

TOWARDS A LEARNING CULTURE

Lessons from an Employability and Entrepreneurship Support Program in Mali, Somalia, Nigeria and Somaliland

This document shares the approach and key insights from developing a learning approach and culture in a large institutionally funded project. This dimension was a key addition to the second project phase to better document and improve project approaches and outcomes. The document aims to support other project teams that are attempting to introduce a learning culture into their own projects.



INTRODUCTION

The Next Economy Program (TNE) supported young people in Nigeria, Mali, Somalia, and Somaliland to find a job or start a business. As these contexts were complicated to work in and partners faced a range of challenges. This required a structured approach to identify and address key project issues to achieve project goals. The project developed a learning approach that sought to balance rigorous investigation, active participation, and formal reflection. This approach led to insights that supported improvements in project processes and youth employment outcomes.

This Learning Document outlines the processes used to incorporate formal learning into employability and entrepreneurship support initiatives. It is specifically targeted to project managers and Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) staff who are attempting to design learning principles and practices into their projects. It provides summaries of the learning activities that occurred, defines the key principles that are needed to facilitate learning, as well as identifies lessons learned. The goal of the document is to show how a deliberate and structured approach to learning can be incorporated into other projects.



DEVELOPING A LEARNING APPROACH

Learning activities were formally incorporated into the project to provide structured review and reflection on the TNE programme. The aspiration was to ask critical questions about ‘how’ or ‘why’ the project was working and to prioritize action research over formal research. To ensure that learning remained aligned with the project needs, an annual ‘learning agenda’ was set with tailored approaches done each year focused on the most pressing problems or themes.

In the first year of learning, the approach started with a collective discussion about what learning meant in the project, partner experiences with research, collaborative approaches, and the types of key questions that people wanted to address. Organizations were given the opportunity to do the type of research that was most relevant to their particular context. Each partner was given financial and technical support in conducting their own inquiry, as well as opportunities to share back results with others.

The subsequent years of the project took more thematic focuses and a consultant was brought in to facilitate inquiry, ensure participation, and share feedback on conclusions. This use of an external consultant as a facilitator meant that partners felt heard and removed the challenge of learning being ‘piled on’ to existing project delivery obligations.

The concept of learning also permeated other areas of the project. Annual events supported collective reflection and problem solving. A Gender Fellowship supported project staff to investigate inclusion topics, approaches, and delivery models with the support of both their own organizations and the broader project team. Project evaluation work focused on utility and program improvement as opposed to accountability. By introducing an active and collaborative approach to learning, the project was better able to reflect and adapt to challenges.

KEY PRINCIPLES & COMPONENTS

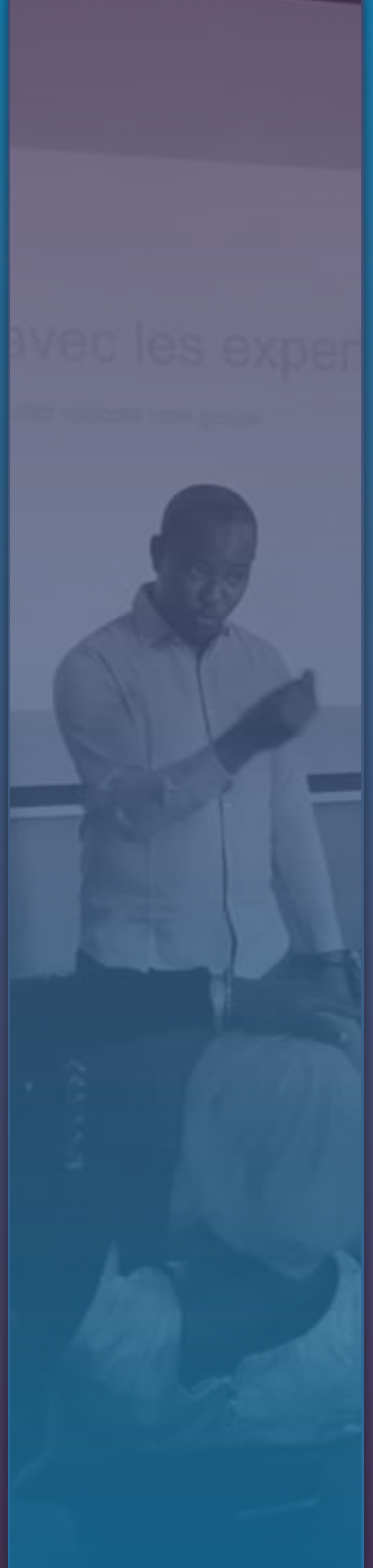
We designed the TNE Learning Approach as an annual set of activities that address key challenges and issues. It combined the application of learning principles with critical components to ensure the use of learning products and findings:

Active Participation

Supporting learning processes that ask partners to ask questions, engage in experiments, and solve problems together, rather than using formal research approaches or sharing technical information.

Facilitated

Introducing experts that had both topical and facilitation skills. This ensured that partners are involved in the process from concept to investigation to recommendation phase, without the need to lead or manage new actions.



Topical

Learning topics were selected by internal project discussions based on the problems that were most pressing or topics that needed to be addressed at particular points of the project. Initial learning topics were selected based on location specific issues while the final learning topics were collectively decided and emphasized sustainability and documentation processes.

Annual

Having a yearly schedule, and determining the key themes at the commencement of the year, ensured that the issues were relevant and the timeline to address them was clearly defined.

Action Oriented Research

The emphasis of learning focused on activities and investigations that had immediate impact on how projects operated and could be incorporated into project activities. This included supporting individuals attempting to make changes as well as bring ideas and concepts across different contexts to determine their replicability.



INNOVATIVE LEARNING APPROACHES: DIVERSE

Learning can be facilitated in various ways. A range of learning approaches were tested with the goal of broader engagement. Whereas traditional monitoring and evaluation is a specialized function, the learning oriented approach chosen was more participatory and better suited to the interests and objectives of project staff



Action Research

The project began with an approach that sought to allow project staff to identify their particular topics of interest, apply for funds to self manage their own processes, and then work with local external consultants to investigate a specific topic. This resulted in a range of research products that were specifically addressing participants



Fellowship

Individual paid fellowships, funded by the project, provided individuals within organizations a chance to pursue their own research independently and supported by other like-minded individuals, in this case focused on gender equity.. It built expertise and supported leadership on key project topics during the project.



Model Building

The project facilitated collective understanding of key topics and issues. Private sector engagement was a key challenge across the project. To address this, a facilitated learning approach and a private sector engagement model allowed for greater understanding and relevant project changes.



Co-Development

To support project sustainability, partners were provided support to develop their own stories, to document what they had done, and to build out lessons learned based on their collective experience. This was a facilitated process that ensured that busy staff were engaged, that they had bought in, but that they were not alone in having to complete tasks. It also aligned some challenging tasks, like cross partner documentation and synthesis, with the needed external expertise.



In Person Events

The project held an annual meeting (in person after Covid) that was an opportunity to support project learning through specific sessions that highlighted what was new, along with structuring discussions and decision making around project activities.



LEARNING INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

1

Focus on Project Improvement

Learning gets merged with monitoring and evaluation (MEL) as an accountability oriented activity. This discourages openness and limits its impact. By positioning learning as its own work stream, using participatory approaches, and focusing on project improvement, buy in amongst team members and desired changes are more likely to occur.

2

Create an Annual Calendar

Project learning is best achieved with specific boundaries. An annual calendar of learning activities, from topic selection to final sharing, seemed to work best. It also allowed for learning to be responsive to specific concerns and not be prescribed in previously developed proposals or plans.

3

Use Participatory Approaches to Gain the Widest Possible Buy-in

Most projects use mainstream qualitative and quantitative methods to support learning. While this is effective in research, it does not always lead to the necessary engagement and social interactions that solicit feedback and stimulate critical discussions. Using a range of approaches -from co-development of resources to fellowships and model building- allowed for different groups of people to be engaged and to participate at critical times. It also supported engagement without the burden of full participation of all project teams.

4

Facilitation can Increase The Right Type of Engagement

External support helped make the structured learning approach effective. Staff were busy with the day to day operations of projects. The use of facilitators provided additional expertise to challenging topics and centralized facilitation responsibilities. Project staff can contribute their perspectives and feel consulted about important topics. When results came back, they may be more invested in the result and more likely to incorporate new findings.

5

Feedback and Use Results

In person events provided an opportunity to share back results and help partners incorporate findings into the result. This could be through engagement with the topics themselves or the use of findings to structure discussions and engagement between partners.

INTERESTED IN STRENGTHENING YOUR ORGANIZATION'S LEARNING CULTURE?

If you would like to learn more about our approach in building a culture of learning, or have questions on some of TNE's organizational and methodological details, feel free to reach out to us.

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The Next Economy supports young people in Mali, Somalia, Nigeria and Somaliland to find decent jobs and start businesses. It is implemented collaboratively by 20 civil society and entrepreneurship support organizations, and is funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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