach. The Council reflected on the challenges, such as initial hesitation among stakeholders, and made the choice to be hopeful, and to continue to take action. As a result of the Action Learning sessions, amongst others, Government Ministers were approached to support the scheme and a recruitment strategy was developed. The parents of the young volunteers also came together and worked out what assistance they could give, such as accommodation. In

this way the communities gained ownership of the scheme.

Throughout the planning phase, despite some fears, there was conviction in the scheme. Finally, in September 2010, action was taken and 13 volunteers were selected. These enthusiastic young people started as teachers and health workers. In 2011, the number of volunteers increased to 20.

The benefits of Action Learning

The systematic use of the Action Learning Cycle helped the Council to consciously develop the initiative and offered them the flexibility to adjust when needed.

The success greatly depended on leadership, in terms of words, action, and behaviour. And the Mayor's commitment was vital, both regarding the youth scheme and the Action Learning approach. His conviction and the clarity of his ideas persuaded others. For the near future, the Council intends to hold quarterly Action Learning meetings with the volunteers, as a way to get feedback from the volunteers and also to help them to learn. Ideally, their newly gained skills will also help these young people to find paid employment in the future.

The Santa Council is determined that Action Learning will cut across all its future work. And it is hoped that the youth volunteering scheme can be applied to agriculture, HIV/AIDS, and the environment.

Life is tough, but we are all transformers – about the Action Learning approach

What do the above stories tell us? First, as we all know, life is tough for many children and adults in developing countries, in particular for those who belong to minority groups, such as the disabled. Secondly, solutions are often around the corner. Mayor Clement, for instance, unexpectedly saw the connection between personnel gaps and unemployment among young people. For him it was 'like two pieces of a jigsaw that could be put together'. When people and organisations systematically and consciously reflect and learn, they are

able to discover successful, creative and context specific solutions.

GSPD in Ghana, GADHOH in The Gambia, and the Santa Council in Cameroon discovered the benefits of Action Learning to bring about change in their communities. There are several methods to alter situations and improve people's wellbeing. In the three cases above, Action Learning appears to be particularly helpful, and the stories might inspire others to adopt the approach. Action Learning builds capacities of organisations and individuals. It empowers and motivates to continuously learn and develop new workable plans. The Action Learning Cycle (see Figure 1) is a practical tool in this process.

Without knowing, many people use elements of Action Learning. However, it is advisable to consciously adopt and internalise the approach. Based on the experiences in Ghana, The Gambia, and Cameroon, here are useful checklists of 'challenges' and 'lessons learnt' for those who intend to embrace Action Learning.

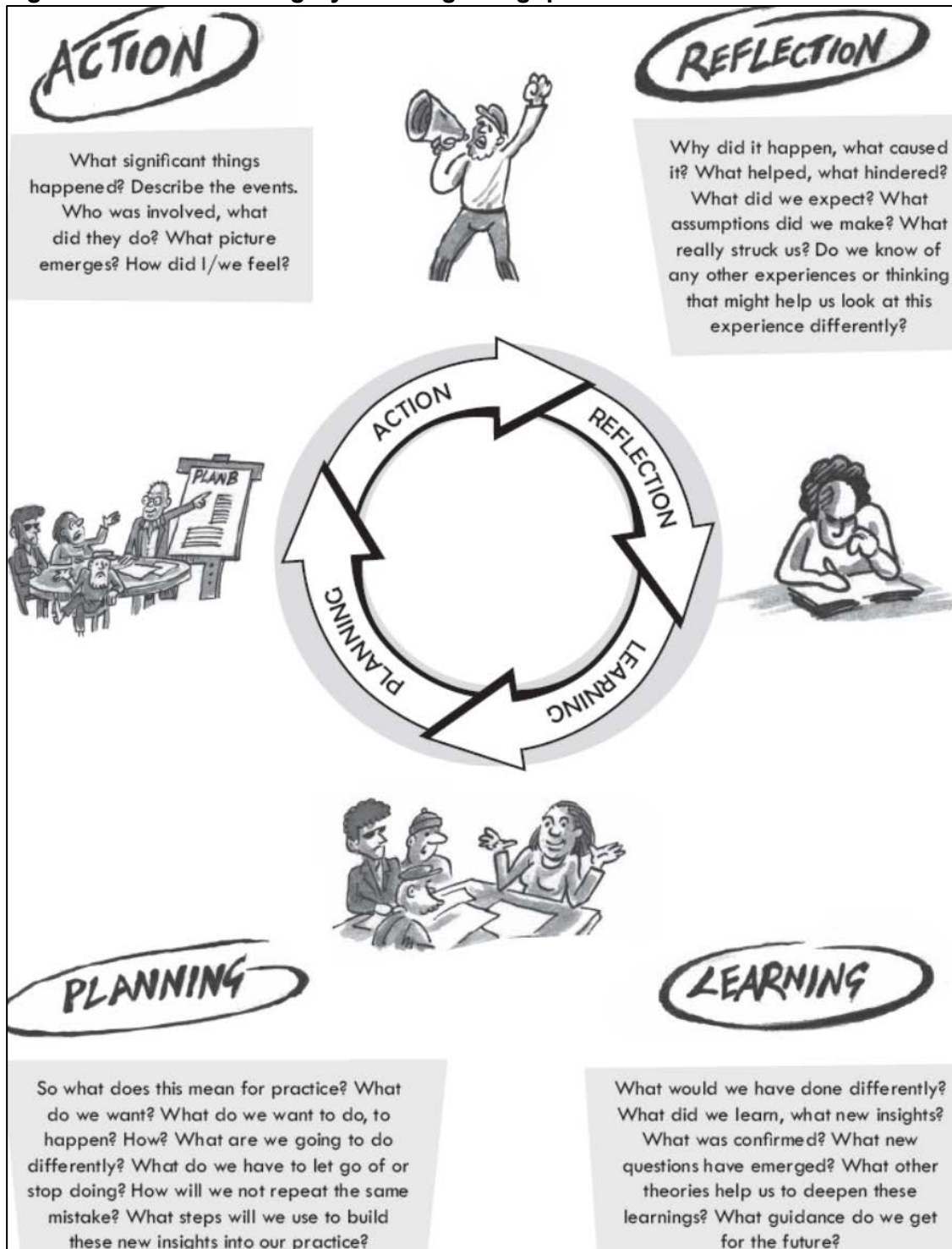
What challenges can one expect?

The number one challenge that anyone involved in a learning process can meet is that people and organisations are always 'on the move' and 'acting' rather than reflecting on their work. Obviously, organisations need time to make a shift and commit themselves to balancing actions and reflective learning. Therefore, introducing Action Learning within organisations usually is a much slower process than initially intended.

Moreover, integration of Action Learning within organisational processes is a slow-paced procedure. People and organisations tend to see Action Learning as a specific project parallel to their organisational processes, instead of an integrated element. (For more challenges, see box on page 8.)

Over the years, we and our partners have reflected on, and learnt from, the challenges and successes we experienced in the programme.

Figure 1: Action Learning Cycle with guiding questions



What are the lessons learnt while working with Action Learning?

Some of the lessons below were new and exciting for those involved; others are well-known by every practitioner. However, it is advisable to 'relearn' them and to be able to translate them into action.

- 1) **Empowerment** of organisations comes with empowerment of individuals and empowerment of communities. Therefore, participants

are invited to bring in both their organisational and their personal lives. For instance, participants of Action Learning Sets who practice Action Learning in their personal lives are most likely to apply it to their work as well.

- 2) **Ownership and commitment** of all involved are essential to guarantee continuation. This challenges us to join people in their learning process on

issues that directly affect their own lives and that they feel they can influence by making new decisions.

- 3) **Time and space** are important conditions for Action Learning. Especially when people are asked to work in a different way, we see they need time to grow accustomed to it. They also need space, such as a cosy kitchen, a workshop room, or a place in the shade. And they need space to experiment without being expected to present direct results.
- 4) **Leadership** is a key issue. Leaders are crucial for giving good examples and creating time and space. Without having a buy-in by the formal leaders of the organisation, Action Learning processes are likely to evaporate easily. Often, things seem to be so much easier and quicker without having formal leaders involved. However, it is worthwhile 'waiting' for them. Mayor Clement is a good example of an involved leader.
- 5) **Change agents**, the informal leaders within organisations and communities, also play vital roles in keeping the fire burning. They are the ones that are at the forefront of change processes. Hence, ways must be found to support and encourage them as much as possible. While working with Action Learning, PSO and VSO staff discovered that the approach also encourages people to become change agents themselves. With tremendous respect, staff witnessed the impact the approach can have on individuals and groups.
- 6) **Resistance** should be met as an old friend. Involved persons who are positive about Action Learning easily forget that new ways of working often meet resistance. People do not immediately accept the idea of joint learning. One will undoubtedly meet some resistance, as many people are afraid to leave their comfort zones. How do they know that what they share will not be held against them at other moments? Practice shows that it is much easier to deal with this resistance when you welcome it as an old friend you are expecting. For this, a learning attitude is helpful.

Challenges

- Doubt and fear to start something new and to lose face.
- Lack of knowledge and ideas on how to share the concept of Action Learning and its benefits in an understandable way.
- Insufficient commitment and lack of ownership.
- Discouragement, because of the time-consuming process.
- Absence of leadership.
- Discontinuation when staff depart.
- Scarce financial and personnel resources.
- Lack of knowledge and ideas on how to continue Action Learning after the project phase.

- 7) **A learning attitude**, marked by openness, trust, flexibility and patience, has shown to be crucial. We see that when a significant number of people adopt this attitude, the organisation's learning culture gets a boost. Moreover, relationships are deepened and enriched. Action Learning fosters the practice of appreciative inquiry that seeks to engage and motivate people.
- 8) **The reach of Action Learning** can easily be expanded to be applied to each topic and in many contexts. When it is successful in one domain, it can be easily adopted in others. For instance, GSPD will broaden the approach to other wings and advocacy initiatives.

Fortunately, for individuals and organisations learning is a natural process that never ceases. Action Learning is an approach that supports this human process. By going through each of the phases of the Action Learning Cycle systematically and consciously, learning is deepened and vitalised.

Figure 1 has been taken from *Barefoot Guide To Working with Organisations and Socials Change*, page 110. The other drawings in this note are taken from *Barefoot Guide 2: Learning Practices in Organisations and Social Change*, pp 88, 99, 140. The *Barefoot Guides* can be downloaded from: www.barefootguide.org