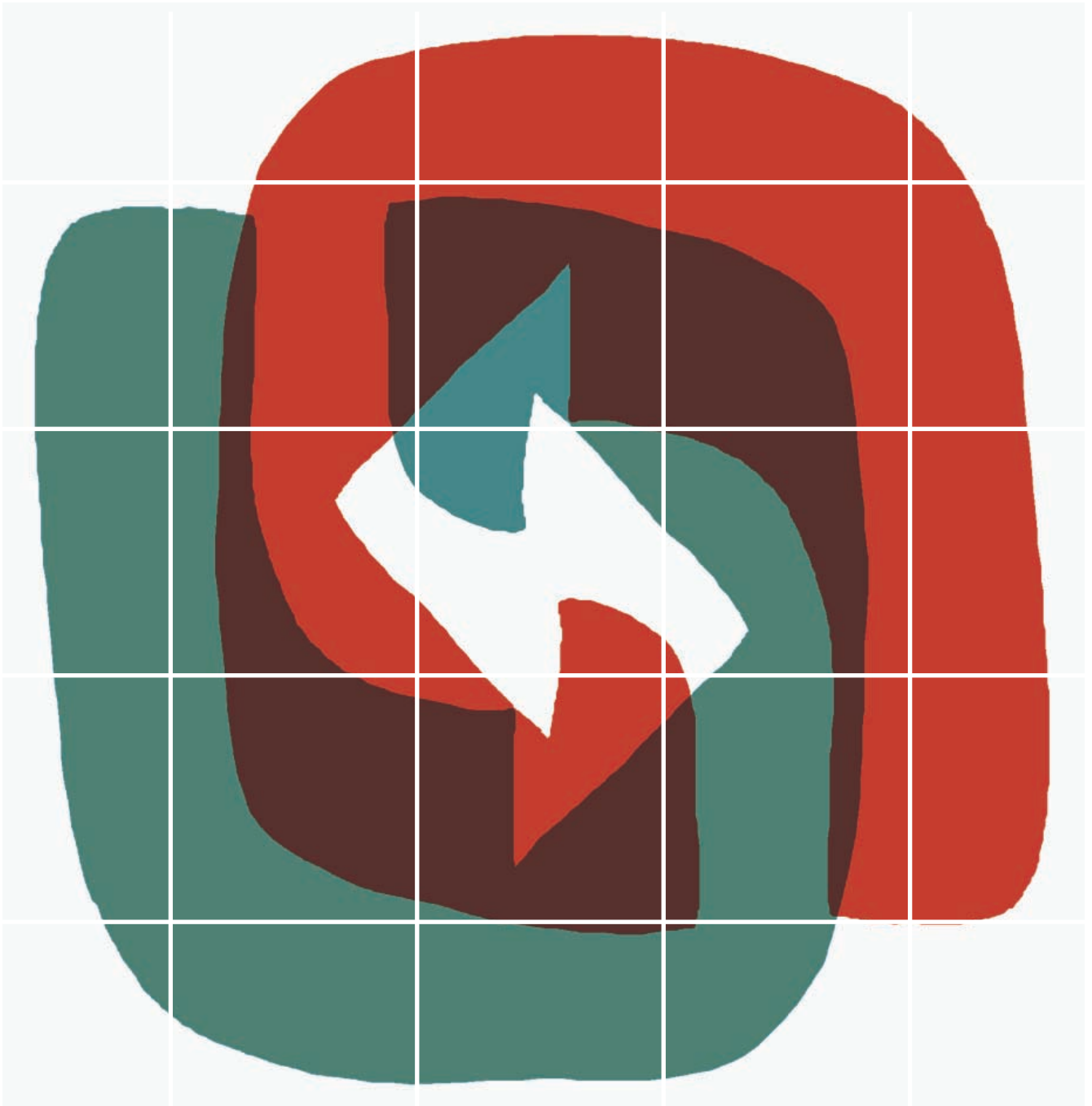




Lessons for change

Participatory learning groups in an aid bureaucracy

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Background

Organisational learning, in which leaders and managers give priority to learning as integral to practice, is increasingly recognized as critical to improved performance. ActionAid, DFID and Sida collaborated with the Participation Group at the Institute of Development Studies to explore understandings of learning and to document innovative approaches.

Learning with ActionAid centred on institutionalising a radical organization-wide approach to accountability, learning and planning. The new system prioritises accountability to poor people and partners and so revolutionizes the way the organization does business. The paper by David and Mancini documents the struggle to institutionalize the new system and the extraordinary changes that it has engendered.

The learning process with the UK Department of International Development (DFID) looked at how to reflect on and improve relationships as a central aspect of aid delivery. The paper by Eyben provides a justification for the role of relationships in DFID's practice as a bilateral development organization. In their paper, Pasteur and Scott-Villiers examine the importance of learning about relationships and offer a set of questions for the organization wishing to learn. Larbi Jones describes three DFID projects and the methodologies applied at various stages to reflect on and learn about partnerships and influencing in Brazil.

Staff of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) worked to explore understandings and practices of participation across the agency. They experimented with participatory learning groups, which took different forms in Stockholm and Nairobi. In their paper, Cornwall, Pratt and Scott-Villiers detail the learning methodology and point out pitfalls and possibilities. Cornwall and Pratt, in a separate paper, explore the realities of implementing participation in a complex bilateral development organisation.

Much of the impetus for IDS to engage in these collaborations resulted from a workshop held

at IDS in May 2001 on "Power, Procedures and Relationships" which highlighted learning as a way to achieve consistency between personal behaviour, institutional norms and the new development agenda (IDS Policy Briefing, Issue 15). A group of IDS staff have pursued this subject, including Robert Chambers, Andrea Cornwall, Rosalind Eyben, Kath Pasteur, Garrett Pratt and Patta Scott-Villiers. IDS also organised a workshop in February 2003 to facilitate reflection and sharing between those involved in each of these initiatives.

Participatory learning groups in an aid bureaucracy

Today's development talk is full of concepts such as participation, ownership, partnership and accountability; concepts that speak above all to the complex relationships that those who work in aid bureaucracies need to manage. Yet scant opportunity exists within these settings for reflection in and on everyday working practice and its relationship with the ideals that policies profess.

In this paper, we describe an experiment in creating these spaces for reflection and learning in such an organisational setting. It narrates the process of establishing and running two participatory learning groups in the Swedish official development agency, Sida: one in the Stockholm headquarters, and one in the Embassy of Sweden in Nairobi. In our work, we evolved a hybrid approach to participatory learning, taking principles from action oriented research methodologies and adapting them to the context of an aid bureaucracy.

Through cycles of reflection and action over a period of close to a year, group members explored experiences and ideas, building analyses, alliances and possibilities for action through participatory interaction. Fostering subtle changes through small acts and shifts in thinking, the learning groups helped foster greater reflexivity amongst participants and, with it, a degree of engagement and awareness with the potential for changes at other scales. This paper reports on the way the process developed, and reflects on lessons learnt with potential for wider application.

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Introduction

How can a staff member of a bilateral aid agency understand and act on a concept like "participation" in ways that are congruent with the organisation's mission, yet meet the needs of the infinitely varied contexts in which the organisation and the individual operates? A team from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) sought to answer this question, and embarked on a process of experimentation that engaged Sida staff members in an action research and learning process. The aim was to generate understandings of participation that were rooted in the everyday realities of a bureaucrat's life and work. Working with two learning groups in the Stockholm head office and a regional Embassy of Sweden, in Nairobi, we drew on cooperative enquiry and action learning methodologies. In doing so, we sought a way of infusing ongoing actions with systematic reflection, and hoped as a result to promote greater clarity in understanding participation, and to increase the scope for decisive action.

This paper seeks to share what we learnt from this experiment. We provide an account of the challenges and considerations of organising and facilitating a learning process in the context of an aid bureaucracy. We reflect on our starting points, the ways in which we used time between formal meetings, the mix of activities we engaged in, the endpoints and outcomes of the process, and on the lessons we learnt from it. This experience leads us to suggest that participatory learning groups can offer a useful approach to dealing with the relational concepts – such as "partnership" and "ownership", as well as "participation" – that are so much part of what development organisations say they do and yet do not lend themselves easily to definitions or standardised procedures.

Learning about participation

Bilateral donors operate within and across a complexity of partnerships and positions, and are required to apply concepts like "participation" to achieve a variety of ends. To do so effectively calls for them to be able to listen and learn, to adapt and respond, to adjust and re-adjust, and to position and re-position themselves in different relationships and contexts. This in turn requires enhancing their capacities for reflexivity – that is, the ability to reflect on and to be aware of one's own behaviour and its impact on other people, and on the dynamics of the social and professional situations in which one is located. Efforts to "mainstream" or "institutionalise" participation in donor agencies have generally involved interventions that seek to provide staff with information, techniques and rationales for building participation into their work.¹ Useful as they can be, such interventions are often insufficient to really change the way things are done; they tend to provide people with little of the reflexivity needed to deal with the extraordinary variety of participation in practice. The challenge we set ourselves was to find an approach that would try to do what seemed to be lacking.

One of our most important influences was co-operative enquiry, used in a range of organisational settings to build reflexivity and co-create knowledge for understanding and action (Heron 1996; Heron and Reason 1998; Reason 2001). Co-operative enquiry involves forming a small group who meet at regular intervals over a number of months to enquire into a topic of mutual interest – such as 'what positions on participation exist within this organisation?' Each group member pursues their part of the enquiry in the context of their everyday working life, developing skills of reflexivity and asking questions about things that they might otherwise have been taken for

granted. Cycles of action and reflection enable the group to develop individual and collective understanding, testing out ideas and asking further questions. Insights and experiences are shared with the group and others as part of a process of co-constructing understanding, which is then used as a basis for action or further enquiry. Experience suggests that five to eight cycles of reflection and action are necessary to pursue a satisfactory enquiry, with these cycles taking place over anything from a few days to several months or years.

We also drew ideas and inspiration from action learning (Revans 1982, 1998; Weinstein 1999). In action learning, a small group of five or six people meet repeatedly and are facilitated by a skilled practitioner. Each individual identifies a live challenge they face in their work. In each meeting, the members have "airtime" to share their challenge with the group, who ask questions to help them clarify their analysis and decide on a course of action, without making judgements or suggesting solutions. Group members share their progress at subsequent meetings, and benefit from more useful questioning from their peers, as well as by seeing others grapple with their own issues.

There are some common principles that underlie these types of approaches:

- **The relationships and trust formed amongst a group provide a context for learning. The group meets over time which allows this context to develop. The process of interaction employs and builds interpersonal skills and self-understanding, and is a source of learning in itself.**
- **Knowledge is produced through a participatory process, in which people bring their own knowledge and experience and build their own analysis on that basis. They are**

¹ See Blackburn and Holland (1998) on institutionalising participation; see Chambers, Pettit and Scott-Villiers (2001), Eyben (this series), Pasteur and Scott-Villiers (this series) and Hinton and Groves (forthcoming) for further discussion on the challenges of 'mainstreaming' relational concepts in development organisations.

not offered solutions, but supported to reach their own conclusions.

- **People learn through reflection on their action. Analysis generates further actions, which become the subject for further reflection. Thus there is a cycle of reflection-action-reflection.**
- **The learning is oriented towards changes in practice, it is not learning for learning's sake.**
- **There is some overlap in the theme or the professional practice that group members investigate together.**
- **There is room for adaptation and variation suited to the topic of enquiry, the nature of the group members, and their context.**

Group-based approaches such as these offer possibilities for developing "communities of practice" (Wenger 1999; Wenger et al. 2002): supporting small, purposive knowledge networks within organisations to enhance organisational learning. Wenger et al. define a community of practice as constituting 'three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and a shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain' (2002: 27). In this case, the domain was both participation-in-Sida and, as we were to discover, Sida itself as an organisation. We sought to extend the 'community of people who care about this domain' through a number of activities, from an initial training course to which a wider constituency of people were drawn, and public space events.

Our adoption of these methodological principles was tempered by the need to take account of the bureaucratic context. We looked for ways of making the most of people's very limited time – by having shorter meetings, by encouraging them to commission research from the support team and by using regular interviews as a kind of diary for group members to explore their perceptions, experiences and feelings. Through meetings and other activities with the groups, we sought to introduce a form of practice that provided the space that everyday work often denies for

people to reflect on their actions, and thus develop both the capability for reflection, and greater reflexivity – that is, awareness of one's own attitudes and behaviour in relation to others and an ability to act on that awareness.

We remain unsure how to label what we did. It was a hybrid that took a different form in the two settings. In Stockholm, members commonly referred to the group by its adopted name *Lagom*, which means 'not too much, not too little – just enough' in Swedish. In Nairobi, we decided to call what we were doing an 'action learning group', as the members were very keen that we focus on the practical application of their learning. As a generic term we will use the term 'participatory learning groups' in this paper – less to create a new label, than to convey our general approach.

The two processes in brief

Each group had its own rhythm, and its own process. This section presents the major activities in the enquiry process – from starting, to running learning group meetings, to ending and making new beginnings. The following sections look at the outcomes and try to capture the lessons we learned that might be helpful to people starting a similar process in a similar setting.

Starting Off

The first meeting of a participatory learning group is already the end of a long road. In this case, the project arose out of a convergence of interests and concerns with the adviser charged with the brief for participation in Sida's Policy Division, Katja Jassey, who became the project's "champion" within the organisation: in the ethnography of bureaucracies, in popular communications and creative approaches to learning, and in the interplay of policy rhetoric and everyday organisational practice in development organisations. We were to begin the process with a training course that would draw together a wider constituency of people in the organisation to reflect on the theme of participation and organisations. From this, the Stockholm-based participatory learning group would be formed, with whom Andrea and Patta would work. Another group would be established in a country Embassy, which Garrett would facilitate. We were to share experiences, spend time in each context, link the two groups and learn from each other in the process.

Katja opened the doors within Sida, opened negotiations with the country office in Kenya, found the funding and persuaded people to join and support the process. She networked and cajoled and gradually drew together seven very different people from across the head office to form the learning group that would call

themselves "*Lagom*" – a term reflecting the group's desire to use their engagement with the process to optimal effect and not spend too much, or too little, time and energy. Our first encounters with those who were to become *Lagom* were on a brief visit some months before we began to work together; to assess needs for the training course. Together with a dozen or so colleagues, *Lagom* members came together at IDS some months later. Each brought distinct views and experiences, informed by their location within Sida, their particular areas of expertise, and also by their life experiences, personalities and networks they belonged to within and beyond the organisation.

All seven *Lagom* members chose to take part, and in turn negotiated with their managers the time that they would spend in the group. *Lagom* was provided with direct resources from Sida and therefore had to cope with the typical problems of these types of groups: scrutiny from line managers and others, accountability for the use of resources, time squeezed into to existing workloads, and short-term pressures and distractions (Wenger et al. 2002). The idea that the IDS staff were "experts" in participation gave the group members confidence that it was worth joining, and that there was something to be gained from setting aside time for meetings no matter how busy they were.

In Kenya the project, and Garrett as the potential facilitator, were introduced to the Embassy through personal contacts made by Katja. Garrett visited the Embassy for several days to introduce the concept for the project in person, to meet the staff, to get an introduction to the Sida programmes in the country, and to find out what would make a learning group useful to individuals who might join. The

Councillor's enthusiasm for what was, in his eyes, a good opportunity for staff development meant there was high pressure on individual programme officers to take part. Some members of staff were more enthusiastic than others. Some saw the theme of participation as highly relevant, or translated it into concepts like partnership or dialogue that made more sense to them given their daily work. Others associated it with community level work that they saw as primarily the responsibility of their partners, and did not regard it as a central challenge for their own work.

The two groups thus began on a different basis, and those who joined them had different interests, motivations, and organisational positions. Differences between the two groups were to be further accentuated by our different styles and interests.

Getting going: initiative, resources, support

We planned to combine facilitation of the groups with active support to assist busy desk officers in pursuing research ideas. For this, we needed to bring in local resource people as co-facilitators and co-researchers. In Kenya, the anthropologist Ferdinand Okworo worked with Garrett on ethnographic studies of participation in practice that were to complement the learning groups in the Embassy. In Stockholm, Seema Arora-Jonsson, a social historian, and Lotta Widmark, an anthropologist, were contracted as consultants to the group, with the intention that they should help each group member gather and process data for their own individual enquiries and provide encouragement and support in the periods between meetings. We were not completely clear at the outset about what their roles and responsibilities would be: in part, because none of us knew what shape the process would actually take.

The Stockholm group met briefly following the training course in Brighton to share concepts and experiences of participation, and hopes and fears for the exercise. The first formal learning group meeting in Stockholm a month or so later took a more structured shape. At the meeting the group worked out how to work best together, discussing how many meetings would be held, how long they would last, and

how much time group members would be expected to spend on related activities between meetings. Then the group turned to content: what did each individual think about participation – what issues, what questions, what challenges were the group to consider? (see Box 1). *Lagom* agreed the theme of the enquiry: 'Sida's Positions on Participation', but were less sure about purpose. Were they here to deepen individual understanding and ways of working around participation? Were they experimenting with a different way of learning that provided a safe and innovative space? Were they trying to influence Sida's approach to participation? They wanted all these things.

In the afternoons of meeting days, we began to hold a "clinic", to which each group member could come to discuss individual enquiry projects that they would undertake between the meetings. People would often come along and then linger for further discussion at these afternoon sessions, which provided another space with a different feel in which ideas and insights could be exchanged. The group went on to meet formally a further eight times over the course of a year: roughly every six weeks. Informal meetings took place much more frequently, either around the time of the formal meeting – in the canteen, or the pub, after the meeting had ended – or between meetings, at lunch or in people's offices. Seema Arora-Jonsson played a key part in facilitating discussion and reflection between as well as at the meetings, either through occasional informal lunches with the group. Her informal interviews with group members in between the meetings provided valuable space for reflection, as well as helping to shape the agenda for upcoming meetings.

The Nairobi group came together as a formally recognised work team in Sida's structure, not as a self-selected group with a particular interest in participation. As we note earlier, the Councillor saw the project as an opportunity for the professional development of his staff. Advantageous as it was to have this vital management buy-in, it became apparent that although most of the officers agreed to join, they had different levels of interest. The authority of the Councillor also meant that all participants were not equal and dissenting

Box 1 Exploring participation in Sida: fragments from the first Stockholm meeting

- How complex participation is in practice. Projects and policies involve lots of different processes – so it is very difficult to say definitively that one thing should always be done. 'We need to scale down our expectations', one person suggested, 'and be clear about who and how'.
- How little we know about what is actually going on out there. Finding more about who is participating, what "dialogue" actually means in practice, the extent to which "participation" involves broad-based involvement or remains a specific, technical issue is important - but also a challenge.
- Participation means so many different things - even within a department of people who all think they're working along the same lines! We need to clarify these as a starting point for our enquiry.
- Practising what is preached: bridging the gap. There are a lot of contradictions. 'Sometimes we force participation on projects when we don't have it inside our own [organisation]'.
- Old ideas in new times. Looking back we can see how we might have engaged greater participation in projects - but to what extent will this help us make sense of what to do in these new times of changing development assistance? What does "participation" mean in this new context? Is it still relevant?
- Participation and process thinking. 'Does participation mean that you have to be process directed – and to what extent can management rely on processes that are essentially intangible?'
- Participation as a right - and a responsibility. 'We talk about participation as a right without thinking what is my responsibility'. 'Do I have the right to participate if I don't give anything?'
- Getting real – being clear. 'One reason we need to know what we mean by participation is that you can end up feeling disappointed – can think it is about having all your wishes met, but participation is not about having all your dreams answered'. 'You can end up feeling even more disempowered.'

opinions were more difficult to voice, but the learning group did allow a different space for debates on controversial topics. The group developed a strong focus on individual learning activities that allowed room for people to find an aspect of the theme that did fit with their own sense of learning priorities, and what was happening in their specific programmes. Developing a group vision for the process was an important step towards starting to learn together (see Box 2 overleaf). Although participants in Nairobi started with varying levels of enthusiasm, as trust deepened they found themselves willing to work together through an unusual and uncertain process.

The Nairobi group met six times as a participatory learning group, usually for a half day workshop, but also through discussions integrated into staff retreats. They continue to meet for the purpose of co-operative learning

through internal seminars, which were a direct outcome of the learning process. As members of the group were immediate colleagues, there were numerous opportunities for interaction. Garrett and Ferdinand participated both in these settings and also undertook research directed by the thematic interests of Embassy staff in field projects; carrying out interviews, producing videos and documenting some of the complexities of participation in practice at field level, in close association with the Embassy's partners.

Unlike the Stockholm group, which remained relatively constant, the Nairobi group saw many changes in membership during its life. Particularly influential was the change of leadership of the Development Cooperation team midway, and a shift from perceiving the action learning group as a source of learning on a specific topic, to a source of team building

Box 2 Developing a group vision in Nairobi

The Nairobi learning group reflected on where they wanted their involvement with the action learning group to lead them using the questions:

'I am going to participate in this action learning group so I can be/do ...' They came up with a number of points relating to understanding better what participation means, in theory and in practice. But what was more striking is that many of their desired learning issues revolved around relationships, and included being 'sensitive to people's real needs and how these affect participation', 'gain the confidence of people I work with', and 'be more clear concerning roles, expectations, contexts'. Participants' concerns were mainly pragmatic, and their expectations were largely about how to better design and implement forms of cooperation in a more participatory way, but their perceptions of their own roles in this provided a lot of scope for a more reflective approach, seeing themselves as 'active participant in contributing to participatory processes', 'an actor to improve possible influences from district citizens', or 'a partner in assisting people to address their own problems'.

and change in work culture. This was reflected in the shape meetings took: early meetings focused on typologies of participation and individual inquiries, later meetings included looking at internal participation within the Embassy.

Throughout the early stages, the overarching challenge for the internal leaders and external resource people was to strike a balance between clarity of purpose and process on the one hand and open-endedness and iteration on the other. Both groups discussed the purpose at the outset, but members continued to have different priorities and preferences. The groups were reproducing differences of culture and orientation that existed within the organisation, whose significance they understood with particular poignancy when they observed their own tendency to indecisiveness and difficulties with arriving at a single group position or product.

Meetings and Methods

Meetings were the main events that gave a shape to the enquiry process. Each meeting was tailored to the point the group had reached in its enquiry and we chose a variety of methods of sharing and building knowledge. In both groups, there was a slow shift from external to internal facilitation over time and during the transition, resource people helped plan events, and then provided support when requested. Building facilitation skills within the group enabled spin-off activities that were not so reliant on external resource people, giving opportunities for group members to gradually gain greater ownership over the process.

The way meetings were used for learning was richly varied, and did not follow a strict model or pattern in either context. We identified issues and questions arising from people's experience over the period between meetings, shared progress and continuously explored and adjusted a range of individual learning projects from participation in water programmes, to participatory evaluations and participation in country strategy preparation. In the meetings, we used diagramming, story telling, discussion and role play as different means of building and sharing knowledge. One powerful experience in Nairobi, for example, was using role-play and exploring how being in the shoes of partner organisations might feel (see Box 3). We experimented with the action learning practice of using "useful questions", which seem simple, but are in practice difficult to use well. Meetings were carefully recorded, and notes on action plans and key discussions were relayed back - and, in the case of the Stockholm group, kept in the internet project room to which all group members had access.

In Stockholm, we experimented with and abandoned having abbreviated "airtime" for each person to be heard and questioned by the whole group, moving instead to sessions that involved the group in an activity and in discussions around that; in Nairobi, an attempt was also made to use "airtime" in the group, but the time was insufficient to achieve depth, so the group chose to work in pairs. There were also more conventional "training" elements to the group's work. Missing out on

Box 3 A role-play on participation in an urban development project

In an early meeting, group members acted out roles of key players in a park upgrading project still in its early stages. They were asked to imagine that they were now ten years in the future. Where did they think their efforts to support public consultations and work through a committee of stakeholders would lead them in the future? As they teased one another about their scintillating future careers, they also outlined a vision of a project that had led to ongoing successes and strong relationships in the region. Playing the Mayor ten years later, one of the programme staff said, 'That was the first process of that calibre. You will recall, we had quite a lot of difficulties with getting all the people concerned on board to start with. But the contacts between Sida and the municipality began at that moment, and it has become even better than we thought. The starting point we had for the interactions we have today with Sida was that process.' Looking back, the only regret that the person playing the Mayor noted was, 'If anything, we should have gone a bit more slowly. We had that very speedy preparation. And maybe we could have involved more people and had much more true participation.' The point was affirmed by the person playing a key local NGO figure, who said that given the innovative public-private partnership that they were trying to establish through the project, 'we had a lot of work to involve the citizenship. We could have used more time.' Reality later mirrored the imagination of the Sida team. The project did take longer than initially anticipated, as local volunteers took over the process and proceeded at a pace that made sense to them.

the IDS course, the Nairobi group received input on concepts and meanings of participation and on organisations and participation, to contextualise their experiential learning. The Stockholm group requested, and arranged, training with Liz Goold on facilitation skills.

Each group had a common project that required making live decisions and served as a focal point for learning. One of the sparks in the Nairobi group was engaging with the urban park upgrading, in which they aimed to support an inclusive, participatory process. Several of the team members were directly involved in

the project, lending common experience as a reference point for discussions. The Stockholm group coincidentally took up another urban infrastructure project as their joint project, setting terms of reference for the consultants who would negotiate project plans with a municipality in Tanzania (see Box 4).

Participation in practice proved a great deal more difficult than it is in policy statements and the group learned how easy it is to call enthusiastically for the participation of so many stakeholders that it would be impossible to achieve – and, indeed, be potentially counterproductive – in reality.

Box 4 Participation by design: an exercise in working with an everyday bureaucratic document in Stockholm

One way desk officers in headquarters can support participation in the field is through influencing the design of commissioned studies and consultancies used for planning and evaluating aid programmes. The Stockholm group found an exercise in designing the terms of reference for a participatory study preparing an urban sanitation project in Tanzania a fascinating opportunity to think about the possibilities and limits of what they could actually affect, as donors. It also highlighted trade-offs between ideals of participation and the pragmatics of getting a good enough job done in a limited time. Designing the ToR as a group, participants noted how different the imprint of their departments would have been if they alone had produced the ToR; this also led to reflection on how rarely input is sought from different departments in commissioning studies or consultants, even when the issues are clearly of a multi-dimensional nature. In practice, though, being multi-dimensional also proved difficult, as the ToR began to take on the quality of a patchwork quilt, as one by one, layers of gender awareness, participation, environment, governance and poverty focus were added to the original technical specifications.

Action between meetings

In between meetings, members pursued their own individual learning, testing out and picking up on ideas to bring to the meeting. **Lagom's** enquiries on what "participation" meant to others in Sida ranged in style from more formal interviews to a quick survey of word associations, offering a chance to connect with immediate colleagues in way that was remarked upon as unusual, and was in itself cause for reflection. In Stockholm this generated discussions on whether a single policy version was desirable, even if it were possible. Some group members began more ambitious research projects. One member of the Nairobi group read policy briefings about major trends in development cooperation, and analysed her own programme in relation to it. A Lagom member talked to local people affected by a multi-country natural resources protocol in South East Asia, examined documents associated with the initiative and reflected on the complexities of participation across national boundaries and with regard to politically contested issues. Most group members did not have a systematic means of capturing their reflections, nor the time to do so, but each sought to bring insights back to the group in different ways. Box 5 illustrates what **Lagom** members did in the six weeks between the first and second meetings:

Whilst the formalised group space permitted individuals the structure for learning together, informal interactions – making the time to stop and chat, to meet in the pub and have lunch – provided fertile ground for seeding new activities. In Stockholm, the members did not work together, and some were strangers at the beginning of the process. Once they were members of **Lagom**, they began to interact informally; meeting for lunch, stopping by each other's offices or going for a drink together after the meeting. People began to speak of **Lagom** as a new network, an institution of great importance in the way Sida works. In Nairobi, group members interacted in a number of work as well as informal spaces. The team had a regular weekly meeting and also met in planning retreats, training workshops, seminars, joint field visits and routine review meetings with their

Box 5 Learning and action in Stockholm

Between the first and the second meeting of the Stockholm group, individual members had:

- written an "ambition level memo" and presented it to the group planning a Country Strategy process, adding to it a crucial sentence saying that defining who and how people participate should be defined at every level of the process;
- made a plan to extend a visit to a regional Embassy in order to go on a four-day field trip to explore how participation is actually done in practice;
- met with departmental colleagues, who agreed to meet to explore their different versions of participation, to seek to arrive at a common understanding;
- decided to take a study commissioned in the 1980s back to the place it was done to discuss it with people there, as a starting point for carrying out a new study;
- proposed that the inauguration ceremony of a prestigious park project should have a grassroots woman worker at the wheel of the bulldozer as well as local male dignitaries;
- debated with colleagues meanings of participation, over whether it is top down or bottom up;
- argued for closer attention to be paid to participation, and self-evaluation, as part of a section on evaluation in a new manual.

partner organisations. They met informally during scheduled morning coffee breaks in the office. Some socialised outside the office, meeting at one another's houses, or at social events in the city. Conversations often happened spontaneously, creating an island in the middle of a busy work schedule to develop ideas and address challenges. In both groups, these extra interactions added layers to the relationships and common knowledge they shared, which influenced the direction of the enquiry.

Spending informal time together helped build stronger relationships. It also allowed the groups

Box 6 Making the links from donors to NGOs to community groups and volunteers

The links between a donor's decisions and procedures and the participatory work their NGO partners do can seem distant to donor staff. Joint learning groups including the staff of two NGOs and their programme officer in Sida shed some light on the connections. They analysed the NGO's work with community groups and volunteers, and the way that funding arrangements with Sida affected those relationships. The discussions highlighted the need for relatively predictable and longer-term funding in order for NGOs to develop visions and plans with their own partners. The NGOs needed to articulate long-term integrated visions for their organisations, rather than putting forward discrete project proposals – this became a priority activity for one NGO as a result. The other NGO made a commitment to further lesson-learning about the dynamics of their relationships with community groups and volunteers, in order to inform their long-term planning for "grass-rooting" human rights in communities.

to come up with ideas that might never have emerged in formal discussions, to debate and to reflect, adding a different dimension to their learning. The kinds of exchanges that take place in formal bureaucratic spaces such as the scheduled meetings are more often around administrative or operational issues and more rarely the actual ideas involved; less formal spaces allow for sharing emotions, stories and testing out innovative or risky new ideas. Interacting in these informal spaces, group members also came to learn more about what one another felt about a subject and the enquiry, not just what they thought.

Involving others: extending learning beyond the group

Learning continued outside meetings, as group members carried the spirit of reflection and enquiry into routine daily tasks. The Nairobi and Stockholm learning groups engaged with others within and outside the organisation in different ways, reflecting the very different potential constituencies for learning activities but also significant differences in style and character between the two groups. In Nairobi, group members were keen on learning with their partner organisations. This focus reflects the general orientation of the Embassies, in which attention is directed outwards towards the organisations funded by Sida. One programme officer and staff from two NGOs set up their own parallel learning groups on participation and human rights, in which they discussed the way that participation was perceived in their programmes and the role that donors were playing in shaping the outcomes (see Box 6).

Another Programme Officer and his Government of Kenya counterparts agreed that studies of community-level participation might help the development of their programme, and met jointly to discuss the implications of findings recorded in short videos and case study documents.

In Stockholm, *Lagom* and their managers were interested in how the lessons that were emerging about Sida and participation could be more widely shared with the organisation. The group put together an early evening exhibition that came to be known as "The Event" at which a range of interactive activities engaged an audience of more than 100 Sida people. Installations included a timeline of Sida "fashionable concepts" and fridge poetry on participation. The subject matter of the event was wider than participation, it sought instead to give people a new view of their organisation, stimulating questions and debate. This represented how the enquiry had shifted from 'how does Sida do participation out there?' to 'what is it about Sida that makes participation happen the way it does?' The style and content of The Event caused the group much heartache and some still wonder whether its slightly chaotic approach was too creative and anomalous for a normal day in the Stockholm office (Box 7, overleaf).

In Stockholm, Eva Lövgren piloted what came to be known as a "mini-*Lagom*", successfully using the same methodology of action-reflection-action, pared down to a series of four short meetings, which were interspersed by short action periods. Bringing immediate

Box 7 Reaching out: engaging Sida Stockholm with 'The Event'

Doing something different and capturing people's imaginations, in the hope of fertilising a more active debate, by

- holding an event that was not a seminar, meeting or lecture, but that took place in the early evening, with music, wine and candles; one that was more like going to an art exhibition than anything else Sida had seen . . .
- advertising The Event around Sida with pictures of Sida staff from the 1970s, with sound-bubble captions, sparking curiosity about this unconventional happening
- running a film of video vox-pop of people saying the first thing that came into their heads when they heard the word "participation" – in relation to development, and in relation to Sida as an organisation;
- using a huge mirror in the exhibition room on which to lay an exhibit of overlaid time-trends graphs of the number of in-country employees in one particularly significant African country; the number of consultants hired; the amount of money given in foreign aid, onto which people were encouraged to place stickits to capture the policies, internal institutional debates and spirit of the times of different periods;
- encouraging people to join in games like putting a bean in a jar to 'count the number of policies', helped with a display of the guesses that the department heads, the General Director and other key figures had made (most of which were wildly inaccurate);
- capturing perspectives and reactions with do-it-yourself fridge poetry and flip charts
- provoking reflection about the gap between what an aid agency does and the realities of the world around them with an exhibition of pictures of a day in the life of a bureaucrat juxtaposed against that day's news headlines.

colleagues together; rather than individuals from across the organisation, this process enabled members of a department to reflect together

about a topic of mutual interest, participatory evaluation. They were able to use the reflective space created by the process to deepen their understanding of the issues at stake, as well as galvanise interest amongst those directly involved in setting the parameters for Sida's evaluations in making them more participatory.

A further route to influence was pursued through people's individual networks, and through dialogues with senior management and key resource people responsible for learning and participation in the organisation.

Endings

Cooperative enquiry groups, according to the literature, are expected to meet around five to eight times. Enquiries might draw to a close sooner or evolve into something new and different; endings may be driven by a range of factors, but are anticipated in the very beginning. Both of the enquiry groups went through a gradual process of endings. Neither finished neatly at a single moment. It was in some ways an outcome of a lack of clarity at the outset about where exactly we should end – something about which, embarking on a new experience, we weren't entirely sure of ourselves. We had spoken of a year together, but as that milestone approached it didn't seem like we had done quite enough. We wondered: would it be that time was up when we'd met a certain number of times? Or would it be the arrival at a particular point of understanding or product that showed a goal met and maturity reached?

In both countries we tried to find a moment to draw clear endings with a sense of completion, summary and celebration, but found it difficult, as discussions about documentation trickled on beyond the last meetings. The very different nature of the processes in the two groups played out in the kinds of endings – or not-endings, in the Stockholm case – that each group experienced.

The Stockholm group had decided to meet for a year. Almost exactly at the end of the year, the group convened for a two-day retreat, where they analysed what they had learned and formulated two briefing papers for colleagues in Sida: one on participation, and one on the

Box 8 "The document" that never was: lessons for policy and practice from *Lagom*

Development organisations tend to value concrete, tangible, objectively verifiable outputs above vaguer, more process-oriented work. Documents play a large part in the life of these organisations. Consultants are commissioned to produce them. Internal memos and strategy documents serve to encode, and fix procedures and policies. Shelves and in-trays are full of paper. Yet there is ambivalence about documents, especially amongst those who are inclined to development work because they want to do something that makes a difference rather than just talk, think or write about it. The idea of strategic documents that put together a variety of positions and perspectives, written in different styles and forms, is not really thinkable – not yet, anyway. Rather, current documents tend to present a single line, in a tone that strives above all to be objective, rational, and comprehensive. What the Stockholm group learnt from not being able to produce this kind of document was that there are many possible positions on participation, depending on the departmental, country, sectoral context, and the political and personal inclinations of those seeking to promote it. But also that the purpose documents serve in an aid bureaucracy might not lend themselves as easily as the group had initially thought to their iterative and practical learning process. Other kinds of processes – "mini-*Lagoms*" through which people explore their own and others' meanings, exercises like writing ToRs together to include participation – and other kinds of documents, ones that speak more immediately to the preoccupations of the desk officer, might stand more chance of making a difference.

Lagom methodology. But the group was unable to arrive at a single version of participation that would hold across the entire organisation, given the diversity of applications, interpretations and positions that are taken up within Sida. In the absence of a paper on participation, they did not feel justified in producing a paper on the methodology either. Disagreements over the contents of the document signalled the complexity of specifying what participation means in practice and how the process of deep discussion had resulted in a diverse range of views on the subject. It also revealed their fears of presenting a final product of our deliberations to a potentially critical outside world. The document was never finished and the group, lacking a product, never formally closed (see Box 8).

One year later, the group has moved on. *Lagom* members have gone on to take understanding of participation and some of the learning processes into other arenas. As individuals and in other networks, *Lagom* members carry on learning about and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about participation.

In Nairobi, in contrast, there were two clear moments when the group made a conscious ending and thus a new beginning. The first moment was an end to the first series of six

workshops in June 2002, at the point at which Garrett returned to the UK. The group reflected back on the process, the lessons people were drawing, and the changes they had noticed at individual, team, and organisational level. The new Councillor, Maria Stridsman, had already started to take on an active role on prioritising team building and group learning in the work of her team. She suggested continuing the process and making it their own, keeping some of the principles from the previous process. The group decided on a round of seminars on topics identified by the programme officers that would be open to a wider selection of people both inside and outside the development cooperation section of the Embassy. The topic changes with each workshop, but those in attendance are asked to make a small commitment to carrying forward some aspect of what they have discussed into their work, and then to report back on what they have done at the next workshop before moving onto a new topic. This preserves the principle of following an action-reflection-action cycle, even if in an attenuated form. Garrett's role in the first two workshops in this new format was to provide some facilitation advice and support to the Embassy staff taking the lead for each event. As Garrett stepped back from the learning activities of the Embassy, the group

spent time in a staff retreat drawing the working relationship towards a close (Box 9).

Box 9 Endings and new beginnings in Nairobi

To close his direct working relationship with Embassy staff, Garrett created a space to mark the transition that this represented. Group members reviewed the story of their working relationship, filling in people newer to the Embassy on what had happened, and drawing out lessons they had learned from the process and the discussions. They then had a chance to think about what they would leave behind at this point, and what would be taken forward. This led to a discussion about what place group learning activities would take in the life of Embassy staff in future, and who would be responsible for seeing that they happened, accounting for the lack of an external facilitator. They reviewed and clarified the arrangements for producing and approving documentation, such as this article, that was one by-product of the work. Finally everyone went out for a social evening.

One of the most interesting outcomes of both these processes was the way that group members took some of the principles and then translated them into spin-off learning activities that made sense. The methodological innovations described here – mini-Lagoms, joint learning processes including donor staff and partner staff, and the new types of events being institutionalised in Nairobi – all deserve exploration in their own right. They are examples of the way that people find mechanisms to suit their situation, and draw on similar principles to interact, learn and change. They resonate further with ideas about creating “communities of practice” that persist over time.

What difference did the process make?

Group members in both places had at times expressed anxieties about the outputs and returns and we asked ourselves what value the process had added to Sida. The question is important to address, not least because others interested in trying to start such an approach may need to make arguments for its value. But while answering it, we also feel it is important to pose a challenge to the way these questions are asked and answered by bureaucrats and the paradigmatic mismatch with this type of activity. This type of inquiry is not only an investigation into externalities and getting answers, it is an investigation into one's own understandings and actions and thus has the potential for individual transformation. Assessing what difference this process actually made calls for a more lateral exploration of impact.

Individuals

The participatory learning groups worked on two levels. On one level, they were designed to encourage – and seek to enable – people to be reflective, to think about what they were observing, hearing, reading and doing in order to learn about a particular issue. In our case, we sought to question what participation was all about, and how Sida dealt with it in policies and practices. At another level, the groups also aimed to equip participants with the means to be more reflexive, that is, more aware of themselves, their own attitudes and values, and the position from which they speak. For the individual, the learning process can result in outcomes in terms of what they think about a given issue. It can also result in people changing the way they think, and, with it, what they do. In *Lagom*, we came to think of this in terms of small acts, things that people began to do a little bit differently, questions that they might otherwise not have asked or interventions they might not otherwise have made.

The difficulties in tracking, and indeed attributing, these kinds of changes are evident. But it is clear that there have been some changes that individuals within the groups are able to pinpoint, and regard as significant. One group member talked of skills and understanding that he was developing to be better able to work in a participatory way. Others explained that they were more disposed to pause over a routine work task and reflect on whether there was a better approach, as a result of the habit of reflection established in the meetings. Time spent on reflection helped others to question their own workplace, as if seeing it from the outside. One person began to reflect much more actively on the role of a bilateral agency in making recommendations about participation, and began to argue for greater clarity and specificity about when and how (and indeed whether) to seek to engage participation in policy processes. These subtle changes can be deeply felt and have far-reaching and lasting effects on the work of individuals, which in turn can have many ripple effects in the organisation.

Relationships

Participatory learning groups, when they work well, create relationships of trust and communication, which can have multiple knock-on effects in an organisation. Where groups cut across existing networks, and indeed hierarchies, they can have some profound effects as personal relationships transcend members' constantly changing positioning within the organisation. As time went on, the relationships formed through the Stockholm group generated a new informal network cutting across departments. This enabled them both to build a broader picture of the organisation as a whole, drawing on their knowledge of different departments and networks, and also to exert a diffuse influence

on colleagues and institutional processes, as they observed and acted within their departments and other domains of association in the organisation, and engaged in processes such as the composition of key policy documents. Small as the group was, the effect went much wider.

As "communities of practice", learning groups like these, can provide opportunities for learning and support that extend beyond the life of an intervention such as our project. Informal networks that span departments are vital to doing business in Sida, so each new one contributes to the efficacy of the organisation. Shifting gear within departments and creating space for reflection and analysis, as the evaluation department in Stockholm did through their "mini-Lagom" facilitated by Eva Lövgren and Prudence Woodford-Berger can help create the conditions for different kinds of relationships in other departmental settings.

As the Nairobi group found, meeting regularly to learn together, share experiences and deepen reflection on their working context helped strengthen relationships in a team within the formal administrative structure. New members of the team felt the speed with which they came to understand one another and their work was increased. The enquiry has fed into a demand for opportunities for regular group reflection in the Embassy, which is being translated into institutionalised practices. It has also built a foundation for ongoing efforts by the Councillor to create an environment in which people can voice differences of opinion and emotions and cooperate well. Some group members said they were more disposed to speak first with a colleague when making decisions, to benefit from the increased clarity that a conversation could bring them. The learning activities had a positive effect on relations with partner organisations as well, allowing some Programme Officers and their partners a new kind of forum to share insights and points of view. In both groups, the meetings themselves and the better mutual understanding and relationships that developed were enjoyable and energising.

Processes and Activities

At a more visible level, there were a number of formal processes and activities that were directly informed by the enquiry processes. Members of the groups were involved in:

- **Designing midterm reviews for two programmes in Kenya**
- **Writing a terms of reference for the consultants in an urban development project**
- **Making a series of decisions that shaped participation in an urban infrastructure project, including establishing a new management body and appointing members**
- **Negotiating ongoing support for human rights NGOs, including both the future direction of their programs, and the appropriate role for donors**
- **Closely reviewing participatory processes in two pilot projects at community level and their broader implications for a Sida-funded programme**
- **Setting terms of reference for a consultancy study to inform an urban development project**
- **Participating in a committee rewriting Sida's procedures, Sida At Work**
- **Contributing to the debate on Globkom, Sweden's review of their policy on international development**
- **Figuring participation into Sida's new Poverty Strategy and its policy on governance**
- **Reviewing and enhancing the participation elements of a range of Sida programmes and projects including a Country Strategy Process, a multi-country common resource management treaty and a major project evaluation.**

This range of activities provided these busy bureaucrats with ample opportunities to intervene, using their new knowledge and insights, and not simply to observe and understand. It was through these activities that members of the learning groups were able to extend their own learning, and it was through acting that they were able to gain a sense of the difference the process they were engaged in could make.

Challenges

A number of challenges arose during the process, which are probably common to many bureaucratic settings. We review these briefly here.

Staff turnover

Sida, like many donor agencies, is constantly in flux as staff move between field posting and headquarters. Learning groups might recruit new members to replace those who leave, but much depends on how they have constituted themselves as a "community of practice". In the Stockholm group, no attempt was made to find a new member when one of the group left; over time, the trust that was established between group members might not have been so easily extended to a new arrival. In Nairobi, in contrast, the group was constantly in a process of formation. The group could see some of these staff changes coming from the outset, so made a commitment to invest in integrating new members into the group as smoothly as possible, but it was disruptive. Members had different layers of shared knowledge depending on how long they had been in the group. This caused some frustration as early questions of purpose, direction, and roles had to be revisited. There were opportunities and advantages with changing membership as well: new members brought enthusiasm and their own understanding of the process and contributed to shaping it. This challenge is particularly acute in a field office, where numbers are small and turnover is regular.

Battling for time

Despite the methodological adjustments we made from the beginning, the bureaucrats had constant battle to make time for learning rather than routine administration. It was important to try to set meetings well in advance, to remind

people to keep the time, and to make the additional workload of being in the group minimal for the returns. But the nature of bureaucracy continued to intrude, for example when group members were called away from meetings at the last minute to other events that had to take precedence for reasons of protocol, or when times of peak work pressure made it impossible for participants to take part.

Internal diversity

The diversity of the individuals in the groups became clearer over time, and was a source of insight and learning when it was consciously explored, but it was a challenge for the leaders and facilitators. In Nairobi, for example, the group explored strong opposing feeling about a particular project. In Stockholm, markedly different attitudes towards the learning process produced tensions that ebbed and flowed throughout the process, with those who favoured a more planned and goal-oriented style of work and those for whom a more open-ended and fluid approach was preferable. Although, on the face of it, these differences could be problematic, they also had tremendous potential to be a source of learning that could also be applied to other situations where diverse people are expected to "participate" together. Facilitating reflection on what is happening within the group "in the moment" can be a rich source of insights drawn from direct experience. At the end of the enquiry, individuals drew different lessons and conclusions from the process. They shared some conclusions, while continuing to disagree on many issues.

Joint learning between the groups

At the outset, we planned to find ways for the two groups to share their learning. We did not successfully manage to make the links for

several reasons. One was the institutionally embedded disconnects between Embassy and headquarters staff, an issue we might have worked with further. Another difficulty was deciding on the timing of exchanges – the right time in the life of both groups for an exchange of experiences never seemed obvious. As Sida staff are routinely overburdened with work, scheduling in travel for face-to-face meetings is always difficult. For example, when IDS arranged a workshop to which we invited representatives from both groups (amongst others), no-one from Nairobi could attend as they were required to host a high level delegation from Stockholm. We did investigate technological means that may have assisted us with the interchange, for example, the group in Stockholm used a web-based project "room", but the Nairobi group never logged on. In future efforts, insights into managing "distributed" "communities of practice" may provide useful ideas for making these links (Wenger et al. 2002).

Products and projects

Throughout the process, we've struggled to decide how to respond to perceived and real pressures to demonstrate results through tangible products. In Nairobi, the emphasis of Sida staff was on strengthening their understanding and own practices related to the theme of participation, and to some extent sharing this learning experience with partner organisations, with little emphasis on a broader change agenda targeted at Sida. In Stockholm, there was more of an eye from the beginning on the group influencing colleagues in Sida in some way, but there were equally some doubts within the group that it had a legitimate mandate to seek to change rather than simply understand Sida, or that its methods would be considered adequately rigorous. These tensions played out in our discussions over whether or not to document the inquiries, in what form, and for what audience. For both groups, discussions of documentation revealed suspicions by the participants about the motivations of the external resource people – were they involved merely to generate research

reports, or were they interested in practical benefits to the group members and the wider organisation?

In Nairobi, the team members were happy to delegate to the external resource persons decisions about, and work involved in, documenting the process, given a clear agreement that the group members had the right to review and veto any documents produced. Fleeting hopes of co-produced documents were abandoned for a clear division of labour between researchers and learning group participants when it became obvious that for learning group members creating written products was not a priority. In Stockholm, *Lagom* attempted a more ambitious experiment in creating documentation through a group process, which proved difficult given the diversity of views about how things should be written, let alone about what such writing should actually contain. Torn between the impulse simply to act – whether in those "small acts" that could make a difference, or simply for the sake of action rather than to be suspended in rumination – and the impulse to convert their learning into something that might be used by others like them to engage with the issue of participation, the Stockholm group found itself unable to arrive at an output that satisfied everyone. It was easier to delegate this to the outsiders who, after all, were researchers and paid to do that kind of thing. One question is whether we might have succeeded in encouraging and indeed enabling people to do their own writing had we tried harder. And one answer to this might be to ask to whom documents matter. As we found in Sida, for learning they matter a lot less than we might think.

Reflections on learning and change

The value of a learning group is that it can tackle the things other forms of learning don't cover: like matters of power, culture and practice. That does not mean that the process will be easy. Sida, like many other bilateral organisations, can be quite a daunting place. The depth of commitment that Sida staff bring to their work mean that staff make great efforts to avoid wasting time or money. People move from position to position with regularity, so do not necessarily get time to establish themselves, they are assailed with huge amounts of work which limit their ability to interact except in the most businesslike manner, and they (like most of us) seldom talk about power dynamics in public.

The learning groups were counter-cultural. They used up time on reflection rather than action. Although participants enjoyed their work in the groups enormously, they found it difficult to legitimise and publicise, because their products were not collective pronouncements but individual questions, not clear strategies for implementing participation, but subtle individual capacities to judge it. The challenge of producing tangible outputs was doubly daunting for busy bureaucrats with an ambivalent relationship with the written word, nervous about saying the wrong thing and appearing not to know how to do the right thing.

Balancing structure and creativity

One of the challenges we faced with our hybrid experimental practice was a constant tension between providing a predictable and goal-oriented structure, a format that most people were familiar with and some were most comfortable with, and allowing sufficient flexibility and space for creative innovation and the pursuit of unexpected avenues and activities. The two learning groups rode this tension in different ways, reflecting in part the constitution

of the groups and in part the tendencies of the facilitators.

Heron (1996) helpfully distinguishes two distinct approaches to cooperative enquiry, calling one Apollonian and the other Dionysian. The Apollonian approach is structured, intellectual and purposeful. The Dionysian is random, emotional and creative. Each works well in a different milieu, and there may be elements of each as tendencies in groups that emerge and go into abeyance at different points, remaining as tensions or working as productive synergy between group members. The "mini-Lagom" and the Nairobi seminars might be styled as more Apollonian; The Event was definitively Dionysian, somehow valuable but vaguely illegitimate.

Exploring these styles as polarities or tendencies can be helpful in enabling groups to work out more deliberately what style would suit what the group is trying to do, the individual styles of group members and the environment in which it will operate.

Depending in part on the balance between Apollonian and Dionysian elements, groups may need more or less clarity about what exactly they are going to do and more or less planning. The Stockholm group worked with the frustration of a number of group members about the lack of a clear structure, frame or plan: and yet resisting the pressure to concretise what the group should do until half-way through the process paid off in terms of the creativity and depth of insight that was brought to shaping plans. Creating a highly structured action-plan – jokingly referred to as 'The Logframe' – brought a distinct sigh of relief to almost everyone in the group, including those with more Dionysian tendencies, because it was the right time to concretise plans. To have done so at the outset might have killed the very creativity that enabled the group to come up with ideas such as the "mini-Lagom" or The Event.

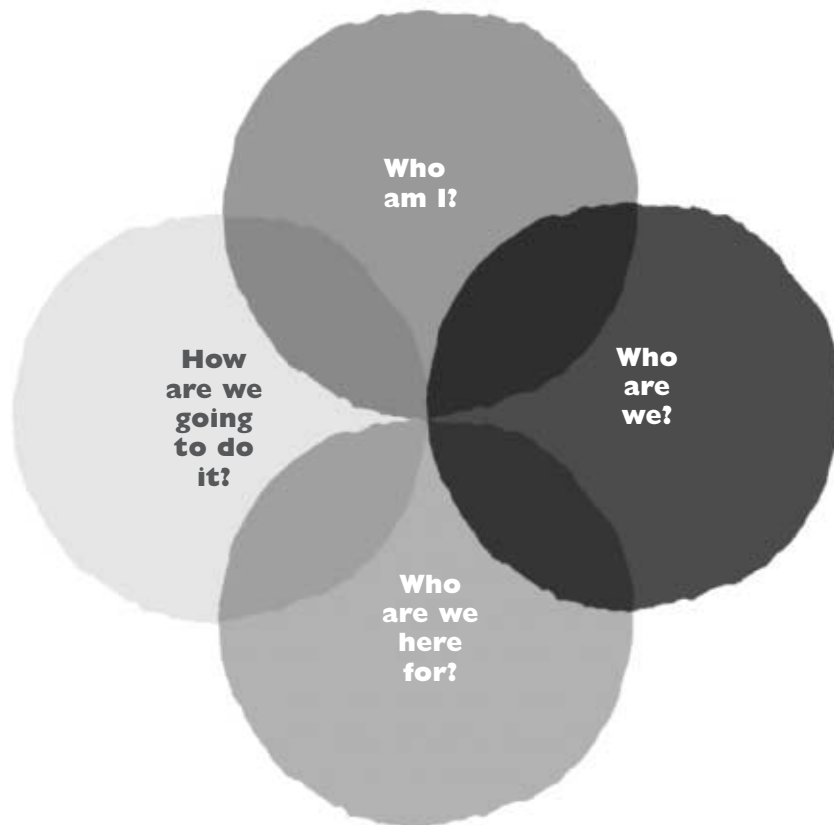
From leadership to self-management

Better management, better preparation, better facilitation can all help, no matter what style the group finds itself most comfortable with. Being sensitive to the group dynamics and process, and creating opportunities to discuss and clarify expectations, roles and responsibilities is very important, allowing a group to be more productive more quickly. Clear leadership and purpose help keep the group to task and allow it to adjust when its leader moves on (it can nominate another one) or when the group begins to wander away from its purpose and "waste time".

Addressing some of these issues means starting not with designing structures or processes in the abstract, or indeed with discussions on themes for enquiry, but with start-up activities that help groups to define their sense of

identity and purpose, and speed self-management. These include making strong efforts to identify the interests of each participant and the accountabilities that each has to meet. A stakeholder mapping exercise can help clarify how each member stands in regard to those around them and thus the diversity of external and internal expectations. The legitimacy and accountability of the new group within the wider organisation needs also to be explored. Based on this clarification of the identity of the individuals and the group, a clear sense of purpose can be proposed that fits with all the counteracting interests and accountabilities. For the group to be able to work effectively, it is critically important to clarify roles and agree who will hold responsibility for leadership, support, facilitation, documentation (if thought useful) and other functions.

Start-up questions



Conclusions

We began our work in Stockholm and Nairobi with similar plans, ideals and expectations. What we learnt along the way was that learning about participation – or indeed any of the relational concepts that are now so much part of the language of development – involves much more than a conceptual or even practical understanding of what these terms actually mean. It requires a closer understanding of self and other, as well as of the complex interplay between organisational structure and dynamics, and it indicates a need to look carefully at the possibilities for applying concepts, methodologies and practices within a given organisational setting.

Given this, it is hardly surprising that our experiences in Stockholm and Nairobi were so very different. The lessons we share here are as much from our errors as our successes; shaped by our own differences, we hope they might have wider resonance for those engaging with participatory learning processes in similar organisational settings.

This story started with the aim of exploring a particular theme in the work of an aid agency. But even within this enquiry, the lines blurred between participation and other relational concepts, such as partnership, ownership, and dialogue. Our experiences suggest that there is exciting potential for using this type of approach to explore the many other complex, relational concepts that are increasingly important to donors' conception of their own roles. We hope that future processes can be strengthened by taking account of some of the lessons we have captured here.

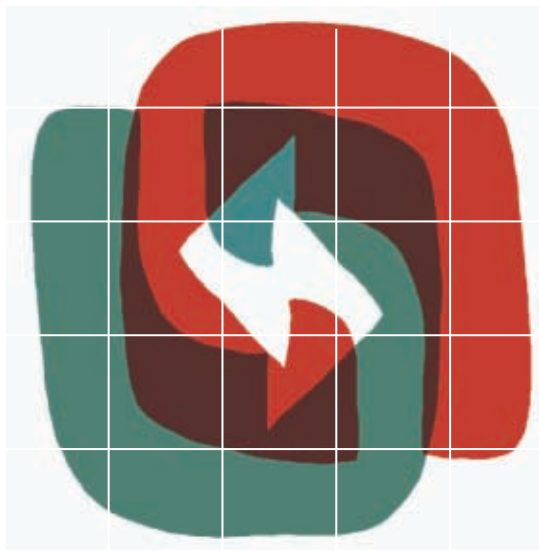
10 tips for effective learning groups (or what we'd like to do better next time)

- Compose the group with care, with attention to the "side effects" that learning groups can have on relationships - intra-departmental groups can create better team working; inter-departmental/organisational groups can create better partnership working and understanding of complexity; "vertical slice" groups can promote better understanding at different levels. All can create tensions. Direct line management relationships can complicate and need to be carefully negotiated or might be avoided.
- Be clear from the beginning who is going to do what and why, and be prepared to revisit this regularly throughout the process.
- Establish ground rules to guide the group, including how the group presents itself to the organisation, rules for producing and sharing documents, rules for the involvement of external resource people, rules for meetings, sharing, confidentiality, new members, language and process style and rules for changing the rules.
- Take account of participants' learning styles and try to mix activities that are "familiar" (more likely to be Apollonian, in Heron's terms) and those that are more daring, unusual or creative – it can be worth pushing people to do something different.
- Make the time to pause and reflect on what's happening within the group – "in the moment" – especially around differences in position, style or perspective, rather than switching focus or skimming over potential areas of conflict: rich lessons can be learnt from working with diversity.

- Pay attention to how the group is represented within the organisation: learning needs legitimacy and validation, so managers may need updates to be kept on board and communication is a vital activity.
- Reflect on and explore who takes the lead and how it might be best supported, devolved or shared within the group. Different kinds of leadership functions might be shared amongst a number of group members, and shift over time: remaining alert to these shifts, and fostering transfers of leadership, can be productive for learning and dynamics.
- Set clear parameters at the beginning, such as meeting length and frequency, a beginning and end to the process and clarity about functions and roles, but be prepared to change them – balancing clarity and structure with an ability to adapt and respond is critical.
- Think about outputs at the beginning and try to link products with processes: be prepared to think out of the box and allow groups to find the form and function that suits what they've been doing, rather than default reports or briefings.
- Consider a symbolic ending which frees up energy for going forward with new things, and identification of what might be regarded as closed or completed, and what needs to be continued.

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Participatory learning groups in an aid bureaucracy

Andrea Cornwall,
Garett Pratt
and Patta Scott-Villiers

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