Social learning for climate resilient development: Limits and opportunities

Blane Harvey
Research Associate, ODI, UK
Assistant Professor, McGill University, Canada

Setting the context: Climate and development

- Climate adaptation and resilience increasingly central to development programming/practice.
  - Adaptation deeply entwined with the international development architecture
  - Traditionally approached as a technical/managerial problem – leading to "command and control" responses.

However,

- Increasing recognition of complex, uncertain and multi-scalar nature of climate impacts and responses;
- Here, social trust & "triple loop" learning become key factors for structuring and understanding relationships between problems and solutions. (Hurlbert & Gupta 2015)

Setting the context: Defining Social Learning

Social learning approaches facilitate knowledge sharing, joint learning, and co-creation of experiences between stakeholders around a shared purpose in ways that:

1. Take learning and change beyond the individual to communities, networks, or systems; and
2. Enable new shared ways of knowing to emerge that lead to changes in practice.

(Ensor & Harvey 2015)

Emergence of social learning in climate & development

- Gained prominence in the late 2000s, emerging from earlier work on NRM, adaptive management.
- Collins & Ison make the case for "adaptation as social learning"
- Recent rise in funding for climate and resilience programmes → Larger, multi-project programmes aiming to embed SL principles in their governance and/or action. (e.g. CARIAA, BRACED, FCFA, ESPA, PfR, etc.)

“Opportunities for critical reflection and processes of social learning may hold the greatest promise for achieving the promise of transformational adaptation.”

Eriksen et al. 2015

Taking stock of practice

Tools and Approaches

	Individual	Network	System
Facilitating Interaction	Role playing games[31,57]	Develop partnerships and engage in action research[58]	Participatory techniques for mentoring farmers' representatives[49]
Capturing Lessons		Framing/reframing exercise[46]	Field visits[49]
Knowledge Management	Workshops for joint knowledge production[48]	ICT-tools can be used to store, retrieve, analyze, display, and disseminate information but must be simple[46]	Combining farmer-produced resource maps of catchment areas[3]
Simulation	Agent based social simulation[57]	Future scenarios workshops[59]	

Source: Ensor & Harvey, 2015

Impacts and Outcomes

	Individual	Network	System
Cognitive	Participants' attitudes toward a communal resource (canals) shifted[31]	Change in participants' understanding of farmers as merely recipients of knowledge and technology, to active agents with the capacity to learn and collaborate[60]	Farmers rebuilding professional identities on the basis of a new relationship to the resources they use[61]
Normative	Municipality allocated new budget for maintenance of shared resource[31]	Improved natural resource management plans[51]	Redesign of fencing to cross legal boundaries of property ownership[40]
Relational	Participants focus on solutions that respect a plurality of interests and worldviews[53]	Improved collective planning processes[51]	Cancelation of new dam building based on inputs from indigenous communities[62]

Taking stock of practice: Key observations

- Despite growing evidence base, learning-oriented and co-constructive approaches remain at the margins. (14% of initiatives reviewed)
- Majority are small-scale initiatives (often pilots) with limited connection to wider systems.
- Real gap at higher scales of action
  - Little done to draw community-scale learning to higher levels of practice
- Institutional and programme norms not seen as enabling SL approaches.

Sources: Harvey et al 2012; Ensor & Harvey 2015; Harvey et al 2017

So, where next?

“Beyond contemplating transformational change in others, practitioners and their organizations may be required to engage in critical reflexivity and navigate internal processes of change, whether individual, organizational or technological.”

Pelling et al 2015

Undertaking such a fundamental shift […] is no small task. It involves changes in individual and institutional incentive structures; in programme design; in management principles and practices; and in resource allocations within programmes.

Harvey et al. 2017

This means either:
Rethinking how we design and 'deliver' development interventions

or

Rethinking the suitability of social learning to 'development as usual'.

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Harvey et al. 2017

More specifically: How DEV design inhibits social learning

Timescales	Recognise SL takes more time than traditional “delivery” projects. Account for trust- and relationship-building up front.
Incentives	Incentives for SL participation are heterogeneous. Understand & address them.
Design	Sequencing of programme design keeps core constituencies from inputting. Limited experimentation or reflection on design SOPs.
Budgeting	Budgeting rules lock partners into a pre-defined course of action – barrier to acting on learning.
Iteration	Existing programming tools (e.g. Gantt chart) assume & impose linearity. Do orgs create disincentives for reframing or shifting set courses of action?

Ensor & Harvey 2015; Harvey et al 2017; Jones et al., in review

Closing thoughts: Challenges and opportunities

The “development system” now a hub for adaptation and resilience action, yet at odds with our emerging understanding of what constitutes effective social learning. Do we rethink development programming & practice, or promote social learning for adaptation outside of its logic?

Closing thoughts: Challenges and opportunities

If we wish to do the former/or both:

- Build on enthusiasm for change emerging from above (e.g. Adaptive development at DFID; CLA at USAID; CBA movement)
- Establish a rich and robust evidence base of the difference SL makes.
- The opportunity: Social learning practice happening on the ground should help to catalyze a rethink of adaptation and development more broadly. Not only in terms of their practice, but in the systems that support them.

Thank you!

References and contact info

- Blane Harvey (b.harvey@odi.org.uk)

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