

Organisational Learning in Non-Governmental Organisations

by

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Declaration

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Summary

Chapter one provides a general introduction to the study. It covers the background of the study, explaining why organisational learning has caught our attention again, and presents the research objectives, problem statement, methodology, and the significance of the study. This chapter also provides the research outline and gives an overview of the entire study.

Chapter two provides an overview of the state of our knowledge about learning in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) by analysing the learning challenges that NGOs face. The chapter also explores NGOs as a phenomenon, focusing on their history, definition, types, and organisational characteristics in relation to learning. The chapter also distinguishes NGOs from regular business entities.

Chapter three introduces general learning theories and what they highlight about NGOs' learning challenges. The chapter first explores the foundational learning scholars and theories to further inform the subsequent chapters focusing on organisational learning in NGOs in depth.

Chapter four describes Bruce Britton's Eight Function model in detail. It analyses each of Britton's learning functions he proposed and how they interact with one another. This chapter also refers to the observations made in chapter three regarding the foundational theories focusing specifically on business environments. The chapter then determines which aspects of Britton's learning model address the learning challenges that are faced by NGOs.

In chapter five, based on the insights gained, the study turns to the question of how NGOs can increase their capacity to learn. The chapter then highlights the study's academic implications as well as its implications for practitioners of knowledge management and organisational learning. The thesis concludes by proposing a number of questions for future research in the nascent knowledge for development field.

Opsomming

Hoofstuk een gee 'n algemene inleiding tot die studie. Dit dek die agtergrond van die studie en verduidelik waarom organisatoriese leer weer ons aandag kry en bied die navorsingsdoelwitte, probleemstelling, metodologie en die betekenis van die studie. Hierdie hoofstuk verskaf ook die navorsingsraamwerk en gee 'n oorsig van die hele studie.

Hoofstuk twee gee 'n oorsig van die stand van ons kennis oor leer in nie-regeringsorganisasies (NRO's) deur die leeruitdagings wat NRO's in die gesig staar, te ontleed. Die hoofstuk ondersoek ook NRO's as 'n verskynsel, wat fokus op hul geskiedenis, definisie, tipes en organisatoriese eienskappe met betrekking tot leer. Die hoofstuk onderskei ook NRO's van normale sake-entiteite.

Hoofstuk drie stel algemene leerteorieë bekend en wat hulle uitlig oor NRO's se leeruitdagings. Die hoofstuk ondersoek eers die grondslagteorie geleerdes en teorieë om die volgende hoofstukke verder in te lig oor die organisatoriese leer in NRO's.

Hoofstuk vier beskryf Bruce Britton se agt funksiemodel in detail. Dit ontleed elk van Britton se leerfunksies wat hy voorgestel het en hoe hulle met mekaar in wisselwerking tree. Hierdie hoofstuk verwys ook na die waarnemings in hoofstuk drie aangaande die grondliggende teorieë wat spesifiek fokus op sakeomgewings. Die hoofstuk bepaal dan watter aspekte van Britton se leermodel die leeruitdagings aanspreek wat NRO's in die gesig staar.

In hoofstuk vyf, gebaseer op die insigte wat verkry is, word die studie verwys na die vraag van hoe NRO's hul vermoë om te leer, kan verhoog. Die hoofstuk belig die studie se akademiese implikasies asook die implikasies daarvan vir praktisyns van kennisbestuur en organisatoriese leer. Die proefskrif sluit af deur 'n aantal vrae vir toekomstige navorsing in die ontluikende kennis vir ontwikkelingsveld voor te stel.

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Chapter 1:

Introduction

1.1 Introduction

‘Organisational learning’ is not a new concept. However, the concept has gained popularity in the last four decades, particularly in theory and research about organisations. We are transitioning into a knowledge economy where the world is interconnected, and the knowledge resources are the currency of the economy. In a knowledge economy, technology plays a vital role as a driving force for growth. Learning is “sense-making”, and it is the process that leads to knowledge. Schein (1992) agrees with this notion, and believes we do not think systematically due to “possessing too much information, and an unwillingness to violate cultural norms”. In most organisations, the leader is under immense pressure to appear to be in control and to possess solutions to organisational challenges. Schein (1993:85) argues further that current circumstances show that “learning is no longer a choice but a necessity”. An urgent priority for organisations is to understand processes related to learning and to react quickly to technological shifts.

Learning, as used in this study, goes beyond the acquisition of existing knowledge, abilities, and skills. For organisations, it is learning, not the accumulation of knowledge itself, that is critical. In the current business world, it is the learning ability and knowledge base of an organisation that creates a distinctive competitive advantage on management and innovation. For Mintzberg (1994) organisational learning concepts are critical to the corporate development of businesses and are no longer on the sidelines of other core management domains such as strategic management and technological innovation.

Organisations cannot treat learning as a standalone function; rather, it connects with other key functions related to the smooth running of an organisation. The key ingredient of management concepts is the human factor. McAdams (1993) agrees with this statement and posits that organisational concepts utilise an approach to human functioning that emphasises the intention “to make sense of” the world and act responsibly upon the understanding we derive from that sense-making. Furthermore, organisational learning is no longer an abstract concept. Organisational learning has become a critical concept not only in knowledge

management related fields but other fields such as management science, development economics and human resource management and development.

Today's organisations operate in an environment of rapid and accelerating change. Most African organisations function in unstable economies and must deal with weak currencies, high levels of brain drain, and technological challenges. A 2015 media report quoted former president Thabo Mbeki as saying South Africa's brain drain has reached "frightening" levels. However, this is not South Africa's problem alone. It is a continental problem with most productive employees and highly skilled graduates in health, technology and sciences fleeing to western countries. According to Porter (1998), the private sector's challenges are exacerbated and characterised by intense resource competition and new customer demands. These include not only limited to financial and technological resources but also extend to human resources.

In the public sector, there are growing expectations by the citizens, for the government to deliver better services, particularly for those who are poor. Most public sector organisations are struggling with this mandate for various reasons including embezzlement of funds, unskilled workers and lack of political will by the government to deliver at a local level. However, beyond all these reasons the swift pace of today's world demands that an organisation develop a dynamic learning culture. In fact, to stay relevant and efficient, organisations must learn at least as quickly as their environment changes. For organisations to be innovative, there is a need to learn faster and to anticipate what the future holds.

The concept of 'learning,' which has mainly developed over an extended period in the psychological field, is understood from various perspectives. Cook et al. (1997) argue that the application of learning at the organisational level did not come into the corporate sector until the 1980s, and was primarily conditioned as a collective of individual learning, training, and human resources development. Thus, the process of individual learning has had a significant impact on the concept and practices of organisational learning. Learning starts with people, and the foundation of a learning organisation is the learning process of individuals in the organisation (Ahmed and Wang 2003). It is essential to understand the individual learning process in order to facilitate understanding of organisational learning. However, Ikehara (1999:65) states that "...individual learning does not necessarily lead to organisational learning". This assertion is so because individual and organisational knowledge may be complementary or congruent. One may argue that it is the responsibility of the learning organisation to integrate individual learning into organisational learning.

However, despite the dramatic growth in the popularity of the concept of ‘organisational learning’ and the proliferation of literature on the topic, there is little consensus on the term’s fundamental nature or meaning. Different researchers in various subject matter areas have applied the organisational learning concept or at least the term to various fields. The varied use of the ‘organisational learning’ concept might help explain broader academic community’s minimum or delayed convergence use of the term. Kostos (2006:76) supports this view and refers to the present time as the “knowledge age” and explains that the biological and humanities field view knowledge, people and organisations as living organisms that are characterised by complexity and collaboration”. The information and knowledge age is upon us due to the rapid proliferation information and technological communications (ICT), which now affect how we live, work and interact. In essence, we are shifting from the world where we separate the offline and the online worlds.

In many organisations be they profit-making or non-profit making, the reality of knowledge management does not fall into one template. Unique situations and realities inform knowledge management in several organisations. The wide variety of how knowledge management is evident in the number of specialist communities residing in various sectors, for example, academia, business, sciences and the social services sector. Knowledge management deals with several concepts in various domains. While opinions differ from one discipline to another, Abecker and Decker (1999) view knowledge in an organisation as “the collection of expertise, experience, and information that individuals and workgroups use during the execution of their tasks”. While this paper will not enter into an ontological approach to define “knowledge”, it is essential to get an understanding of the broader definition of knowledge to understand organisational learning. No one definition can encapsulate what knowledge is, but from a cursory glance through literature, it is clear that knowledge is a mixture of several items such as values, contextual information and expert practices. Knowledge in itself is produced and stored in individual minds and documented in organisational processes, services, procedures and systems. Writing on epistemology and anthropology, British scholar Bateson (1972:453), argued that people are going through a transformation regarding how they view the world. Instead of focusing on different parts of knowledge as disconnected from knowledge systems, there is more integration, collaboration in reaching corporate goals and objectives. The implications for learning are that people no longer see themselves as separate from the world and in extension the knowledge systems. There is a definite need to understand the world better. With the

proliferation of technology in all facets of an organisational life, Bateson's vision is even truer and more relevant in organisational dynamics. Organisations and the people who work in them do not live in a vacuum. They also bring what they experience externally to the organisation, and they bring their experiences with them to the workplace (Ash 2016).

Much literature in the humanities field focuses on creating an assumption that "more knowledge leads to better outcomes". Pasteur (2004) supports this finding in a literature review focusing on learning in the development sector. In a bid to appease donors, NGOs focus on creating positions that focus on knowledge management or monitoring and evaluation. Some create units that whose sole responsibility is to "create knowledge" and bring great project outcomes. Senge (1990) questions this assumption and argues that the purpose of learning in the context of organisations is to improve practice, which should ideally be an action outcome. However, people reorient how they perceive original experience and strategy because according to Kolb (1984:38) learning is a "cyclical process, whereby people reflect on the measures, knowledge" which leads to new actions or strategies in the future. Implementing the shift towards influencing and supporting policy processes and forming closer relationships to ensure ownership by partner countries poses new challenges to development professionals. It is in this regard that Hinton and Groves (2004) identify key factors which are central to achieving more efficient impact:

- The shift from linear, outcome-oriented perspectives on development towards a more complex systemic understanding of the aid system, its actors, and the relationships between them.
- Understand power and politics and ways in which they influence actions and relationships at many levels, from local to international.
- Question how procedures might be reinforcing pernicious cultural and political dynamics.
- Recognise and reflect on the role of the individual as well as the organisation in transforming and implementing the poverty reduction agenda.

In the business environment, organisations embark on learning as a predictive effort in order to improve productivity and counter the unpredictable market conditions. Organisations in the private sector also undertake learning to improve their return on investments and profits. Learning enables faster and more efficient responses to a complex and dynamic environment (Corbacioglu and Kapucu 2006). The increase in information sharing, communication, and

understanding can be attributed to effective learning. For these reasons, the concept of ‘learning’ is probably more pronounced in business than in any other area.

1.2 Background of the study

In recent years, NGOs have become quite prominent in the field of international development. In theory, NGOs have been in existence for many decades. NGOs are motivated by the need to ‘do good’, to provide care and develop communities. To reach these goals, NGOs work mostly with the disadvantaged and vulnerable in communities create various programme areas such as gender equality, gender-based violence, climate and environmental sustainability and economic empowerment. (McMichael 2016). However, NGOs go beyond just doing good. Through working to achieving their goals, NGOs also by extension work to extend the democratic ideals and other social development principles. NGOs like the Black Sash worked alongside struggle activists during apartheid. NGOs move with the times and work on current issues. In recent years they have taken a stand on contemporary issues such as crime, water and sanitation, service delivery and the scourge caused by HIV/AIDS. NGOs have taken action on issues such as peace, democracy, human rights, gender equality, and poverty. The world is in economic crisis, and the development sector is increasingly competitive. There are more organisations than the money to be distributed.

In 2000, The United Nations (UN) proposed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were global time-bound and quantified targets for addressing extreme poverty in its many forms including hunger and homelessness while promoting gender equality, education, and environmental sustainability. The UN developed goals were drawn up with basic human rights in mind – the rights of each person on earth to health, education, shelter, and security – that were to be achieved by 2015, as cited by Travis et al. (2004). The UN recognised the role that NGOs play in the achievement of the MDGs by stating that “partnerships between NGOs and government agencies are critical to success in achieving the outcomes”.

The MDGs arguably represented the greatest opportunity and challenge for alleviating poverty and improving quality of life globally. The different stakeholders such as governments and NGOs made significant progress in achieving many of the goals; however, their achievement required maximising all available resources and capitalising on all available actors. Morduch et al. (2003) cite lack of uniformity across the world and/or across

the goals as a major factor that hindered progress in achieving the MDGs. Furthermore, the UN has shown through its Millennium Project that sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is the epicentre of the HIV/AIDS crisis, with drought causing continued hunger and a rise of income inequality. Scores of people are living with inadequate shelter and low income. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) replaced the Millennium Development Goals. NGOs are still major drivers in the attainment of these goals.

NGOs are involved in promoting development at a national, regional, and global level. At a local level in South Africa, NGOs work on various issues such as women's development, children's rights, and sanitation issues. Stewart and Korten (1997:17) define development as a "positive social, economic and political change in a country or community". Development is an inclusive and value-rich process which is concerned with positive development efforts. It is measured by the results seen in change in existing human societies and successes of society in natural, environmental, and social relations. Korten (1980) further describes development as a process by which members of a society, guided by their aspirations, improve their quality of life. Within the context of a more detailed analysis, it is NGOs serve as catalysts for the implementation of the development process. While NGOs cannot deliver development alone, they do enjoy a comparative advantage in service delivery because of their focus on community empowerment and because they are more able than government to respond directly and immediately to community needs (Shepherd 2000).

NGOs have learned much about themselves and development over the past two decades, but their real potential as learning organisations has yet to be unlocked. Much of the writing and thinking on organisational learning comes from the corporate world, where performance is measured in terms such as "competitive advantage", "market share", and the "bottom line" of profitability (Luthans and Youssef 2004). As a result of the increased importance of creativity and innovation, organisational learning has become a concept of intense interest (Argyris 1999). The interest, coupled with the ultra-competitive global marketplace, makes organisational learning a concept of particular importance to NGOs. However, because NGOs do not focus on generating profit by outperforming competitors, there is less of a proprietary concern for the knowledge NGOs generate. Instead, NGOs place greater emphasis on networking, collaboration, sharing, and dissemination, with knowledge ideally flowing outwards into broader contexts for the benefit of the society as a whole.

NGOs have either entered the mainstream literature with their claims of innovative and effective practice or have tried to transform themselves to fit new realities; organisational

learning has emerged as one way to live up to expectations and needs (Petit 2003). Most NGOs use the term “institutional learning” loosely, without necessarily being ‘institutions’ themselves in the formal sense of the phrase. Some NGOs prefer to use “organisational learning” interchangeably with “monitoring and evaluation”. “Organisational learning” is the preferred term throughout this thesis. The preference is not to detract from the importance of learning in NGOs but reflects the biases of the researcher’s own experiences working for several NGOs in Africa.

Complexity and uncertainty characterise the environment in which NGOs work. For example, there is a complex range of interrelated social, economic, and political factors that the funding organisations and other collaborators have minimal control (Dahan et al. 2010). The development process itself is not straight forward, unpredictable, and poorly understood by the NGOs themselves. Learning about NGO work on the ground is essential to identify what works and what does not, in a cost-effective manner. To successfully lobby advocate for change at grassroots and national levels, NGOs need to prioritise learning about broad issues such as macroeconomic policy. Ossewaarde et al. (2008) argue that learning forms the foundation of accountability, dissemination, and influence; all of which are increasingly important to NGOs as they move away from a reliance on small-scale project interventions and engage in broader processes of development. If NGOs are to anticipate and prepare for threats and opportunities, it is imperative that they learn about the changes in the external environment, for example, donor policy and development. Learning is a critical component of staff development and effectiveness, and learning from the ideas and experiences of others is important if NGOs are to keep themselves alive to innovation and challenge. In essence, learning is the only sustainable competitive advantage.

It is easy to agree with the rhetoric of reaching common goals and exercising mutual learning in the NGO sector. Arya and Salk (2006) are of the view that “learning” and “common objectives” are terms continuously repeated in the policy documents and guidelines produced by NGOs. Other repeated phrases include “partnership”, “participation”, “transparency”, “good governance”, “civil society”, and “coherence”. Moreover, once the terms are written in policies, they start to circulate among practitioners and other policy makers that reproduce the same rhetoric in their policies, strategies, funding applications, and reports. The current terms easily become buzzwords that function as a symbolic means of integration into the international development system. The circulated buzzwords, together with the funding in the NGO channel, define the characteristics and borders of the system.

By following the latest development fads, members of the heterogeneous set of organisations all over the world belong to or desire to enter into a system of development. The phenomenon of circulating and spreading new concepts and terms used in political rhetoric is of course not specific to development policies (Fischer 2003). Such a phenomenon is familiar to anyone working with NGOs in development. Terms such as “grassroots participation”, “poverty reduction”, “gender”, and “good governance”, among others, move quickly from the strategies of international organisations and aid agencies to the brochures and funding applications of NGOs.

In the past, NGOs have not faced the full costs of not learning, because they can rely on a relatively loyal donor base that was not taking time to get to know about the context in which the NGOs worked. The donor loyalty also caused for some NGOs to be popular with some foreign government arms. However, in a future dominated by increasing competition, donors’ demands for “results” and “impact”, critics’ closer scrutiny of NGOs, donors are demanding to know more about their funds were used. (Bendell and Unies 2006). For NGOs to develop and survive in the cutthroat world of NGO fundraising and development, they need to learn more and more efficiently. In the NGO world, success is measured using different indicators, and these are not easy to quantify and measure. If learning is then tied to success as an indicator, it becomes difficult to measure, and this raises fundamental questions about how knowledge can be measured in the monitoring and evaluation framework of NGOs.

There are many theories about and conceptual models of organisational learning. Through reviewing literature, one can discern that there are many guidelines and templates that seek to explain a ‘how to’ guide to organisational learning. A substantial portion of the literature on organisational learning is developed by and aimed at the corporate sector (Finger and Brand 1999). Therefore, the goals of business to be efficient and maximise on profit are the underlying motivation for much of the knowledge management literature and many of the recommendations therein. NGOs can benefit from this insofar as they also seek to continually improve their sustainability. However, many NGOs work towards developing their communities and reducing poverty, and these goals require that learning in the NGO sector should not only contribute to internal efficiency, but also to issues such as “improved responsiveness, partnership, and policy influence” (Hovland, 2003:vi).

The study does not in any way abdicate the role NGOs have in ensuring accountability, transparency towards its donors, beneficiaries and peers. However, what the study advocates

for is a shift and reorientation towards accountability, that takes learning into consideration. When accountability takes a centred learning approach, it is most likely that there will be an authentic reflection, to produce specific responsibility to all stakeholders, and to provide continuous learning, management and collective ownership. However, Aarnoudse and Hill (1992:28) recognise that, “the need to learn is not enough” and that “NGOs do not understand how to make useful learning happen” and “how to translate new learning into improved practice that leads to greater impact”. While these may seem like obtusely negative observations, in sum, there are several reasons why learning and change in NGOs are difficult. Aarnoudse and Hill (1992:28) further identify some of the reasons including lack of sufficient resources to allocate to learning, lack of a supportive environment both internally and externally, a poor learning culture and even resistance to learning. These challenges cannot all be attributed to NGOs because different missions and goals guide NGOs, and their challenges vary depending on their type.

1.3 Statement of the problem

The problem observed is that the learning needs of the NGO sector are different in some ways from those of the profit making sector and the learnings and recommendations from publications focused on business cannot be transferred indiscriminately. As in much of the industry literature, the approach to organisational learning in development has been normative and aspirational, and much is written from within organisations about their own experiences promoting learning and change (Paton 2003). Theories of organisational learning are often not applicable to the operations and values of the NGO sector. For-profit organisations have many reasons to practise sound knowledge management processes such as learning to increase their bottom line and have a competitive edge. There are stakeholder interests such as profitability and return on investment that require that businesses act in this manner. In most circumstances, given a competitive environment, a company that has poor knowledge management processes will be inefficient; ultimately, its products will become obsolete, and its competitors will absorb its market share (Hurley and Green 2005). Businesses often replicate business practices that have proved successful in different communities through procedures such as franchising. Processes such as purchasing and logistics are developed, evaluated, documented, and shared with all employees and franchise owners.

Bradach (2003: 19) observed that most NGOs spend "...large amounts of time, funds and imagination... reinventing the wheel, while the potential of programmes that have already proven their effectiveness remains sadly underdeveloped". In many instances, this represents a substantial loss to society as a whole. The objective is to replicate the successful programme's results, not to recreate every one of its features. The difficulties in replicating programmes are multifaceted, but the NGO sector's failure to replicate successful programmes is only a symptom of a critical problem. NGOs lack the critical processes and knowledge needed to help them develop, evaluate, document, and share successful programmes.

From the problem statement, the following research questions are derived:

- What is known about organisational learning in NGOs? What are the learning challenges that NGOs face? Are there any gaps in the knowledge about organisational learning and NGOs? What are the gaps that have been identified by other researchers?
- Is there a consensus on what constitutes organisational learning in NGOs? Alternatively, is there a significant debate on the issues raised? What are the various positions?
- What models of organisational learning or aspects of organisational learning can be utilised by NGOs to facilitate learning? Are the models sufficient?

1.4 Research objectives

The aim of this thesis is to identify the unique learning challenges that NGOs face as compared to corporate entities. The research seeks to explore some organisational learning theories and debates, intending to determine a corresponding set of factors that, if present, might tip the balance towards more productive learning in NGOs. The thesis provides an analysis of organisational learning in NGOs and examines the diversity of thought regarding what constitutes organisational learning. While researchers and academics have prioritised analysing learning in organisations; most of the writings and foundational frameworks are corporate sector oriented. Bruce Britton has developed a model to spur learning in NGOs given their unique challenges. The thesis focuses on Britton's "Eight Function" model of organisational learning and critically analyses the solutions suggested for solving learning challenges in NGOs. The study checks for gaps in Britton's model and suggests how the learning challenges faced by NGOs can best be solved.

1.5 Research methodology

The methodological approach for this thesis is entirely conceptual. Kothari (2004:1) defines a research method as a system, scientific and theoretical, applied in searching for pertinent information on a specific topic in a given field of study. An unreliable method produces unreliable results thereby undermining the value of the interpretations of the findings. The thesis draws on selected literature for conceptual support in the areas of organisational learning and NGOs. Undertaking a literature review includes identifying a topic of interest, searching for and retrieving the appropriate publications, analysing and synthesising the findings, and writing a report. There are four methods for conducting a literature review, namely a narrative review, descriptive review, vote counting, and meta-synthesis. These four methods can be utilised separately or can complement one another in research.

A body of literature is a collection of published research relevant to the research question. Different sources, such as journals, books, grey matter, spoken word, videos, and the Internet form the body of literature. A literature review compares and contrasts the thinking, ideologies, and concepts in a particular subject area. Undertaking a literature review gives the researcher an opportunity not to simply summarise the writings, but to contrast, reflect upon, and indeed critically analyse the literature. The researcher will incorporate her thoughts and opinions on the literature into this thesis since literature involves a complex dynamic of personal responses to reading.

A literature review is a classification and evaluation of what accredited scholars and researchers have written on a topic, organised according to a guiding concept such as the research objective, thesis, or the problem a researcher wishes to address. Hart (1998) goes further and states that literature review is an “objective, thorough summary and critical analysis of the relevant available research and non-research literature on the topic under consideration”. While the purpose of a literature review remains the same regardless of the research methodology used, it is an essential test of the research question against what is already known about the subject. A literature review is a mechanism through which research becomes a cumulative process. The analysis makes the literature review an integral component of the research process. Its goal is to bring the reader up to date with current literature on a topic and to form the basis for another purpose, such as the justification for future research in the area. For a literature review to be of good standard, the researcher needs to examine many sources about the particular topic and write the analysis well. The review must contain few if any personal biases. It should include a clear search and selection

strategy (Carnwell and Daly 2001). Good structuring is critical, to enhance the flow and readability of the review. Accurate use of terminology is important and the researcher kept the jargon to a minimum. Referencing should be accurate throughout the research, so that future researchers can trace back the sources of information (Colling 2003).

More specifically, the literature review fulfils the following purposes:

- to provide a historical context for the research;
- to give an overview of the current environment in which to situate the research;
- to present theories and concepts pertinent to the research;
- to provide definitions and relevant terminology for the research;
- to describe related studies in the field and show how the research deepens or fills in gaps in the previous work done;
- to provide supporting evidence of a practical problem which the research addresses.

Tesch (1990) has produced a useful, if complex, typology of qualitative analysis. She distinguishes a total of 26 different approaches to qualitative research which she reduces to 4 groupings, the interest of which is in language, discovery, comprehension and reflection.

The analysis constitutes a progression from more to less structure and formality; the final grouping “reflection” being one whose proponents are resistant to any systematisation of their analytical process. It is imperative to note that the central requirement in qualitative research is clear thinking on the part of the analyst (Tesch 1990). This is the case because qualitative information, in Miles’ (1979) terms, can be described as an “attractive nuisance”. Its attractiveness is undeniable. Words, which are by far the most common form of qualitative data, are a speciality of people and their organisations.

This study takes into account that some Internet sites may be putting forward particular perspectives. The study also recognises the limitations of ‘grey’ research, some of which may not have gone through peer review processes (Walsham 2006). The thesis critically analyses earlier work in the field; paying due attention to its contributions and to any methodological problems and limitations involved. In a way, it can be called a “review of literature”, but it also provides some practical insights that can be tested in future studies.

Documents are nonreactive, which means that the researcher does not intervene in the context and therefore does not have to rely on the cooperation of participants. Documents and other literature are a useful source of information; in particular regarding the values and beliefs of individuals. The information gathered and analysed is linked to the research questions developed in the conceptual framework of the study. The author is well aware that the theoretical approach might contain certain drawbacks. Firstly, the research analysis might be biased due to the choice and accessibility of literature on organisational learning. If the study relies too much on one or very few authors' theories, the thesis' results could be biased towards the findings of these authors' previous studies. For the researcher to minimise potential bias, she selected the theories after following careful examination and objective evaluation. Therefore, the researcher considered academic papers, online literature, respected academics in the field and other development oriented studies of as many authors as possible. The researcher also examined and analysed the relationships between studies, the theories and frameworks and field reports done by NGOs themselves to come up with the most objective results possible.

Secondly, doing this study of organisational learning in a real organisation would have been more advantageous. Experiencing organisational learning, in reality, would enable the researcher to see its viability in practice and also in context, in a real environment (Richardson and St Pierre 2008). Nevertheless, to do a study of this type in practice, certain factors are necessary: a company willing to cooperate and has time for the study, theories and frameworks to be tested, a framework of the analysis to be applied, and also the analysis itself. The organisation would also need to be cognisant of intellectual property and protection of personal information of their employees and beneficiaries.

Thirdly, a wide variety of studies on organisational learning has been done, but not many analysis of NGOs have been conducted. Writing on organisational effectiveness, Sorgenfrei and Wrigley (2005:29) note that "there is a shortage of theoretical frameworks to be applied and tested in the NGO arena" as most of the frameworks are business oriented. Thus, it is necessary to have extensive literature systematised and focused mainly on learning possibilities and challenges in NGOs. Therefore, in a way, the thesis reviews organisational learning literature, with a view not only to get insights on existing models and learnings from the business sector. The thesis also reviews those business-oriented models to see if there are any aspects of each model that can solve learning challenges in NGOs. The study then suggests some mechanisms to facilitate learning in NGOs.

Fourthly, the author has worked in NGOs for over a decade, and her understanding of the organisations might be subjective due to the experiences she might have had in the organisations. This personal outlook might influence the proposed mechanisms. As the outcomes of the researcher's reflective and insightful thinking, they might be less meaningful for readers with different opinions of and knowledge on the subject. The researcher aimed to find meaning in the text and also the context and experiences in which the text was written. For this reason, the thesis' outcomes should be considered as insights and suggestions, not as all-conclusive statements.

Bangert-Drowns (1986:23) is of the view that people are "natural analysts" and have deficiencies and biases corresponding to the problems that they have as observers. While these shortcomings can be minimised to adopt a systematic approach, some of the human deficiencies are chronicled below:

- Data overload: The restrictions apply in particular on the amount of data that can be dealt with before it becomes too much to receive, process, and remember. This is particularly true in this age of technological innovations, where we have information from various sources on the Internet and on the go.
- First impressions: early input makes a strong impression so that subsequent revision is resisted.
- Information availability: information that is difficult to obtain receives less attention than more easily obtainable information. While the researcher gathered information from the Internet, data costs are high and led to the researcher not being able to source much information from the Internet as she would have wanted. Some of the books were in foreign languages that was not accessible to the researcher, with only a summary available to show that the relevancy of the book. Some of the textbooks were available on subscription only, making it out of reach for the researcher. However, this was supplemented by the use of the University library and through interlibrary loan arrangements.
- Internal consistency: there is a tendency for researchers to discount the novel or unusual and to stick to what they know already.

To conclude, the researcher assessed the potential drawbacks of the methodology chosen and took a precautionous approach. This was done to minimise the above mentioned biases and to develop a picture of organisational learning in NGOs that is as realistic as possible.

1.6 Significance of the research

NGOs complement the government and the private sector and represent the third or the social sector. They are also considered to be important features of effective, democratic, and healthy societies. This important role involves continually adapting to changes in the other sectors, as well as the NGO improving its effectiveness and efficiency in the face of limited resources and rising competition (Porter 1996). NGOs are working in increasingly demanding environments, where they are under scrutiny to show how they use finances received from supporters and donors. They are also under pressure to demonstrate that the funds they are given are making a meaningful, and sustainable impact not just in the communities they serve but beyond as well.

NGOs are struggling to be business-like. To compete in this new marketplace, they are under renewed pressure to show results and impact and to justify their existence. Most NGOs in the developing world obtain their finance from foreign governments. However, funds for them are becoming increasingly scarce, as donors are seeking more convincing ways to put money into development projects that can quickly and easily display ‘measurable impact’ (Reeler 2007). Foreign governments are also under increased pressure to divert funds to local problems such as welfare issues for their ageing populations.

NGOs are under pressure to be accountable, and their funding proposals promise accountability to donors and other stakeholders. However, promises of project implementation alone, no longer satisfy donors. Donors themselves face the same pressure to account to their funding partners, who in turn must report to their political masters. The main funders, usually developed-world governments, are asking more difficult questions and setting higher standards each year because they need to be accountable to the electorate and to taxpayers (Reeler 2007). An environment like this requires an NGO that is resilient and can adapt and respond to the changing environment and improve financial sustainability. Due to donor requirements, most NGOs have a monitoring and evaluation unit. However, most of these units are there to “tick boxes” and serve the donor’s needs. Mayfield et al. (2003) call for donors to rethink their practice and learn from their own experiences of managing funds and funding recipients.

The study is significant because it explores ways in which to design NGOs so that they fulfil their aims and objectives effectively by placing learning at the heart of sustainable social change. In general, organisational learning encourages people to reach their full potential

and at the same time to help the world to be a better place, which is NGOs' main objective. Through this study, the researcher hopes that NGOs will learn from their experiences and keep abreast of new practices and developments in the field so that they maintain relevance. The corporate sector also benefits from this study, which examines learning in a unique environment.

1.7 Scope and limitations of the study

The extent of this thesis is purely theoretical. The researcher did not perform the research in a real or existing organisation. All analysis, reflections and thoughts are derived from several academic works of literature. However, the researcher provided some real-life examples to offer a different perspective on the subject or to supplement the explanation of theories and models. For this study's purpose, the researcher viewed organisations as social systems which have three interrelated tasks: the development of the organisation itself; the development of individuals who make up the organisation; and the development of the larger system of which the organisation is a part, including the community (Ackoff 1981). The study focuses on NGOs as representatives of organisations. They are of particular interest to the author due to their unique status in society as vehicles of social development, and because she worked for NGOs for close to a decade. Besides, the choice of one kind of organisation makes the study more accurate and makes it possible to arrive at more precise results.

In hindsight, it is easy to see 'how it ought to be done.' In practice, conceptual issues regarding sub-sectors, fields, and types of activity meant that it remained difficult 'to put ought to into practice.' Research is a combination of science, subjectivity, and pragmatism (Darke et al. 1998). This study is no exception. Both the organisational learning field and incrementally the voluntary sector set considerable challenges for the researcher. The research relied on databases whose conceptual and classificatory schemes differed from those that the researcher would have employed thereby exacerbating the difficulties. The scope and nature of NGOs themselves were a hindrance. The researcher however diminished these challenges through an extensive literature review which involved a comprehensive analysis of information. The researcher minimised the constraints and weaknesses in various ways, such as using a variety of data sources and personally conducting quality checks of information.

1.8 Structure of the research

Chapter one provides a general introduction to the entire study. It introduces the problem and problem statements; frames the main research questions and sub-questions; and discusses the broad methodological approach, as well as the specific research questions employed in the study. The first chapter also provides the research outline and gives an overview of the entire study.

Chapter two provides an overview of the state of our knowledge about learning in NGOs by analysing the learning challenges that NGOs face. The chapter also explores NGOs as a phenomenon, focusing on their history, definition, types, and organisational characteristics specifically concerning learning. The chapter also distinguishes NGOs from regular business entities.

Chapter three introduces general learning theories and what they highlight about NGOs' learning challenges.

Chapter four describes Bruce Britton's Eight Function model. It analyses the functions proposed and how they interact with one another. The chapter determines which aspects of Britton's learning model address the learning challenges that are faced by NGOs.

In chapter five, based on the insights gained, the study highlights the conclusions drawn from the previous section analysis. The chapter also highlights the study's educational implications, as well as the lessons it provides for practitioners of organisational learning. The thesis concludes by proposing some questions for future research in the nascent knowledge for development field.

1.9 Conclusion

The chapter introduced the general background to the study of organisational learning in NGOs. While the chapter gave a glimpse of the challenges faced by NGOs about learning, the objective is not to accuse of non-governmental organisations of not learning. Rather, it emphasises that NGOs face considerable challenges when they attempt to learn to the extent that for most NGOs, the learning then tends to concentrate in pockets of the organisation. In the end, learning then learning tends to be focused in less contentious units of the organisation or more so amongst the staff that are based in the field not necessarily working in decision making positions. The Chapter highlighted the scope and limitations of the study and how some of the limitations are averted. The researcher explained the methodology used

to gather data focusing on the positives and negatives of the methodology and what the researcher did to work on the drawbacks . The succeeding chapters cover recommendations on facilitating learning in non-governmental organisations. However, before formulating recommendations, it is first necessary to review the literature on learning challenges in NGOs - a focus for the next chapter.

Chapter 2:

Learning challenges faced by non-governmental organisations

2 The rise of the non-governmental organisation

NGOs have played a significant role in improving the lives of ordinary people at national, regional, and international levels. These organisations have been at the forefront of intergovernmental negotiations, ranging from the promotion of gender equality to the abolition of slavery and the banning of landmines. In South Africa, NGOs like The Black Sash led violent resistance to apartheid, GenderLinks leads in fighting for gender equality in and through the media, and Greenpeace advocates for environmental sustainability. The proliferation of NGOs shows no sign that is ending soon. The explosion of the NGO movement can be attributed to years of unpredictable social, political, economic and technological environment. There has been political and economic uncertainty and natural disasters like El Nino, where NGOs have stepped up to deal with the challenges faced by society. Africa has faced a myriad of challenges including increased poverty, depreciating income levels, diseases such as Ebola, environmental degradation and climate change effects, armed conflict leading to other challenges such as human rights violations (Nyenswah 2014). The political leadership often reminds South Africans of the country's "triple challenge" of unemployment, poverty, and inequality. The problems weigh heavily on the social, political, and economic fabric of the country. Among other reasons, reducing the number of people living in abject poverty is one of the objectives of NGOs, leading to the rise of non-profit making organisations.

In South Africa, the government has struggled to keep promises on service delivery of essential services such as sanitation, transport infrastructure and housing. The dissatisfaction with the poor of performance of local government has resulted in protests and dissent. The incapability of uninterrupted service delivery by the government has led to development practitioners to seek other ways to ensure that citizens have essential services causing NGOs to lead the way in ensuring that communities' needs are met. The University of

Johannesburg's Social Change Research Unit's 2015 study showed that service delivery protests increased in South Africa over the period 2004–2014 and claimed close to 50 lives. NGOs are also facing the same scrutiny. While NGOs, are receiving increased attention and leading the way in ensuring developmental projects are prioritised, NGOs are also facing performance and sustainability challenges. According to Stark (2003), the challenges can be attributed to lack of funding, low retention levels of skilled staff and 'hoarding' of funded projects with no staff to perform the related tasks.

Scholars like Jaggernath et al. (1996) have put forward other reasons to explain the growth of the NGO sector. These include:

- NGOs operate outside the government system and they do have capabilities to create developmental programs to benefit the community. For the NGOs, to continue doing the work they are doing, there has been increasing support from international donors and national governments.
- The work of NGOs is usually directed to the poor and vulnerable. NGOs have the capacity to reach those who are at the margins of service delivery. This is mostly the case because NGOs work within communities.
- Government resources are under immense pressure from growing populations and decrease in spending budgets. This has caused governments to look at alternative ways to offer aid and development services to those who need them. States are being forced to seek more cost-effective alternatives to generally accepted state development programmes because of a rapid decrease in government resources;
- NGOs have the ability to attract funding from various sources through the work that they are doing.
- NGOs have a track record in influencing public policy. While their projects are mostly at a local or national level, they influence bottom up policy processes and institutions. This has ensured that they possess the credibility required to work on relevant policy issues.

In a speech at an Annual Civil Society summit, Heintz (2006:6) remarked that while we live in an era of "global interdependence" there are other sets of problems facing humanity such as global security and climate change. Deadly weapons are spreading rapidly across the African continent and being used in criminal activities and armed conflicts; deadly diseases like Ebola are spreading; global warming is causing alarm,

and starvation and hunger persist. The problems that are befalling nations are not only limited to one country or one region. The United States of America, one of the most powerful countries in the world also faces challenges such as terror attacks and natural disasters, and cannot overcome the challenges without the assistance of other countries or regional blocks. Some countries are also burdened by the problems bedeviling their neighbours; for example, South Africa is bearing the brunt of weak governance systems in countries like Zimbabwe. In an article for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news site, Akwagriam (2013) attests that much of Africa depends on foreign aid, despite economic growth in parts of the continent that outpaces the global average. Zafar (2007) supports the above claim, as he explains that foreign aid represents a primary source of finance in most countries in SSA, including Nigeria, where it can supplement low savings, narrow export earnings, and thin tax bases. In fact, foreign aid is considered to be a major supplement to government expenditure in Nigeria. Ethiopia's developmental trajectory is mixed, sometimes fast, slow or declining. Ethiopia's developmental trajectory is Its economic growth has been on an unprecedented growth trajectory for a decade, but it is one of the poorest countries in the world. Its economic growth has been on an unbroken growth trajectory for a decade, but it remains one of the poorest countries in the world. Much of its budget comes from international aid. This analysis supports the point that countries depend on one another for growing their economies.

The most promising aspect of global interdependence is the rapid development and growing importance of global or transnational civil society. According to the economist Stiglitz (2007), "economic globalisation has far outpaced political globalisation," and the researcher can attribute this notion to African countries having weak governance systems. States continuously undermine public interest institutions like the Public Protector's Office, further eroding democracy. NGOs are helping to fill this critical vacuum, providing the means through which citizens can influence the forces that are shaping our world. Klees (2008:9) goes on to argue that "...while global forces are key – how things play out depends on the specific nature of local circumstances and context." An important part of this is that NGOs are embedded in a web of relationships with other civil society organisations, media, social movements, and informal groups.

In the past decade, in particular, there have been some fundamental changes at a global level that has had seismic effects on the regional and local level. One can argue that perhaps, one of the significant changes has been the impact of the global economy on developing and

emerging markets. In 2000, the World Bank confirmed that the policies and those of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) often have more impact on macro and microeconomics of national governments. They are the most powerful international financial institutions, and most African countries rely on lending from them. At the same time, these two organisations prescribe policies and dictate structural changes to emerging economies. The world over, as countries make commitments to the Bretton Woods institutions, the governments start experiencing similar effects of the structural policies. On the other hand, the growth of private institutions and transnational corporations has had a multiplier effect on national level policies.

What the trends at the global level show are that emerging market and developing economies hardly control their economies and this has a lingering effect on the economy causing runaway inflation in some. While there has been no timeline on the effects of global financial trends, what is clear is that the effects have either happened slowly or at times rapidly. The changes have not only been on the global level, but there have also been changes in other spheres of the ecosystem as well, including climate change where environmental changes happening at a global level are causing alarm and despondency at a local level (Kennedy 2011; Bell and Ashwood 2015). The information, communications and technologies revolutions are global, too.

Ball and Dunn (1999) make three observations regarding globalisation as described above:

- With the rapid globalisation comes some disadvantages for developing countries who are losing control of national interest issues which are no longer in their hands. This puts forward the question of how much control does a country have on its national issues such as the economy, sovereignty and security?
- There has been an erosion of cultural norms and values, with some pundits blaming the advent of social media.
- The gap between the rich and poor is widening with no opportunity in sight that the gap will be decreased.

In Africa, development work has snowballed, and this is due to natural and human-made disasters too. According to Singh and Bourgoignie (2013), the rapid growth of the NGO industry can be attributed to the changes occurring both at a theoretical and practical level concerning development. Within the context of a more detailed analysis, development specialists accept that NGOs serve as catalysts for the implementation of the development

process. Shepherd (2000) echoes this sentiment and adds that “NGOs enjoy a comparative advantage in service delivery because of their focus on community empowerment” and also because they are “more able than government to respond directly and immediately to community needs”. Increasingly, NGOs are proving to be a necessity rather than a luxury in societies throughout the world. The citizenry cannot rely on the state because history has shown that a welfare state and a free enterprise are unable to create just and sustainable societies. Prompted by the inadequacies of the state and the market, citizens across the globe have developed organisations of civil society – NGOs – to help address a wide variety of social needs (Scheyvens 2002).

Teegen et al. (2004) propose that NGOs have several roles, which include providing an opportunity for the self-organisation of society and preserving a unique and essential space between the for-profit sector and government. It is through NGOs that citizens are working together to promote values, ethos and principles that are important to them as a community. The private industry is efficient at producing goods and private wealth. Government is best when it focuses on providing and managing public goods and services. There are some societal challenges that a government or the private sector will simply not take on. The challenges may be viewed as too narrow or serving a small percentage of the population and NGOs are sometimes better placed to provide the solutions. Civil society organisations can take risks that are economically unacceptable to the government. Chimanikire (2002) contends that advocacy campaigns emanating from the NGO world, may also be transferable to business practices by governments.

Not all scholars agree on the role of NGOs in aiding development, especially in Africa. Some scholars, such as Moyo (2009), have lambasted the notion that aid can alleviate systemic poverty. She dismisses the view that NGOs can replace state and fully participate as social welfare delivery agents. While NGOs are considered as change agents, it is folly to agree with the assertion that civil society is an invariably progressive, democratic force. NGOs also contribute to and influence state-society relations and participate in political agitation. Rodriguez (2005:309) contends that international agencies acknowledge that compared to other industries, NGOs offer numerous benefits including “flexibility, access to the poor and vulnerable, lower costs, and credibility.” Sachs (2005) shares Moyo’s view, as both scholars argue that millions of Africans are poorer today. Poverty and misery have not ended but have increased, despite close to a trillion dollars trickling in over the past

decade. The increase of societal problems has somewhat ensued that NGOs receive a broadened mandate, particularly from national and international aid agencies.

In a nutshell, as the economies are increasingly shifting to capitalist markets, markets often experience an erosion in economic and social equality. Various factors have led to the development and growth of NGOs including the changes that are happening at a global and also local level. In these circumstances, the NGO sector has proven to be an essential mitigating force that helps to create a healthier balance between the potential excesses of capitalism and the inefficiencies and limited resources of the state.

2.1 Defining non-governmental organisations

Scholars have not arrived at a definitive definition of NGOs. Shilbury and Kellett (2006) suggest that a tax status can define an NGO, what they do with their surplus revenue, the existence of a volunteer board of directors, or the fact that a mission statement directs their work. The NGO sector is also referred to as the not for profit, civil society, third sector, independent, charity or voluntary organisation. The above definitions of NGOs indicate that internationally non-profits are typically called “NGOs,” “charities,” or “foundations.”

Non-profits are in the knowledge business, whether they acknowledge it or not. A human rights organisation such as Amnesty International translates the reparations approach used in one country to a similar circumstance in an entirely different part of the world. A philanthropic foundation such as the Ford Foundation leverages its understanding of its field to help bring together organisations working to achieve similar goals. All of these non-profits are actively using and sharing knowledge as a core part of their daily work. However, because they do not think of themselves as information brokers, these organisations rarely invest adequately in how they manage the knowledge that is central to their efforts.

Some scholars such as Alvesson (2001) have opted to refer to NGOs as “knowledge-intensive organisations.” A knowledge-intensive organisation is an organisation where most work is of an intellectual nature and were well-educated and qualified employees form the major part of the workforce. Typical examples include law firms, accounting firms, management consulting firms, and research and development companies. Although NGOs are often omitted from example lists of knowledge-intensive organisations, Capozzi et al. (2003:89) suggest in a recent article that “...philanthropic foundations are knowledge-intensive bodies.” Given this definition, it is evident that NGOs, which often employ professionals such as educational specialists, counsellors, and psychologists, are also

knowledge-intensive. To identify a knowledge-intensive organisation, one of the key identifiers requirements is its reliance on human capital and knowledge as the source of its competitive edge and as (Starbuck 1992) puts it where knowledge is at the perch of the prioritisation list and is valued more than other resources such as financial capital.

According to Nzimakwe (2008:91) NGOs are institutions that advance development. They also consist of a variety of “functional, geographic, membership, and organisational groupings, which makes it difficult to develop a standardised definition”. NGOs take various forms, and the definition of an NGO and the choice of terminology are themselves the subject of much debate and limited agreement. One can argue that there is an absence of an accepted transnational or trans-historical definition of these organisations. In its broadest sense, Nzimakwe (2008:92) goes on to say some view “every organisation in a society that is not part of the government and operates in civil society is an NGO”. If this is the accepted definition of an NGO, then it becomes too broad and include a vast majority of other organisations such as sports clubs or political parties. On the broad definition of NGOs, Goleman (2006) charges that, “while it is based on semantic correctness, it is problematic because it embraces a large number and wide variety of diverse organisations”. Gardner (2011) concur that narrowly defined an NGO works with them to help them improve the social and economic aspects of their life. This definition is also problematic because it is both restrictive and broad. NGOs do not just work on improving the economic and social aspects of one’s life; NGO mandates are broad and include working to further democracy, improve use of technology and fight for social justice. Further confusion results because there are many different approaches to what is broadly called “development work,” including some that are in opposition and do “contradictory” work and others that are viewed by some (e.g, Stern 2000) as being the very antithesis of development.

In essence, an NGO is viewed as an organisation with the primary objective of supporting a development or social issue, usually of public concern and non-commercial purposes (Davies and Hossain 1997). NGOs are in a sense a hybrid of business enterprises and government, but at the same time differ from both. Unlike business (but like government), NGOs have no owners to whom profits are distributed; instead, all their resources and seeming profits are channelled back internally to reach set goals (James 1983).

The term “NGO” has been criticised for its negative connotations and inaccuracy, particularly since it is structured from government’s point of view and has its boundaries defined about them as “non-governmental.” It is almost impossible to base the definition of

the NGO on a legal definition given that there is wide variation in the law that relates to NGO activities. According to which an NGO may, for instance, have the legal status of a charity, a non-profit association, or a foundation (Teegen et al. 2004). Not surprisingly, some scholars have stated with resignation that there is simply no such thing as a “typical NGO” (Chimanikire 2002). As a result of such criticism, alternative expressions have been introduced, such as “development sector organisations” and “community-focused organisations.” Globally, there are many different types of NGOs, which can make the process of defining such an organisation a difficult task. To be considered an NGO, an organisation must not be a political party, must not be a criminal group, and must be a non-profit organisation (Fowler 1991). Although these three characteristics could be disputed, they offer a broad overview of the world of NGOs. Schiavo-Campo et al. (2001) propose three criteria that can assist in defining an NGO: it should be set up independently, as opposed to being set up by or through the government; it should have a well-defined structure, and its funds and projects should not be tied to the government. These, above all, is what ensures that NGOs are not linked to governments. This argument by Schiavo-Campo et al. (2001) is problematic in that nearly all NGOs receive some form of funding from governments. The government contributions can be subsidised or no taxes at all, funding for projects and technical support. While NGOs might not receive funding from their national governments, they may receive funding from foreign governments through various funding channels such as the Canadian International Development Assistance offered by the government of Canada.

In a bid to find a standard definition for the NGO, Agard (2010) outlines the characteristics an organisation should have to be considered to be a non-profit-making institution. To ensure its “voluntary” or “benevolent” character, and that it should support development. Agard (2010) goes on to state that “the voluntary nature ensures its public interest character is maintained. However, one needs to note the definition of public interest is broad, and some authoritarian governments have acted in a way to ensure that the public does not enjoy and exercise their freedoms. In a nutshell, NGOs have many different missions and visions, but the majority of their goals have one common theme of working together in partnership with the UN for a more peaceful and sustainable world. After analysing these definitions, one can agree that NGOs’ primary objective is to assist vulnerable communities, create equitable societies and redistribute wealth, especially at grassroots level.

Sociological approaches to NGOs mainly define them by referring to what NGOs are not. Teegen et al. (2004) argue that NGOs are often referred to as “non-profit-making”, and this attribute differentiates NGOs and other non-state actors such as corporates, whose primary aim is the pursuit of profit. NGOs are interested instead in advancing their chosen objectives, such as the eradication of poverty. In essence, NGOs are non-governmental and non-profit-making, and do not make profits. However, if there are any surpluses of funds, these can be ploughed back into the organisation to make it more sustainable and fund other projects.

NGOs are distinct from other forms of collective action with less permanent organisational structures, such as public protests or social movements, in that they have some degree of formal or institutional existence. Senge (2006) echoes that the organisational attribute characterises NGOs as having an organisational structure, such as permanent staff members, offices, or financial income. Maartens (2002) NGOs are thus formal institutions with self-governing constitutional arrangements. Usually, NGOs have formal statutes or other governing documents setting out their mission, objectives, and scope. They are accountable to their members, donors, and beneficiaries. However, Willets (2002), an authority on NGO dynamics, argues that not all NGO structures are the same. Some NGOs have headquarters based in international cities such as the World Vision with a headquarters in New York City. Alternatively, NGOs can be centrally located in one country but operate in multi countries. Alternatively, they may be based in a single country and operate transnationally, as organisations or loose movements.

Willets (2002) goes on to argue that sometimes NGOs are sometimes compared to loose social movements fighting a particular cause such as The Fees Must Fall movement in South Africa. NGOs would like to see themselves as more dynamic, structured and progressive. However, this is a false dichotomy. NGOs are components of social movements. Similarly, ‘civil society’ is the broader concept that covers all social activity by individuals, groups, and movements. It remains a matter of contention whether civil society also covers all business. Barber (2004) states that society is composed of three sectors: government; the private sector; and civil society, excluding businesses. In functional terms, NGOs can focus on operational and advocacy activities. Operational NGOs contribute to the delivery of services, whereas the primary aim of advocacy NGOs is to influence the policies of public authorities and public opinion in general.

Hansmann (1987) notes that some individuals, therefore, prefer the use of terms such as “voluntary organisation,” “private voluntary organisation,” “non-profit organisation,” or

“not-for-profit organisation.” For example, in Zimbabwe, NGOs are under pressure from the government and are seen as ‘anti-governmental’ or ‘agents of regime change.’ The government has even tried to thwart NGOs’ operations, and many NGO employees have faced arrest, harassment, or even torture. The cat-and-mouse relationship between the nongovernmental organisations and the state in Zimbabwe has led to the promulgation of the NGO Act to regulate the activities of NGOs.

For practical reasons, no distinctions are made in this thesis between NGOs, transnational social movement organisations, faith-based organisations, and community-based organisations. The term “non-governmental organisation” represents all kinds of global and local social movement entities. For this research, the acronym NPO is used interchangeably with NGO.

2.2 Learning in non-governmental organisations

(1990:353) posits that “organisational learning and strategic knowledge are key to gaining the upper hand, clout and influence.” NGOs do not only depend on financial resources like funding, but they can leverage their knowledge as a resource that can be traded with other stakeholders such as peer organisations, beneficiaries, donors and governments. Enforcing learning is easier said than done especially for NGOs because they have little time for reflection due to work pressure and understaffed projects. Even if the NGO wants to invest in learning tools or space for learning, this might be impossible due to limited funds, unwillingness to collaborate with “rival” NGOs. While some NGO networks collaborate and work together on Communities of Practice to share best practices and knowledge, it is not common practice and also leads to duplication of efforts. Also due to the “contract culture”, where staff are project based with no permanent employment contracts in place, NGOs may find it challenging to assign staff on a continuous basis to drive learning efforts in an organisation. For those NGOs whose headquarters in a different city or country, communication flows can be challenging with no real partnership in place. Marker (2002) sees tangible results of collaborating further suggesting that it not only useful for learning initiatives but also fundraising and resource mobilisation.

NGOs need to learn to remain sustainable. Because of their non-profit making nature, NGOs need to ensure that they maintain their capital not only financial but also social and human capital. To be able to act as “stewards” of their capital, NGOs need to prioritise learning.

Due to globalisation trends, NGOs' relevance and impact is increasing. Attaining development goals is not easy and Edwards (1997:4) identifies four challenges that NGOs face in their quest to create a just and equal society:

- NGOs need to work with all stakeholders and not just focus on certain sectors of society. Before the NGOs think of working with everyone, they need to be an “inclusive civil society” including grassroots, loose movements and cause-driven;
- NGOs need to ensure that institutions and other organisations respond to environmental and social needs, and hold those accountable for their actions. The NGOs need to realise accountability is two way, as they will need to be measured by the same yardstick that they impose on others regarding transparency and accountability;
- NGOs need to provide space to developing and emerging countries the “policy space” and ensure that poor countries and poor people are not treated differently because of their economic status;
- There are various commitments and promises that are made by governments and also at global conferences. NGOs need to ensure that these are met and they speak to local context needs and provide “concrete” solutions at a local level.

Clearly, NGOs are working beyond just meeting their set mission and goals. There are increasing demands for the NGOs to collaborate with other NGOs, be they local or international, there is a need for the NGOs to cooperate with governments and private companies to meet national developmental goals. These demands require that the NGO put learning at the heart of its core activities.

There are two key distinctive characteristics of NGOs that affect learning (Fowler 1988). Firstly, NGOs' relationship with their target audiences is based upon principles of voluntarism rather than control, as is typical of government. This means that intended beneficiaries are sometimes involved in programme design and management. If this happens, the programmes stand a better chance of success, as they are more likely to be relevant and attractive. Secondly, NGOs are highly dependent on donors, and they have a tendency to change interventions and project activities to match donor priorities. This dependency leads to a lack of financial, project, and organisational sustainability.

During the 1980s and 1990s, there were three major perspectives on organisational learning that arose in the development sector (Korten 1980:496). Each of the three strands responds to the increased attention given to institutional performance within the neo-liberal policy environment of the time and to the related emergence and presumed effectiveness of NGOs as mainstream development players. The three perspectives are:

- The learning process approach, which emerged as an argument against blueprint approaches to development projects;
- The systematic attention given to the evaluation of development projects, much of which began to address issues of organisational learning;
- The increased organisational learning literature emanating from the NGO sector produced by the NGO staff or consultants. The literature is usually in the form of annual reports with special sections on learning, learning compendiums, monitoring and evaluation guides and toolkits.

The business environment is not constant neither is the environment in which NGOs operate. Hence NGOs need to adapt to suit the dynamic external environment. However, Davies and Hossain (1997) view are of the view cultural norms and values, individual competencies, poor decision making skills as some of the cumulative blocks to NGOs to reflect on the work that they do. Even though NGOs face the pressure to fundraise in a world with fast-changing environments the NGOs need to adapt and borrow some agility from the corporate sector. Organisational learning can be a panacea to the challenges the NGOs face.

2.3 Learning challenges in NGOs

There is a need to consider some inherent characteristics of the NGO world that may present particular learning challenges for NGOs. NGOs do not operate for profit, neither do they have shareholders, and this means the organisations operate mainly driven by their mission and principles. Senge (2006:19) opines that “learning is hard to do, not only for individuals but particularly for organisations and groups of organisations.” He goes on to argue that “when we do learn, we often learn the wrong things” and this causes a rift between what has been learned and the behaviour that is being displayed and the practice. These characteristics are entirely consistent with good development practice. Fowler (2007) laid down an enormous challenge for all NGOs when he stated that “an almost universal weakness of non-governmental organizations is limited capacity to learn, adapt and continuously improve.” This incapacity is a grave concern because NGOs’ future usefulness is hinged on their ability

to know where their shortcomings lie and to learn how to learn. Experience is the best teacher. NGOs need to prioritise reflecting on their experience and learning from it. NGOs can ignore learning at their peril. Only if they learn can they continue developing the community and fight for a community that is free and just for everyone.

For Smillie (1995) NGOs have a short memory and fail to remember what they have learned. However, this may not be attributed to a natural cause, but for some NGOs, this is self-inflicted since they would instead “remember” only the positives to amass more donor funding. One finds that some NGOs, would rather share their achievements and in turn hide their failures to get more funding and be seen as trailblazers. Smillie (1995) puts forward another argument that some NGOs do not prioritise learning due to ‘insecure’ leadership, who feel that if their subordinates learn, they might become more knowledgeable and render them not so useful for the organisations they lead. For this reason, one of the most significant internal barriers to learning can be what Senge (1990) calls “defensive routines”, which he defines as the “entrenched habits that we hide and not wanting to reveal our thinking to others”. There are various reasons why people might choose to protect themselves including lack of confidence and low self-esteem.

Shepherd (2000) states that learning and change in NGOs has proven to be difficult for multiple reasons, ranging from a lack of external and internal support (learning takes time and money), to poor learning culture and even a resistance to learning. Importantly, those who have the will to learn often lack simple, lively, engaging, and fruitful learning process designs, methods, and techniques that increase the effectiveness of learning practices. The lack of coherence between what an NGO envisions and what it does results in ineffectiveness and is also a challenge to learning, since it creates confusion in the minds of the NGO’s staff, its supporters, and other stakeholders, and reduces focus and energy.

Barriers to learning can be categorised as external or internal. Although this study focuses on the internal barriers over which NGOs have some control, it is important to acknowledge that some of the most significant barriers to learning in NGOs may lie largely or completely outside of their sphere of influence. External barriers to learning are those that arise from the organisation’s external environment and over which the NGO may have little or no influence, let alone control. A useful starting point for identifying external barriers to learning is to look at the NGO’s key stakeholders such as its funders, other NGOs, the general public, and even its supporters.

Regarding internal barriers, the staff of many NGOs will readily acknowledge – with varying degrees of frustration – that their organisation has characteristics that make the process of organisational learning difficult. Edwards (1997:9) and Britton (1998:17) point out that “...we all know that, in practice, learning in NGOs is very difficult. Often the characteristics and behaviour of NGOs are not favourable to the requirements of learning”. In addressing barriers to learning, the first step is to identify what they are. In addition to the internal barriers to learning which Edwards has identified, there are a number of other powerful forces that may block the learning process and that operate at an interpersonal or even a psychological level.

In NGOs, there is an almost imbalance between aspirations, capabilities and resources. One of the most significant findings in research done by Twig and Steiner is that work overload and pressure are not only significant factors in NGO operations and performance but also systemic weaknesses. Another challenge facing NGOs affecting learning is staff turnover, especially within organisations, that embrace voluntarism. High staff turnover and poor performance have been persistent issues for both international and local non-government organisations (NGOs). Studies have shown that the high turnover is linked to the challenges associated with ensuring that the NGO employees remain motivated not just through monetary incentives but also other incentives such medical insurance and more extended employment contracts. However, it is important to note that the motivation of employees is not only to personal benefits for the staff but also a supportive leadership plays a major role in ensuring that staff stay. One can argue that a high staff turnover may have an impact on learning rates, but so far studies have failed to demonstrate this empirically. Knowledge depreciation or organisational forgetting is one of the causes for reductions in learning rates among firms.

2.3.1 Lack of learning systems and information mechanisms

In NGOs, there is an imbalance between aspirations, capabilities, and resources. One of the most significant findings of Twigg and Steiner (2001) is that learning is not incorporated in the organisational functions, and this leads to systemic weaknesses. Systems for accessing, storing, transferring, and disseminating learning are underdeveloped, under-resourced, and inefficient. Information overload is common in NGOs – there is a vast amount of information circulating, but too little structure to ensure that the right people get what they need at the right time. A preoccupation with documented knowledge and information storage is common in NGOs. Britton (1998) concurs by identifying NGOs’ lack of simple, lively,

engaging, and fruitful learning process designs, methods, and techniques that can make learning practices more effective.

Several factors hinder NGO learning. Project documentation is poor overall, often difficult to find, and of varying quality (Kar 2003). This is significant, since internal project documentation makes up a significant part of NGO employees' reading. Terminology plays an important role in the take-up of ideas and in employees understanding what they are reading. The formal language of organisational learning may be useful in academic and business circles, but it is often misunderstood in the NGO world. Unfamiliar terminology acts as a barrier to engaging with organisational learning. However, for Edwards (1996), the problem is conceptual. NGOs often confuse information, knowledge, and wisdom. Information is the raw material that enters the system; knowledge involves systematising information by filtering, testing, comparing, analysing and generalising; and wisdom is the ability to utilise knowledge and experience in action. The quantity of information is large, but the quality of information is underwhelming. Information is often vague, unclear, inconsistent, incongruent, and scattered. Work pressures leave NGO staff with very little time for reading and strategic thinking.

2.3.2 Poor learning culture

By their very nature, NGOs seem to value to action and results in more than reflection and inquiry. This can be attributed to an activist culture prevalent in NGOs that may view learning as a luxury; separate from and secondary to the 'real work' (Edwards 2002). The activist tendency can lead to quick fixes, which in the long term may exacerbate internal and external problems if underlying symptoms are not addressed. Carlsson and Wohlgemuth (2000) identify poor learning culture and resistance to learning as the two major challenges of learning in NGOs. For example, some NGOs are known for 'toy-toying' in the streets for their views to be heard. They may view this as their main goal and put learning on the back burner. Some NGOs also prioritise being visible on the ground so that they may be perceived to be doing some real work and consequently raise more funds. Incentives and rewards for learning are weak and diffuse in NGOs. Britton (1998) attributes this to a lack of clear and measurable goals about using knowledge to improve performance.

Goold (2006), writing in a briefing paper for a network of NGOs in the United Kingdom, attributes the weak learning environments in NGOs to what she refers to as "bias for action". Bias for action is the propensity to act or decide without customary or sufficient analysis; a

mentality of “just do it” and contemplate later. The concept was popularised by Tom Peters as a distinguishing feature of agile companies. Bias for action is generally a good thing. However, it serves NGOs best when the action is strategically focused. Goold (2006) goes on to outline the pressures that reinforce this bias for action:

- Time spent in inconclusive deliberations: NGO staff are too heavily loaded with tasks to engage with reflective ‘second-order’ learning. However, many people feel frustrated by the amount of time spent in endless, unproductive or unsatisfactory meetings, where decisions are not taken or the same issues persistently reoccur.
- The urgency of tasks: the sense of urgency is tied to the reduction of the willingness to be more reflective in making decisions.
- Avoidance of reflective observation, unclear concepts, and uncertainty of outcomes: Some NGO staff may avoid deep reflection because it could mean experiencing the situation as more complex than initially envisaged, thus increasing people’s frustration and anxiety.
- Fear of failure leading to avoidance of decisions: Uncertainty breeds fear leading to a time being spent in inconclusive meetings with no outcomes.



Figure 1: The cycle shows some of the forces that reinforce bias for action as opposed to reflection

Another challenge affecting learning in NGOs is staff turnover, especially within organisations that embrace voluntarism. High staff turnover and poor performance have been persistent issues for both international aid organisations and NGOs. The issues have often been connected to difficulties in motivating staff and volunteers. The culture of an organisation, its structure, leadership, vision and mission, and management processes, has a direct influence on employees' motivation. Financial constraints in NGOs also often mean that staff, many of whom are experts in their fields, are not paid market-related salaries. Irrespective of the NGOs' affiliation, mission, and size and extent of operations, problems of low morale and low motivation of staff and volunteers are found to exist in varying degrees. Global, national, and community influence also play a significant role in motivating employees. Research on organisational learning curves show that employee turnover reduces learning rates, but so far studies have failed to demonstrate this empirically. Knowledge depreciation or organisational forgetting is one of the causes for reductions in learning rates among firms (Argote, 1999).

2.3.3 Competition for funding

What an NGO can or can't implement is largely linked to where and who is bringing the money. This linkage often affects the neutrality of the NGO. NGO activities and projects rely on funds from various donors, foundations, and the private sector. Most NGOs have difficulty in finding sufficient, appropriate, and continuous funding for their work. They find accessing donors as challenging as dealing with their funding terms and conditions. Most NGOs have limited resource mobilisation skills; often, they do not look for funds that are available locally, hoping for funds from international donors. Funding tied to particular projects or programmes does not lend itself to innovative learning initiatives outside of the project box or facilitation of organisation-wide or inter-organisational learning processes.

NGOs are under pressure to present donors with success stories. Instead of learning, NGOs engage in public relations in a bid to provide a continuous stream of uncomplicated success stories to obtain donor funds (Kotler 2007). This detracts from the depth of self-criticism and analysis that NGOs need if they are to be serious about learning. Rising competition for funds leads NGOs to prioritise public relations – i.e. highlighting the good and burying the bad – over genuine learning (Hulme 1996). NGOs face pressure to demonstrate low overheads to donors. This detracts from investments required to learn effectively; even though it is clear that learning is essential to achieve leverage and impact and ought therefore not to be classified as ‘organisational learning’ at all.

2.3.4 Organisational structures

Institutional tensions within NGOs are numerous. These stem from a highly structured pattern and centralised decision-making. It is common to find that NGOs whose offices are in Africa have headquarters elsewhere; usually in developed countries. For example, World Vision, a larger NPO working for children's rights, has headquarters in the United States of America (Easterly and Easterly 2006). At a national level, locally based organisations usually operate smaller offices in other provinces, with the headquarters usually situated in the capital city. This leads to centralised decision-making. NGOs also face the problem of high staff turnover. According to a study done by Avril Ryder Salary Specialists (2008), the staff turnover in NGOs is higher than the average in South Africa. NGOs were called upon to prioritise paying staff market-related salaries. The main causes of high turnover are low remuneration levels, high centralisation of management, and the narrow definition of job assignments. Job insecurity and short-term contracts make staff less amenable to learning.

The problem is exacerbated when long-serving core staff who serve as institutional memory leave the organisation, thus affecting its learning capabilities.

NGOs do not only suffer from the consequences of high levels of brain drain. The main problem is with NGO donors, whose internal organisational problems, stemming from the nature of development work, make performance measures difficult to establish for the grantees. The expansion of NGOs now undermines their competitive advantage (Pearce 2000). A survey undertaken by Pearce illustrates how expanded organisational structures have complicated information flows within organisations and have led to perspectives of the organisation's mission differing between headquarters and field staff. As a result, organisational cohesiveness and overall effectiveness have been affected, as have credibility and accountability. Kourdi (2015) argues that there is a broader concern that NGOs are facing management and learning challenges because they have become large bureaucracies exceeding their organisational structure; consequently undermining their flexibility and effectiveness. The lack of institutionalisation and over-dependence on the founders creates a significant risk of collapse at the death of founders, leadership bailout, and high turnover. In essence, the hierarchical, centralised, control-oriented structures often found in NGOs are inimical to learning.

Smillie (1995) argues that hierarchy and centralisation distance decision-makers from the sharp end, thus compromising the link between learning and action and the ability to adapt quickly to a dynamic and uncertain world. These characteristics encourage distrust and stagnation because 'rationality' in such systems requires that staff compete with each other and disguise their mistakes. In contrast, in flatter and more democratic structures it becomes rational to cooperate. Boundaries are pragmatic and often temporary, and are designed to facilitate cooperation through mutual interdependence. Horizontal linkages are deliberately fostered, and professional distinctions, for example between programme and research staff, are blurred.

2.3.5 Unequal nature of the aid relationship between donors and NGOs

NGOs do not have a single reality. They operate in an unstable, complex, and uncertain environment. Most NGOs depend on donor funding for their survival, and the unintended consequences of this are highly influential in NGO learning dynamics. Donor types vary: they can be governments, private companies, or even individuals. The unequal nature of aid relationships, where one party possesses the 'power of the purse,' is seen as hampering

critical dialogue and creating information bias (Aarnoudse and Hill 2010). NGOs' dependence on donors has important consequences for how learning is perceived. According to Britton (2005), NGOs are under immense pressure to demonstrate low overheads to donors, which may make them reluctant to invest the time and other resources necessary for effective organisational learning. One can conclude that NGOs are now mostly following a donor-driven agenda with regards to development, and have lost sight of their original social justice goals.

What is vital for NGOs' sustainability is not only a sufficient quantity of funding but also its quality and diversification. A vast majority of non-governmental organizations depend largely on donor funding and often face closure when the donor funds tap runs dry. Even if the donor funds continue, increased reliance on these sources may also threaten NGOs' performance, distort their autonomy, and weaken legitimacy. For the private sector, a company's responsibility is to maximise shareholder value, increase profits, customer responsiveness, market agility and possibly to a lesser extent accountability to employees. Compared with the NGO sector, private sector accountability is quite straightforward; especially as there is arguably a congruence of interests among its immediate stakeholders, such as shareholders.

Transparency and accountability are not necessarily as simple for NGOs, whether local or international. Power et al. (2002) identify the conflict of interest between two primary stakeholders of NGOs – their donor institutions and their 'clients' or beneficiaries. Donors control the purse strings, and they often exert undue influence on how the NGO views accountability. Ika et al. (2012) state that internal information management systems, monitoring and evaluation tools, the development and use of reports, and indicators for success are determined not by the NGO's beneficiaries, but by the donors. The donor's hidden hand also determines how learning systems are structured and whose interests will be served. This argument highlights that the 'development project' is relevant to most donors, driven by a donor agenda. Instead of allocating resources towards learning and innovation, reporting systems and procedures are skewed towards controlling resources, particularly financial resources.

It is complex for NGOs to be accountable when they belong to international confederations such as Red Cross, Oxfam International, or World Vision. These international NGOs have diverse and segmented stakeholders such as staff, donors, volunteers, and activists, as well as relationships with governments, media, and other allies. Wymer et al. (2006) point out

that it is a challenge to find the right balance and methods for handling accountability relationships. The question of accountability to multiple stakeholders and learning is not dealt with extensively in the literature, and this is becoming more and more relevant as the scope of NGO work broadens.

Guijt (2007) asserts that tension between transparency and accountability is alive and kicking. One cannot be accountable if one does not learn, and one also needs to know how well one lives up to performance expectations in order to learn. The tug-of-war between learning and accountability is nonsensical. They need each other. Understanding effectiveness requires both. Guijt proposes further that this unease with balancing transparency and accountability is only theoretical. Official policies that profess the importance of learning are often contradicted by bureaucratic protocols and accounting systems which demand proof of results in light of pre-set targets.

2.3.6 Political restrictions shaping donor priorities

Donor objectives and priorities change often. Development aid is a public activity, whose objectives and guidelines are the result of a political debate in which different stakeholders participate and try to raise their concerns and issues. The nature of donor priorities often enforced on NGOs in a fragmented project framework can inhibit learning or even make it near impossible. It is difficult to assess and influence intellectual debates on learning at policy level. The same is true of evaluating the influence of international NGOs or donors. According to Karlsson (2000), the ambiguity and contested nature of the official objectives of development aid constitute a political constraint that makes it difficult for agencies to determine ‘what really matters’ and to develop a clear and focused sense of mission. Donor priorities detract from the depth of self-criticism and analysis required if NGOs are to be serious about learning. Ellerman (2002) posits that the main challenge is that donors commit a significant amount of resources to certain assumptions made by NGOs. This makes it difficult for NGOs to learn because they have to fall in line with the donor priorities and assumptions made during proposal development.

Ellerman (2002:33) questions the motives of the scholars who are not convinced that NGOs can “induce economic and social development” – and she states emphatically that the view is ill-defined since the issue of development is complex. Development is non-linear, unpredictable, and complex; and what is needed for sustaining development is poorly understood by NGOs. In a development process, there are only a few aspects over which

organisations have any control, and a great many more over which they do not. It is not clear which aspects are most important, when and how they interact, and what the downstream effects will be if successes or anticipated change are achieved in any one area. The lack of clarity presents a significant challenge to organisations committed to learning, because it is not always for NGOs on what they should learn or how the organisation make use of what it learns. For NGOs, the problem is particularly pronounced due to the high pressured environment caused by disasters or emergencies.

Gupta (2009) is of the view that learning challenges are greatly amplified when influential NGOs try to develop ‘the best way,’ which often involves inflexible beliefs. This creates significant challenges to learning, as NGO practitioners focus on explaining away mistakes and failures rather than questioning the wisdom of the dominant paradigm (Ellerman 2002). NGOs tend to focus on planning and evaluation tools that target the operational level, systems and operations that are concentrated at the accounting and financial level. In turn, NGOs fail to reflect on the important issues such that Ellerman (2002) identified as “behaviour, values and agency.” Taylor (2002) suggests that it is important for NGOs to develop the capacity for learning and to make the connections more important than just accumulating information. In sum, there are multiple actors in the development cycle. Development personnel, beneficiaries, and donors all make up the development process. The challenge is that the theory of the learning organisation assumes that there is some degree of a shared vision regarding learning amongst the different stakeholders in the NGO communities. The reality is that the NGO programs multiple actors who have competing interests, goals and objectives.

2.4 Conclusion

The NGO sector has often been described as incredibly diverse, heterogeneous, and populated by organisations with varied goals, structures, and motivations. It is therefore not easy to find a standard definition of the term “non-governmental organisation” (Cooper 2008). However, many scholars agree that NGOs possess four defining characteristics which distinguish them from other institutions in civil society: they serve the broad community, mission driven, are voluntary, independent and not-for-profit. The global NGO community is unique rendering it difficult to characterise the entire NGO sector. The difficulty of portraying the whole phenomenon is a result of the great diversity found in the global NGO community. That difference derives from differences in size, duration, range and scope of

activities, ideologies, cultural background, organisational structure, culture, and legal status. Most scholars agree that an almost universal weakness of NGOs is often "the limited capacity to learn and adapt" to improve the work that they are already embarking on internally and externally. The weakness is a grave concern because NGOs' future usefulness to the world poor depends on the NGOs' willingness and ability to learn how to learn. Korten (1980) believes that learning is not merely an option for NGOs; he maintains that learning is important and can integrate into the NGO's plans for sustainable development. He further outlines the key principles underlying learning organisations as "participation, empowerment, adaptability and the acknowledgement of grassroots experience". In summary, NGOs are not very good at dealing with discordant information. The inability to deal with information is a threat to short, medium and long term goals of an NGO particularly with regards to strategic management. Learning disabilities plague all bureaucracies, and NGOs are not immune to them.

Chapter 3:

A review of organisational learning theories

3 Learning theories

This chapter introduces and reviews organisational learning theories and goes further to look at the various organisational learning models. The section looks at the theories and models, their differences and similarities and how they feed into each other. Learning is a process, and a learning theory attempts to describe how people learn by laying open the complex processes of learning so that we understand what is involved. Learning theories are guidelines that give a detailed view of how information is utilised through absorption, processing or retention through learning. Learning is not a stand-alone activity but encompasses other influences and experiences that change one's worldview, skills and values. Learning does not only happen in the physical sense but also involves the emotional and other environmental influences such as culture and context. The theory of learning falls mainly under three categories or philosophical frameworks which are the behaviourism, cognitive, and constructivism theories. Behaviourism focuses only on the objectively observable aspects of learning. Cognitive theories look beyond behaviour to explain brain-based learning. The constructivism theories view learning as a process in which the learner actively constructs or builds new ideas or concepts.

3.1.1 Social constructivism

Social constructivism is mostly attributed to Vygotsky (McLeod, 2007) and emphasises the notion that groups create knowledge the other and working together to create an understanding of shared meanings. Social constructivism is based on specific assumptions about reality, knowledge, and learning. McLeod (2007) further asserts that social constructivists believe that there is a correlation between reality and human activity - as human activity is the foundation of reality. According to Kukla (2000), members of society together invent the properties that make up the world. As per social constructivism theory, learning has social aspects, and no human being just discovers learning and the associated

reality of the world. Learning is a social construct and knowledge is a human product. The people in organisations create the meaning of the world they live in through the interactions that they have with each other. The interactions do not only happen only at peer level but can also be upward or downward and even lateral. It is imperative to note that culture and context are essential in understanding not only what happens at a societal level or organisational level especially NGOs. Constructing the meaning of knowledge based on culture and context is what is at the heart of social constructivism. In sum, meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities. In the constructivism theories, Tracey and Morrow (2006:4) describe the learner is described as an “active, natural builder of knowledge.” The learner is not a passive actor in the learning process but is actively involved in the construction of knowledge. In a social learning process, learning is not imposed on the individual but the learner seeks learning through interactions - and technology can facilitate the interactions. Further, it is vital to note that, in NGOs, learning can be facilitated in a natural work setting. The learning process can happen through the observation or emulation of other skilled practitioners and socialisation into a community of practice. Vince and Saleem (2004:135) conclude by noting that learning, therefore, is seen as both a social and a political process. It happens with and through other people. Some scholars have criticised social constructivism on various grounds including the views that knowledge is socially constructed as unreliable. Also, in reality, not all organisations create spaces for social interactions

3.1.2 The Cognitive Learning Theory

This theory can be divided into two specific theories: the Social Cognitive Theory and the Cognitive Behavioural Theory. The cognitive learning perspective involves the changing of information into knowledge that is stored mentally and bases its foundation on the knowledge modified by experience. However, according to the cognitive learning theory, learning is not only affected by stimuli but also other intrinsic factors which in the end bring out learning in an individual. The intrinsic and extrinsic factors eventually result in an individual realising learning not only at a personal level but also organisational learning. The Cognitive Learning Theory places the brain at the centre of learning. The theory posits that if efficient cognitive processes are in place, all the new information that would have been acquired in the learning process can be stored in the memory for a long time. However,

if the cognitive processes are ineffective, this can result in learning challenges that can affect not just an individual but can also be detrimental to learning at an organisational level.

3.1.3. The Social Cognitive Theory

The social cognitive theory considers three variables and these are behavioural factors, environmental factors and personal factors. Bandura's (1997) social cognitive learning theory suggests that humans can learn through observation without imitating the observed behaviour. Cognitive competencies can be modified by external factors such as a supportive supervisor or a pressured work environment or weather conditions. For the person - behaviour interaction, an individual's behaviour may affect the way one thinks. The crux of this model is that for optimal learning to occur, an individual need to possess positive personal characteristics, exhibit appropriate behaviour and be in a supportive environment. The previous chapter looked at the challenges facing the NGOs, and funding is one major issue facing NGOs hence the organisations may find it difficult to provide a supportive environment.

Salomon (1993:12) notes that affirm the notion that has mostly been held in educational circles that "cognitive processes, cognitive development, and educationally competencies" has been viewed as residing in people's heads. Other sources of external stimulation such as social contexts or other cultural and technological factors have been treated as minor artefacts in the learning process. Organisations preserve behaviours, norms, values, and "mental maps" over time as suggested by some scholars. An organisation builds its culture as it addresses and solves problems of survival. It also creates core competencies that represent a collective learning of its employees, which include past and present employees. Even though NGOs have high turnover rates if learning is entrenched as part of the organisational culture when staff leave the knowledge is transferred because it remains part of the culture.

Further, Freidlander (1983) supports the cognitive perspective by noting that, "Change resulting from learning need not be visibly behavioural". Learning may result in new and significant insights and awareness that dictate no behavioural change. In this sense, the crucial element in learning is that the individual is consciously aware of differences and

alternatives and to choose one of these alternatives consciously. The choice may be not to reconstruct behaviour but, somewhat, to change one's understandings.

3.1.4 Cognitive Behavioural Theory

The Cognitive Behavioural Theory describes the role of cognition (knowing) to determining and predicting the behavioural pattern of an individual. This theory was developed by Aaron Beck in 1960. The Cognitive Behavioural Theory notes that individuals tend to form self-concepts that affect the behaviour they display. A person's environment can affect either positively or negatively the concepts that affect someone's behaviour. Some scholars who support this theory suggest that the cognitive behavioural perspective is suitable in explaining that cognitive development is necessary for learning, but there is a need for change in behaviour. Learning is said to occur as new insights, assumptions, and causal maps lead to new behaviours or conversely, new behaviours lead to new insights. Argyris (1977:119) seems to agree with this cordial relationship between action and learning by noting that, "An organisation may be said to learn to the extent that it identifies and corrects errors". In a nutshell, one can conclude by stating that learning is associated with cognitive and innovative changes through a process by which individuals gain new knowledge and insights and thereby modifying their behaviours and actions (Stata 1989).

3.2 Defining "learning" and "the learner."

There is no consensus on the definition of "learning," and so it is hard to describe how organisational learning occurs. However, some scholars like Dodgson, (1993:1) have put forward various definitions of learning. He further notes that, "management and business literature often equates learning with sustainable comparative competitive efficiency" – however one might argue that this does not fit neatly into the definition of learning but is describing the positive results of learning.

Indeed, according to Dodgson (1993), learning relates to profit-making organisations and encompasses both processes and outcomes. He goes on to define learning as "how private companies build, supplement, and organise knowledge and routines focusing on internal activities to adapt and develop organisational efficiency by improving the use of the diverse skills of their staff." This broad definition incorporates some assumptions, including:

- Learning produces positive results even though some of the outcomes may be deemed to be negative. It is through mistakes that organisations learn. While it is

important to recognise the role of an individual in the learning process, it is imperative to note that organisational culture plays an important part in aiding the direction and process of learning.

- Learning is not static, and it occurs in all activities of the organisation and at different intervals. In an NGO, this can be illustrated by the different activities that happen in an NGO including fundraising, project design, and implementation. All these are opportunities for learning and what is key is to encourage a variety of interactions in learning in NGOs. Learning does not only happen at an organisational level. It is “a human process by which skills, knowledge, habits, and attitudes are acquired and altered in such a way that behaviour is modified”. According to Fincham and Rhodes (2005), learning is “a cognitive and physical activity giving rise to a relatively permanent change in knowledge, skill, or attitude.” When someone learns they gain new insights. Fincham and Rhodes (2005) further assert that “with learning comes a “mind-set shift follows from the recently acquired knowledge on factual information or learning new procedures.” It is easier to assess the formal learning of facts as this can be done through examinations while procedural learning might be difficult to assess. Normally learning involves both the factual learning and also procedural learning.

Schunk (1989) sees learning as a “social experience, built upon interaction and dialogue with the primary stakeholders in a context where people are willing to share their ideas”. However, Schunk emphasises that she shares the idea that people must learn how to learn. Learning how to learn is particularly the case for NGOs: some have learning departments because it is a donor requirement, but they are not learning. In other NGOs, learning departments are training units, and their objective is to “build capacity” of external stakeholders and not necessarily focus on learning internally. Most donor projects are time bound with specific project goals making it difficult for NGOs to prioritise learning at an internal level. Kim (1993) sees two different meanings of learning. These are the” acquisition of skill or know-how, which entails the physical ability to produce some action; and the acquisition of know-why, which involves the capacity to articulate a conceptual understanding of an experience”. Capacity building is relevant to NGOs, because what they learn they cannot keep to themselves. Rather, they have to share these newly acquired skills and experiences with their beneficiaries, donors, and partners. NGOs use interaction and dialogue to share knowledge.

Heron (1999) describes learning as having “four distinct yet interdependent forms which inform, support, and enhance one another.” The first form is practical learning, which entails learning how to do something and is manifested in the competent practice of that skill. Heron describes the first level as the physical level of learning, where one has to show the willingness to learn. For example, in NGOs, this can be demonstrated through someone learning how to design projects or how to evaluate projects that would have been implemented. The second form involves conceptual learning, which entails someone showing a desire to learn about something (for example, someone saying “I want to learn about leadership”). This level of learning is intellectual and verbal and pronounced in statements and propositions. Conceptual learning emphasises the kinds of things one can do with the information one has acquired. The third form, is creative learning and is expressed through art, music or dance. The fourth type, experiential learning, is learning through interaction by being present and learning face to face.

However, Huber (1991:106) argues that learning consists of four stages, which are “knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation, and organisational memory”. Knowledge acquisition involves the collection of information from both internal and external sources. For NGOs, information gathering can be done through internal meetings or projects evaluations which usually happen at the end of a project. From an external perspective, information can be collected through other NGOs, project partners or event donors through meetings or attending conferences. Huber (1991:9) further expands and state that information distribution focuses on “message routing, delay, and distortion” while organisational memory involves “preserving certain behaviours, mental maps, norms, and values over time”. In sum, learning is itself an ongoing process. It emerges from own reasoning and behaviour. Through active participation and personal interaction, NGO staff can improve their listening skills and acquire new knowledge. For the acquisition of knowledge to occur NGOs need to formalise the process of acquiring information through the provision of written guidelines. Written guidance can be found in organisational documents (both electronic and hard copies) and through social interaction with others.

For Caldwell (2011) learning is "intrinsically a highly problematic concept in cognitive or psychological terms," and further argues that the problem and this further highlighted if learning is as an "action-theoretic" concept where the ability to act is correlational to the capacity to learn. Learning as an action might seem obvious, but questions abound as to the specifics of how learning can become meaningful and efficient, especially for NGOs.

In the NGO sector, a learner is a stakeholder or beneficiary, which can be staff, members, volunteers, and interns. The learner does not just absorb information but can also be used as a source of information to other learners through peer to peer learning. According to van Houten (2003) learning is driven by three primary ‘drives’ that are natural to human

- Yearning for knowledge: the constant yearning to know more about ourselves and the need to understand the environment in which we live in.
- Yearning for development: the foundation of our humanity which molds, defines and refines us as we grow.
- Yearning for improvement: emanates from a deeper inner sense that we can change the current outlook for things and that they can be done better to improve our chances of arriving at a certain point in the journey for knowledge.

Garvin (1993:51) defines a learning organisation as one that is “skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights.” This definition of a learning organisation might lead one to argue that a learning culture increases knowledge, competence, and performance. Learning also consists of "values, guidelines, and processes." By definition, “organisations are collections of individuals”; thus, logically, organisational learning turns out to be made up of collective personal experiences. In psychology, learning is defined as the “process by which a relatively lasting change in potential behaviour is a resultant of practice or experience.” Agnes (1999).

3.3 Developing learning capacity in NGOs

There are many different approaches to developing learning capacity in organisations. This chapter will focus on the individual competencies and the organisational development strategy respectively, with regards to developing learning capacities in NGOs. The strategies are unique and can be used as stand-alone procedures or in tandem with each other. First, there appears to be a question about the importance of individual learning for organisational learning. Individual learning is “the change of skills, insights, knowledge, attitudes and values acquired by a person through self-study, technology-based instruction, and observation” as put forward by Marquardt (1996:21). Therefore, Kim (1993) emphasised that individual learning becomes embedded in the organisation’s memory and structure. This brings in the notion that an organisation has a memory. Although an individual may come and go the organisation has a memory whereby learning is stored and recalled. In his

book 'Images of Organization' Morgan individuals within the organisation and the organisation itself does not learn. However, a learning organisation is not just a collection of individuals involved in a learning process. For Swieringa and Wierdsma (1992) organisational learning is encapsulated in the "changing of organisational behaviour" which is a result of a collective learning process. While individual learning is essential, on its own, it is not sufficient condition for optimum organisational learning. Other factors come into play including culture, environmental and social context. Although it is clear that organisational learning occurs through individuals, we cannot take organisational learning as merely a sum of the learning acquired by each of its members. Organisations differ in that respect from individuals in that they build and maintain learning and knowledge systems that influence their staff and are transmitted to future generations as the organisation's history and norms.

Organizational learning is more complex and is not just a sum of individual learning experiences. Kim (1993) further argues that although the meaning of the term "learning" remains essentially the same as in the individual case, the learning process is fundamentally different at the organisational level. It is the opinion of the author that to analyse how individual learning or knowledge can become organisational; it is essential to investigate the concept of "Organisation" with regards to an individual actor. Organisational learning comes as the ultimate level at which learning can take place. The concept of the OL has become shorthand for an organisation which is skilled not just at the building, acquiring and transferring knowledge but also competent in altering its behaviour to reflect the newly acquired knowledge. Kim notes that all organisations learn, whether they consciously choose to or not because it is a fundamental requirement for their sustained existence. However, organisational learning is both quantitatively and qualitatively distinct from the sum of the learning processes of individuals. Some of the crucial differences between individual and organisational learning are that first, organisational learning occurs through shared insights, knowledge, and mental models. Thus organisations can learn only as fast as the slowest link learns. Change is blocked unless all of the major decision makers learn together, come to share beliefs and goals, and are committed to taking the actions to change. Second, learning builds on past knowledge and experience – that is, in memory. Organisational memory depends on institutional mechanisms for example policies, strategies and explicit models used to retain knowledge. Of course, organisations also depend on the memory of individuals.

3.3.1 The individual competencies approach

At the centre of the individual competencies approach to learning is an individual. The approach assumes that unless the individuals in an organisation are capable learners, the organisation itself will be unable to develop the ability to learn at other levels. Dixon (1999) states that understanding how we as individuals make sense of the world is at the core of our understanding of how the collective learns. This view is in line with the individual competencies approach, which focuses on strengthening individuals' competence as learners so that they can better contribute to organisational knowledge as a whole.

It is imperative to note that the individual competencies approach seeks to initiate change at a behavioural level. The processes that an NGO designs for organisational learning must take into account the immense potential as well as the peculiar limitations of individual learning. If NGOs ignore the tacit aspects of learning in designing organisational learning strategies, the result will be an ineffective construction of processes. Likewise, if NGOs confuse individual learning as the passive reception of information, senior management may as well design the necessary procedures to self-correct.

Through a competency-based approach to learning, instead of learning commences by identifying specific competencies, skills and gives the opportunity to the employees to learn a new skill usually under a mentor or peers. A merit-based system can be used to reward employees or the competencies achieved can contribute to performance assessment through validated recognition. However, the competency-based approach might not be appropriate for new graduates or employees with minimal experience. For the program to be effective, it also needs to be fully integrated into the regular work procedure, or it will be a failure if employees feel it is extra work. As a tool in human resource management, a competency-based approach is an essential tool for organisational development. In a competitive environment, particularly for NGOs, it is imperative that organisations develop the resources that they have internally, most important the human resources through upskilling, reinforcing and improving their skills. What is important is to do a skills map within an organisation to identify, evaluate and develop the skills are internally and what improvements are needed in organisations. Using a competencies approach is not only beneficial to the organisation, but also to the employees as it matches the requirements of the organisations and the opportunities for the employees as well. Some competencies are

relevant to the knowledge economy, such as knowledge management and information analysis and systems management. These skills set the organisation apart especially for NGOs who have to fight for funding and other resources. Competency is not a one-dimensional concept.

3.3.2 The organisational development approach

The organisational development (OD) approach takes a holistic perspective of learning. It focuses on organisational structures, procedures, culture, and people skills and abilities.” The OD approach to change management is based on various theories and has its primary goal affecting organisation-wide change positively and more efficiently. The traditional organisational development approach contains the following elements: it is systematically planned, has the support of top-level executives, and is focused on actions that improve the effectiveness of the organisation for the long-term (Palmer & Akin, 2009). This approach views organisations as complex systems whose elements are interconnected or interdependent. A change to one part affects the others. NGOs tend to focus on the OD perspective how they can build capacity based on the participation, commitment and perceived empowerment of their beneficiaries.

Conceptually, OD is different from both management training and management development. In Burke’s (1971:173) view the primary reason for using the organisational development approach is to improve parts or the whole system. Through the organisational development approach to learning, an NGO is well positioned to work in a collaborative manner as it aims to improve the ‘whole’ entity. Relationships and a shared sense of purpose are central to ensure the success of the approach. Because of lack of funding, most NGOs work is implemented through relationship building and partnerships. However, it is imperative to be on the same wavelength regarding goals, purpose, and objectives of the other main stakeholders. Monitoring and evaluation of the results are critical to ensuring that results are documented.

For an organisation to increase its viability and effectiveness, it will need to employ interventions as it implements various agents of change. The goal of such structured interventions is to improve sustainability, performance or behaviours. The programme can be a series of defined individual and team activities that take into account the employees’ needs, what to do and how to do it. Britton (1998) provides a simple five-stage model of organisational development that is relevant for non-profit making organisations. These

stages include assessment of the whole picture, assessment of available options, action planning, implementation and management of the change process, and evaluation and ongoing review. Of these stages, it is important to highlight that organisational development is not a once off phenomena, but a process that requires investments in ongoing reviews. For NGOs, however, because of limited funding, it might be a challenge to invest time and resources into a continuous review. Thol (2012) provides a shortened version consisting of three stages that have been used to organisational development work:

Level	Activities
Stage 1	Developing a holistic approach in which the organisations choose their own focus areas. Typical activities include on boarding of new organisations, and self-assessments.
Stage 2	Capacity building for skills that are required to pass through stage 1. Typical activities include management skills and problem solving.
Stage 3	Develop and strengthen a learning culture for continuous learning. Typical activities include coaching and mentoring.

Table 1: Stages in an organisational development intervention

A successful organisational development intervention should enhance the organisation's capacity to manage change and learn from its practice. The major strengths of the individual competency approach are that it recognises that learning organisations require individuals who learn; it focuses on the short-term empowerment of individuals; it develops knowledge and transferable skills; it can be done without external help, and it can bring about fairly rapid changes. Its weaknesses include the possibility that it may address symptoms rather than causes; it does not address the context within which learning takes place, namely organisational structures, systems, and culture; and it may be interpreted as blaming individuals for the organisation's faults. According to Britton (1998:29) the advantages of the OD approach is that it is "holistic and comprehensive: it views every aspect of the

organisation as important; it addresses all the barriers identified, and it can be a very effective way of modelling a learning approach”. In the same breath, he argues that the OD approach can be “time-consuming; demoralising; it requires a high level of commitment from managers and staff and costly.” In reality, however, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. They can both be implemented to suit the needs of the organisation.

3.4 Learning models

Learning models are conceptual frameworks and guidelines that Learning models are important not just for academia but also for NGOs because they give NGOs a base to think through learning strategies. The chapter critically reviews the following models Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, single and double loop learning, planned and emergent strategy and Senge’s fifth discipline. The models were chosen for review because they have been used in subsequent learning model formulation and they do have some aspects that can be used in an NGO environment, for example the planned and emergent strategy model.

3.4.1 Kolb's experiential learning cycle

David Kolb (1984) developed a four-stage model of how individuals learn which involves action, reflection, abstract conceptualisation and experimentation in a continuous cycle. According to Kolb, all stages of the cycle must receive adequate attention, however, learning can begin at any stage of the cycle. Honey and Mumford (1986)’s learning styles model is based on Kolb’s experiential learning cycle. The model is based on the idea that “each individual will have preferences for one or more stages of the cycle. By being aware of their preferences, they can choose to strengthen other stages to make them better ‘all-round’ learners” Kolb (1984). Most scholars agree that the process of learning through experience is called experiential learning, and Kolb (1984) expounded on the definition and stated that experiential learning is “learning through reflection and doing.” Kolb’s model is grounded on the foundation that experiences shape any given learning style between people and their environment, for example, education, career or job role.

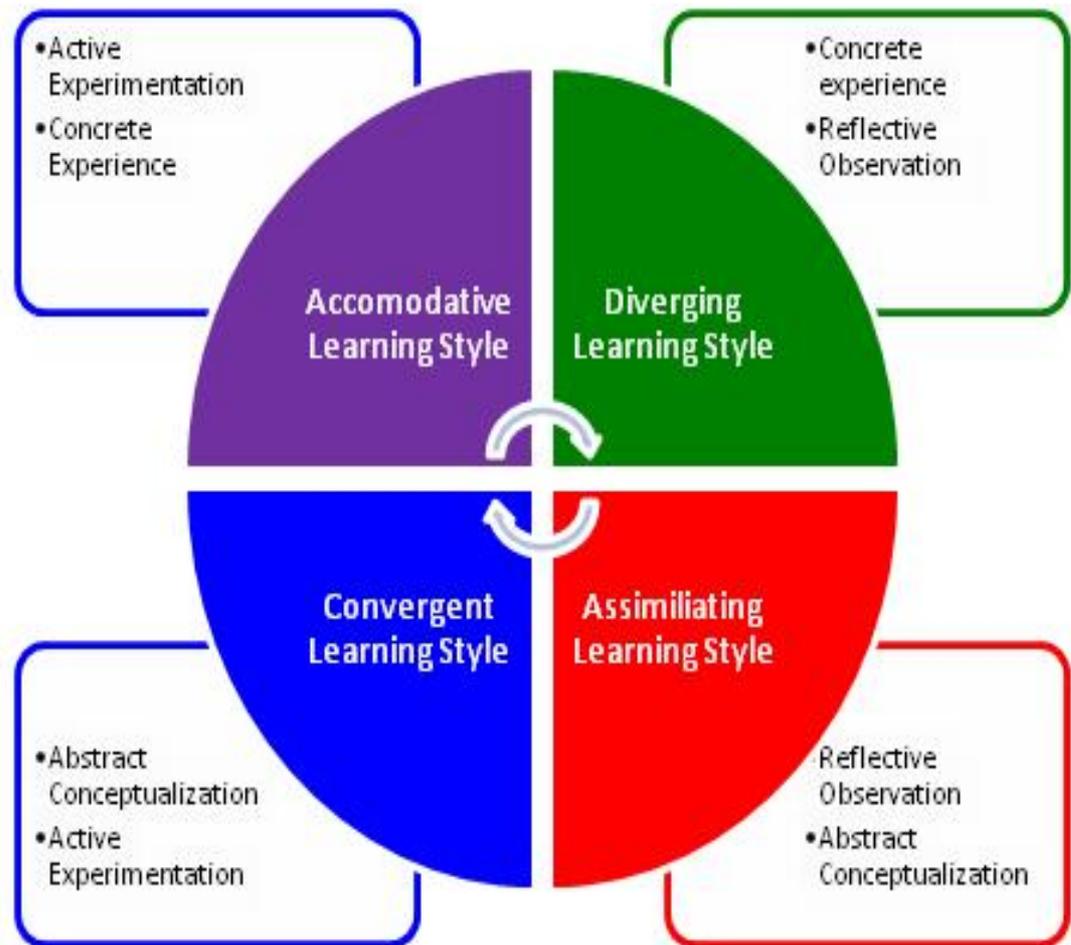


Figure 2:Kolb's experiential learning model

In other words, Kolb argues that learners apply these four learning processes, but some tend to engage in some modes than the others. Kolb views learning as a continuous process grounded in experience. Experiential learning is an integrated perspective on cognition and action. The learner does not play a passive role but is an active participant in the process. For active learning to happen, the learner must pass through all the four stages of learning and create new experiences through the learning interactions. For Kolb, all the stages are interrelated and do not exist in isolation. They feed off each other and inform the execution of the next stage. However, there is no logical sequence to the learning cycle, and a learner can join the process at any stage. Kolb (1984) further asserts that none of the stages on its own can be valid, but if a learner is to benefit immensely then they need to execute all four stages of learning. Various factors influence someone's learning journey including their basic cognitive makeup.

These types of learners prefer watching than doing and perform well in idea generation situations. In non-profit organisations, these types of learners would be great for fundraising

ideas or brainstorming new projects. Divergent learners also do well in group tasks and can connect with people, building and sustain relationships. They are also good with the arts and humanities if they are in the academic sector. Learners with an assimilating type of learning are less focused on people and emphasise logical sequence of activities. They approach learning from a theoretical point of view rather than a practical one. These types of learners prefer to have time to think through ideas – and in NGOs, this might pose a problem in that, NGOs are usually short staffed, and job descriptions are project based. Therefore, it becomes almost impossible for the staff to have time to be in a reflective mode and think through ideas. People with a converging learning style will find practical solutions to problems. They are more likely to simulate, test out their ideas to find solutions with little regard for people skills.

There are several definitions and models of experiential learning. One same characteristic feature of all the models is that the learner drives the learning process. The organisation is not responsible for ensuring that the individual learns, but the learner is responsible to testing the different facets of the model. For Kolb (2000:8) and those who have followed in his tradition, a learning style is not a fixed trait but “a differential preference for learning, which changes slightly from situation to situation.” According to Coffield et al., (2004:69) At the same time, there is some long-term stability in learning style.” Common to all models of experiential learning is “an frequent and repetitive cycle of experience, reflection, making sense, and application”. In other words, an experience, which is reflected on, is analysed and turned into new learning. This is important in NGOs because it turns into a guideline for action and new experience.

Kolb's model of learning can be used in NGOs in the gathering of internal experience. The process of gathering experience (internal or external) needs to be based on the sharing and exchange of information about projects or processes in the organisation. This requires an awareness of the organisation of what the organisation is working on and the impact of the work that the organisation is doing. Donors shape most NGO priorities, and because of staff shortages and work pressure, most staff are not even aware of the projects that they are working on or their impact. It is imperative for NGOs to identify the role of review and evaluation. Evaluation studies, annual reports, documentary information systems, and research reports are paper mechanisms that can be used to assess the impact of NGO work and gather internal experience. However, theoretical propositions are not enough – other strategies such as meetings, workshops, and debriefs can help NGOs to be rigorous in

evaluating and documenting their work. NGOs need rigorous evaluation systems in place, and must also offer staff opportunities to meet and share so that they can learn from one another's experiences.

Critics of Kolb's model, including Sadler-Smith (2001), postulate that six key issues are facing the model. They are as follows:

- The model does not adequately address the process of reflection;
- the claims it makes about the four learning styles are extravagant;
- it does not sufficiently solve the reality of different cultural conditions and experiences;
- In fact, learning does not necessarily happen in steps or stages

Sadler-Smith concludes by stating that Kolb's model does not fully represent the complex relationship between learning processes and knowledge.

Britton (2005) views the criticism as harsh. Kolb's experiential learning model introduces the idea of individual 'learning styles.' Kolb also recognises that organisations need to create space for all four stages of the cycle to encourage learning to take place. Most NGOs are action-oriented due to the challenges they face, such as staff and funding shortages and high staff turnover. Some NGOs perform activities not because they are part of their strategic plan, but because they have been asked by donors to do so. This approach causes the NGOs to be action-oriented. This action by the NGOs tends to implicitly diminish the value of the three other stages of the experiential learning cycle, which are reviewing experiences, concluding from experiences, and planning future action; all of which are essential for effective learning. In such an action-oriented culture as that found in NGOs, it is not clear how learning is rewarded hence employees end up learning in their own time during breaks or when the "real" work allows them to do so.

3.4.2 Senge's fifth discipline

The concept of the learning organisation was coined through the work and research of Peter Senge. It emerged in parallel with 'new leadership' discourses which sought to create alternative models of change agency, leadership and organisational change. Senge (1990) defines the learning organisation as the organisation in which learning woven intricately in the life and processes of the organisation. Senge's fifth discipline model's foundations come from a business management perspective, looking at learning from the viewpoint of the

organisation. The motive of enhancing or transforming workplace organisations as sites of learning is necessary to improve productivity and effectiveness. From an NGO perspective, a learning organisation actively incorporates the experience and knowledge of its members and partners. There are various ways in which the corporation can be done, and this includes policies and procedures that seek to continuously improve stakeholder satisfaction and grow its people and accomplish its mission with a constituency. The learning goals, however, do not need to exist in a vacuum but are tied to the purpose and objectives of the organisation and the desired outcomes and goals.

A review of the literature on organisational learning reveals that there are some organisational skills that NGO staff need to learn. Many of the skills are generic and range, for example, from field work to strategic management, training, and change management. Senge (1990) argues that leaders of a learning organisation require new skills that are heavy on a learning orientation. The new skills that the leaders need to acquire include the ability to develop a "shared vision," expose the prevailing models of learning and foster new patterns of approaching learning. Senge refers to systems thinking as "the ability to see connections among cause-effect relationships that are related but separated in time and space." Within the NGO sector, the discussion about systems thinking is currently focused on how complicated systems are. It is hard to predict the results of processes of social change initiated by NGOs.

For Senge and his associates, they have distilled five interwoven "units" or disciplines to be cultivated for building a learning organisation. He acknowledges that each of these disciplines is built upon the work of other writers. The figure below shows the five management skills also known as "disciplines" as identified by Senge. Many of these skills, which are as follows, are transferable to the NGO sector:

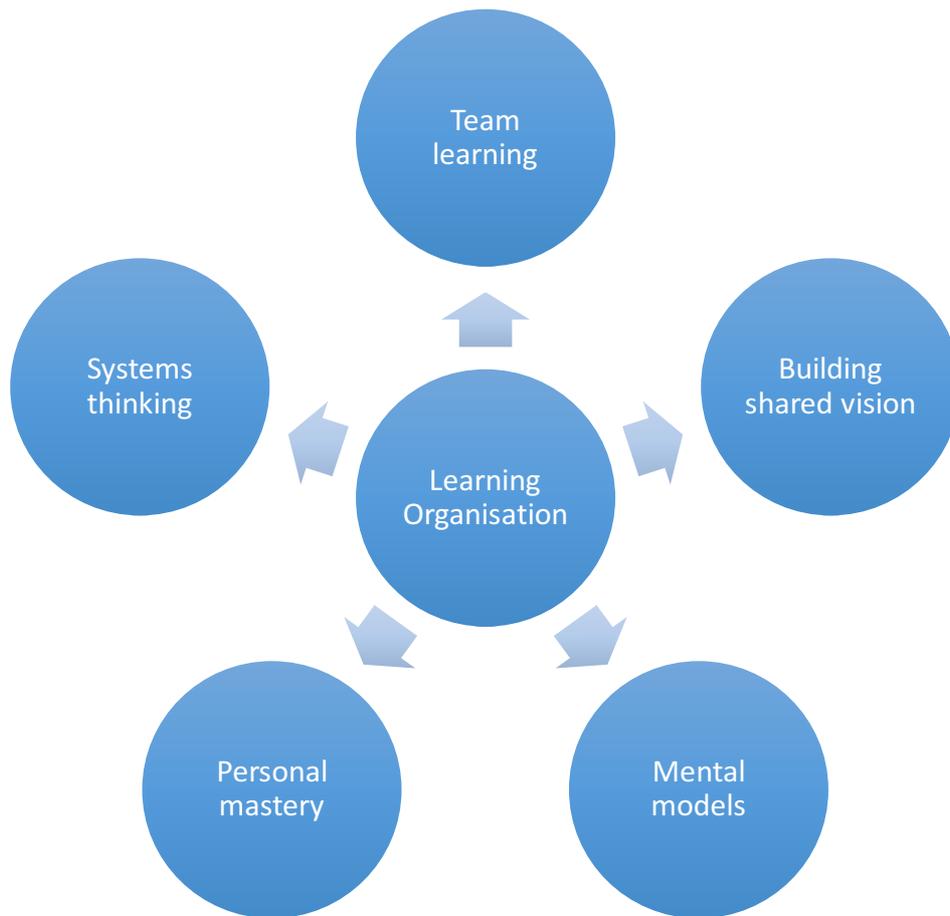


Figure 3: Senge's five disciplines

- Systems thinking – to act more in tune with the larger process of the natural economic world including seeing processes rather than events, wholes rather than parts, dynamic rather than detail complexity. This is about coming to view the organisation from a big picture perspective that recognises how one's actions affect everyone else.
- Personal mastery – learning to expand personal mastery including the ability to understand own capacities and dreams. It also entails the discipline of personal growth and learning and self-development.
- Mental models – reflection and continuously reflecting including examining and overturning deep personal beliefs which we use to interpret the world.
- Building a shared vision –The aggregate view can encompass the personal insights of all those working for the organisation. The team works on a common purpose and goal, with a shared vision and values. The team does things not because they are forced to, but they share the values.

- Team learning – collective thinking skills, the process of collaborating to work and develop knowledge efficiently in small groups.

As a concept, systems thinking makes much sense. However, the debate surrounding it has been at an abstract level, which makes it difficult to gauge the applicability of systems thinking practice, especially for NGOs. To date, most systems analysis in the NGO sector has focused on one issue in particular: that is, “the functioning of large organisational and institutional systems and networks and how funding partners can better address them” (United Nations, 2000). While it is prevalent in the literature, scholars seem to suggest that systems thinking is difficult to apply to NGOs. Writing on European NGOs, Mowles (2010) offers some words of caution by stating that NGOs need to differentiate how they approach systems thinking in Europe and developing countries. Mowles calls for the recognition of complex local knowledge and power relations when designing systems thinking processes. He gave an example of an aftermath of a natural disaster when a European NGO formed a partnership with a local NGO. The idea was for the Europe based NGO to bring in 'international' expertise to create a better-informed programme related to natural disaster management. It would also demonstrate partnership in action and knowledge transfer. Both partners committed to a capacity development process, whereby the European NGO's staff would be matched with local staff and transfer what they knew through training. The relationship between the two organisations nearly foundered because managers from both organisations could not agree on the shape and size of an organogram designed to map the managerial dynamics between the two sets of staff. The staff could also not agree on job responsibilities and reporting relationships.

One of the main challenges that NGOs face is funding. While systems thinking is touted as the next "evolution of sustainability" but NGOs need to be cautious and enter the arena fully aware of the costs that are associated with the processes. For development-related organisations such as NGOs, collaboration may offer the best opportunity for increasing project activity and impact, but it is far from easy and requires a certain skill set. These skills include a sense of humility and sensitivity, which most large, powerful private corporations seem to lack (Confino, 2012). Confino suggests further that it may seem obvious, but on the most basic level, it is vital to ensure that representatives of all stakeholders are included at the very beginning of the process and that everyone has an equal voice when discussing collaboration. Equally important is a clear mapping of what the system is and how each part

relates to the others. The mapping is something that needs to be undertaken by experienced system experts and requires considerable time and much repetition to get right.

NGOs work with many stakeholders, such as donors, peer organisations, and beneficiaries. NGOs will make little progress if any of their representatives feel undervalued, or feel as if they are token participants with no real voice. Some factors can lead to NGOs not participating fully. These include different cultural backgrounds and languages and diversity of ideas. Before implementing a project, trust lies at the foundation for multi-partner meetings. Basically, this involves the creation of a shared understanding of what the goals are, how to get results and what are the resources required. Another essential ingredient in generating meaningful change is moving away from a position of what 'should' be done and take a position of consulting partners, beneficiaries, and peer organisations.

In sum, the systems field is vast, with many schools of thought and a plethora of opinions about what the essence of systems thinking is. Most capacity development initiatives take up contemporary organisational development theory as if it were the best or even the only way of working. One can argue that "capacity building" is not a foreign or stagnant term. Much like systems thinking, it sees the whole as more than the sum of its parts. It is a concept that has long been used under many names. NGOs often limit capacity building to workforce or finance, when in fact capacity building refers to all the aspects that allow an organisation (or campaign, or team) to manage and achieve what they aim to do.

While systems thinking has its disadvantages, it also that can be applied to NGOs. It ignores or destroys the human interactions, the social aspects of working together. Systems thinking involves human activities, and a minimalist approach to resources and interactions is not appropriate. It encourages 'fragmentation' and 'isolation'. Most development activities including monitoring, evaluation, data collection and analytical tools and techniques are dominated by a "reductionist" way of thinking. Due to lack of funding, the thinking around the implementation of activities is based on 'either-or' choices; in an environment that now supports 'both-and.' It also leads people on healing the symptoms not the actual problems. NGOs end up designing reactionary interventions aimed at fixing things in the short term without thinking at a long-term strategic level.

Morgan (2005:3) identifies three other issues that are intrinsically linked to systems thinking. The first tenet is that "systems thinking as an analytical and learning tool" applies to any scenario. At any level of human activity and interaction, systems thinking can be

implemented. The second tenet views “human systems as an organisational form” and an object of systems thinking. Human systems can operate at an individual level to parts of a whole as a team. All organisations, for example, are systems by nature. So are NGOs, organisational sub-units, and other welfare organisations. The third issue identified by Morgan is capacity building and how systems thinking can be used to upskill NGOs.

To be more widely adopted in development cooperation, systems thinking will have to meet a few challenges. Hinton and Groves (2004) put forward the view that two key factors are constraining the effectiveness of aid especially in developing countries:

- The distorted relationships of those in the development chain including the donors and the NGOs themselves. This affects learning in that those with the funding might not be willing to learn from their beneficiaries. The NGOs might also view as the ‘gospel’ what their funders preach.
- The continued use of templates with pre-selected outcomes that the NGOs rarely have a say on.

Senge’s (1990) work is inspired by other writers. He bases his work on the synthesis of other people’s work, and this draws criticism from other academic quarters. There are questions on whether Senge's five disciplines produce tangible results. Haines (1998) has pointed out that where Senge has cited real-world proof of his theories, he has drawn heavily from three private company leaders who worked closely with Senge at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

3.3.3 Single-, double-, and triple-loop learning

Single-loop learning is a component of a broader organisational learning developed in the 1970s by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon. Their model has since been expanded by other organisational development practitioners and theorists. Single loop learning is at the primary level of learning and takes place as part of a learning system or process. Single loop learning occurs when the objective is to fix the underlying problems and does not in any way try to alter the current organisational system. In NGOs, this means that rules, policies and procedures are not questioned but operationalised merely. In some cases, field NGOs who have parent companies overseas, just copy and paste rules and procedures that might not necessarily be relevant to the local context. In essence, single loop learning is about following the rules. Double loop learning is different from single loop learning in that this type of learning does not take organisational structures for granted. It looks at possible

reasons for deviations, or how to change the rules to fit into the new narrative. Double loop learning also questions the motives of a task being undertaken to understand the basis of why they are being committed not necessarily to find an efficient way of completing a piece of work. Argyris's research has been more focused on having more organisations emphasis on double loop learning. In phases of rapid change, double loop learning is critical in moving the organisation forward. The third type of learning is the triple loop learning. This level of learning is not only concerned with asking the fundamental questions and understanding the basis of completing a task, but it is also wary of the attitude of the learner, their beliefs and point of view.

	Single loop learning	Double loop learning	Triple loop learning
Involves	Follow and apply the rules and procedures. Deals with the symptoms of the problem . No innovation on thinking of alternative ways of solving a problem	Questions assumptions regarding rules and procedures. Thoroughly examines underlying causes of problems. Innovative thinking regarding solving of problems.	Examine core values and context. Rethink the primary principles and purpose. Thinking innovatively about the problem and how to get a solution for it.
Intended outcomes	Working efficiently and following rules and procedures.	Effective way of working. Not just following rules but working to improve the rules and procedures.	Questioning of vision and mission and reworking it to ensure it meets with renewed goals.

Table 2: The characteristics of single, double and triple loop learning

Roche (2010) explores innovations in Australian NGO accountability and shares a range of innovative ways in which NGOs are working to improve their accountability and social learning towards their beneficiaries. Single-loop learning can be thought of regarding generating improvements to the way in which existing rules or procedures for working in an organisation are applied in practice. It is often called “thinking inside the box,” and poses ‘how?’ questions but almost never the more fundamental ‘why?’ questions. For NGOs, this would refer to feedback from partners and communities to NGOs on their activities. To practice double loop learning one needs to think outside the box, and question any biases that they might have had or any other underlying assumptions and values. For NGOs, this describes ongoing engagement with partners and communities on broader policies, practices, or strategies. Triple-loop learning challenges the organisation’s principles and assumptions, which may no longer be relevant given changes in the organisation and its

environment. Triple-loop learning is seen as the most fundamental level, which explores how NGOs adhere to their core values and mission. Triple loop learning requires open dialogue.

Focusing on triple-loop learning and accountability involves reflection on NGOs' beliefs about the world and their place in it, as well as their assumptions about how positive change occurs. This is the most challenging area of accountability, as it is linked to the identity of an organisation. Based on NGO examples, Roche (2010) concludes that most learning practice in NGOs is focused on single-loop accountability; with NGOs learning how to improve their practice, but not exploring radical new ways of doing things. She argues (Darke, 1998) that NGOs need to recognise the strategic nature of the new 'learning agenda'; moving beyond participation and improving learning to consider transparency, complaints procedures, and response mechanisms.

3.4.4 Mintzberg and Quinn's model

Mintzberg and Quinn's (1992) model makes a very enlightening distinction between intended and emergent strategy and describes the two scholars' understanding of strategy development. Mintzberg suggests that the traditional way of thinking about strategy implementation focuses only on deliberate strategies. Mintzberg claims that some organisations begin implementing strategies before they articulate a mission, goals, or objectives. In this case, strategy implementation precedes strategy formulation. Mintzberg calls strategies that unfold in this way "emergent strategies." An organisation's implementation of emergent strategies involves the allocation of resources, even though the organisation has not explicitly chosen its strategies. Most organisations make use of both deliberate and emergent strategies. Whether deliberate or emergent, however, a strategy has little effect on an organisation's performance until it is implemented. The model as shown in the figure below makes a distinction between planned and emergent strategy.

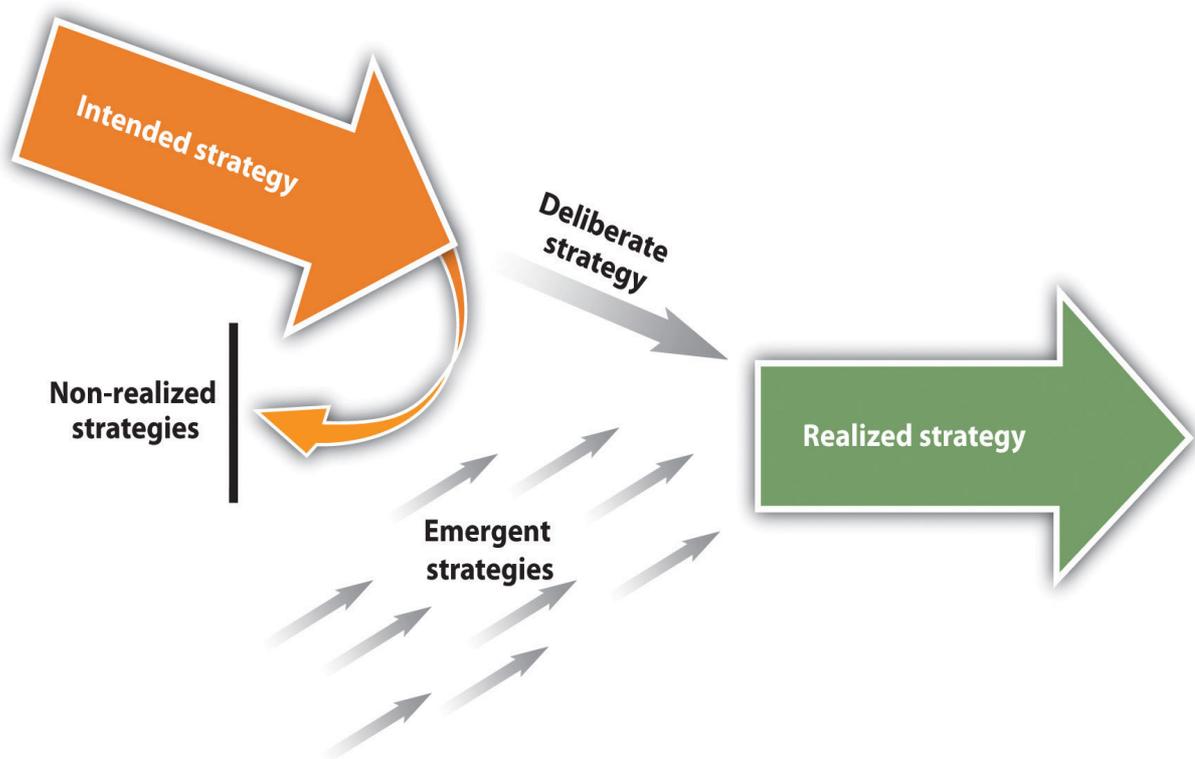


Figure 4: Planned and Emergent Strategy (Adapted from Mintzberg and Quinn: the Strategy Process)

A strategy implemented rarely follows what was planned. A strategy is a sum of opportunities and challenges faced by the organisation. There are many factors that may act as an impediment to the realisation of an organisational strategy. Mintzberg and Quinn's model is practical in its approach to developing strategy and is not blind to the environment in which NGOs work. It obliges NGOs to be open to and reflect on the various elements of 'emergent' strategy. The 'emergent' strategy involves:

- unplanned but implemented strategy,
- a deliberate strategy that is planned and implemented,
- and unrealised strategy which can be planned but not implemented, and learn from each of them so that they can better respond to new opportunities and threats as they emerge.

It is important for NGOs to integrate learning into strategy and policy. One way of building lessons learned into the fabric of an NGO is to develop policy and procedures which reflect organisational learning. This provides the NGO with a framework for decision-making and resource allocation. If policy development is seen as a participative learning process in itself, this strengthens the process of integration and builds commitment to implementation. Integrating learning into strategy is more complex, but Mintzberg and Quinn provide a useful model for strategy development which acknowledges 'strategic learning.'

3.4.5 A learning process approach

Korten (1980) differentiates learning organisations from other organisations who do not learn using three characteristics: "their response to error, the role of peoples' participation in planning, and how knowledge is linked to action". According to Korten, learning organisations "embrace error" and openly "discuss their errors, what they have learned from them and the corrective measures they are attempting." This is closely linked to evolutionary perspectives. When NGOs are first established and they are in contact with their fieldwork teams, there is a strong chance of feedback and "loops" for effective learning. Nonaka (1995) notes that Korten sees teams as the "medium through which new learning takes place, and specialisation of roles is seen as an outgrowth of that learning process". This, however, might be a challenge in that it can cause early specialisation during the early stages of project development in NGOs.

Korten (1984:183) states further that there are three stages in a learning process approach. These are "learning to be effective, to be efficient, and to expand". Although this idea was

later used in the literature on NGOs by Edwards (1997), little evidence is available to provide an accurate description of the way non-governmental organizations and organisations in general learning. Korten (1980) argues that while NGOs are keen to learn, donors cull their enthusiasm, by exerting requirements tied to funding provision. The requirements of programme approach and management in each stage are different: critically, in organisation theory terms, the essential first stage requires task or power, but not organisational culture. Although the learning process was received enthusiastically in the 1980s, during the 1990s, it seems to have been lost to sight. This is a pity.

3.5 Conclusion

Fiol (Fiol & Lyles, 1985) states that no organisational learning model has widespread acceptance, and goes on to argue that any organisational model developed should be compatible with individual learning theory. However, for organisational learning to occur, it is not enough simply to encourage organisational members to exchange their accessible meaning structures with one another – the organisation must actively facilitate collective learning.

According to Schein (Schein, 1996:183), “learning is not a unitary concept”. That being said, an NGO organisational learning model should be centred on institutionalising a thorough organisation-wide approach to learning and strategising. A new learning system can prioritise accountability to people with limited means thus shifting the way NGOs have normally conducted their business.

Learning entails not just pragmatic problem-solving but also a reflection on the process using which this happens and the underlying perspective on knowledge. Learning requires capacities for critical thinking, identifying assumptions, seeking evidence about what is or is not going well, analysing multiple data sources, relating evidence to expectations, and analysing and negotiating possible consequences. These processes all require connecting people and their perspectives. Therefore, the capacity to deal with power dynamics becomes essential.

To conclude, this chapter explored various organisational learning models which can be applied to NGOs wholly or some of their parts. In sum, the models explored as possibly applicable to the NGO sector would involve four steps: generation widespread generation of information, integration of new/local information into the organisational context, collective interpretation of information, and having authority to take responsible action

based on the interpreted meaning. Learning is a multi-faceted personal yet social phenomenon that is both situation- and context-specific. It would appear that a definitive one-size-fits-all framework of learning in organisations is inconsistent with reality. Perhaps a set of guidelines could assist NGOs in learning better. NGOs need to define their operational model and strategic goals.

The next chapter outlines conclusions derived from the study of organisational learning and NGOs. The ultimate test of learning is to apply what has been learned to be it in fundraising, project management or monitoring and evaluation. Perhaps most important is to create an organisational culture that legitimises the process of learning by resourcing and rewarding it adequately. Learning theories and models alone are not enough. There is a need to build capacity in NGOs for learning. Organisational learning theories and models regularly build on each other. Equally frequently, one aspect of organisational learning is magnified, and the image of organisational learning remains limited.

Chapter 4:

An Analysis of the Eight Function Model

4 Introduction

This chapter analyses the learning challenges identified in chapter two to assess to what degree Britton's eight functions are geared to addressing the challenges faced by NGOs. The chapter describes each of Britton's eight functions, looks at the views about each function, focusing on both the positives and the negatives. Linking with the challenges as described in chapter two, the chapter will look at to what extent does the function address or fail to address a particular problem. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the strengths and weaknesses of the function in dealing with the linked learning challenge. The chapter shows that Britton's eight functions only address some of the challenges (either directly or indirectly), but ignore many fundamental challenges that NGOs face. Britton's model suggests that there are eight key dimensions in which an organisation needs to perform well to learn effectively. The model provides a questionnaire to assess the strengths and weaknesses of an organisation regarding the eight key functions. At the turn of the 21st century, many NGOs faced significant levels of organisational transformation. These changes included rapid organisational growth, organisational reform, greater emphasis on collaborations and working with other stakeholders, and technological changes caused by improvements in the ICT field. Each of these changes creates a potential learning agenda for NGOs. Some of these learning agendas may overlap or even conflict. For example, the out-of-date thinking is that flat organisational structures create an environment that is more conducive to lateral knowledge sharing. However, decentralisation can create disconnected 'silos' which have little or no contribution to the channels of exchange once provided by the senior specialists who are usually based at headquarters. For most NGOs operating in Africa, the headquarters are usually located overseas, and this creates silos. Various scholars have identified the following challenges facing NGOs:

- Knowledge acquired by the NGOs paraded as the official view on certain subjects:

Acquiring new learning that is not in sync with the “official view” is discouraged. Ellerman (2002) refers to this practice by NGOs as “branded knowledge as dogma”. Some NGOs carefully manage information to prevent their targeted audience from being distracted by alternative views. Some NGOs do this for funding purposes or for them to remain to enjoy support from beneficiaries and other partners.

- Social science as dogma: In the NGO sector, there is the infiltration of the Tayloristic ‘One Best Way’ mentality in development policy in the name of science.
- The rush to conclude: Major development organisations and NGOs rush to put forward best practices and recommendations – a tendency not based on any methods resembling a social science. The urgency is mostly done to attract new funding or for the NGOs to be viewed as ‘gurus’ in their field.

These pressures and challenges, combined with the scale of the task facing them, have led most NGOs to adopt an action-oriented or “adrenalin” culture where the conclusion of activities is measured as success. The problem is so endemic that some NGO critics have labelled it an “NGO disease.” Most NGOs have short-term projects that require staff to work under pressure so that they can deliver. Due to funding constraints, staff time is limited, meaning one employee might be performing numerous activities.

The benefits for showing the use of learning to show improvement in organisational performance is very high. Donors and funding partners are increasingly questioning NGOs’ value addition in the development aid chain. Competition for donor funds is swelling. Most funding originates almost exclusively from the wealthy and industrialised world – mainly Western countries represented by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Western countries’ governments have traditionally been the core funders of NGO activities, but this is slowly decreasing as a result of the refugee crisis in Europe. In an article for IRIN News, Siegfried (2015) states that “Europe’s current refugee influx has led several EU governments to consider diverting funds away from developing nations to fund local challenges.” For example, Sweden, expected as many as 190,000 asylum seekers in 2016, considered using up to 60% of its foreign aid budget in 2016 to fund refugee reception. Naturally, there has been an uproar in the civil society and NGO community, because these changes will deplete their funds and budgets. This will, in turn, have a snowball effect on NGO projects and activities especially learning.

NGOs have evolved from small local groupings into sophisticated multi-country organisations with global networks. Their growth has also had an impact on the funding terrain where donors are not only limited to the traditional foreign governments donors. Some governments are now funding a few NGOs, for example in South Africa, the government through the Social Development Department sponsors various local NGOs. Writing on the multi-layered and interdependent relationships between NGOs and their funders, Ebrahim's (2003), has shed new light on this complex terrain. In his book on NGOs and organisational change, he further enthuses that the evolution of NGOs is a result of their increased profile as respective partners in delivering assistance to beneficiaries. He argues further that the evolution of NGOs can be attributed to the relationships between NGOs and their international network of funders, the tensions created by funders' project-reporting requirements, and the different strategies of confrontation employed by NGOs. Ebrahim (2003) further shows that "systems of reporting, monitoring, and learning play essential roles in shaping NGO learning." Learning is not only about NGOs can do but more importantly how they think about and apply what they do. One can argue that NGOs, are not the same and learning models cannot be exerted without looking at the different needs of each NGO.

As part of a rebranding exercise, in 1996 the World Bank reinvented itself as a "knowledge bank" for development. The rebranding can be said to have had an influence in which NGOs had to rethink their approach to learning. The Bank invested considerably in people and technology to build its credentials as an important source for data and analysis on development issues. Motives behind the rebranding knowledge initiatives are, quite understandably, the subject of considerable debate. For some, this was just a marketing ploy, and for others, this was a genuine move by the bank to prioritise its approach to learning. The World Bank's approach to knowledge management has had an impact on how other development agencies including NGOs approach learning and knowledge management. (Wilks, 2001 and King and McGrath, 2000).

Britton (2005) states that NGOs need to provide the purpose, an enabling environment, and opportunity that supports organisational learning and provides some actionable examples of how other non-profit organisations are handling it. Current models of learning are based on a Western understanding, but the author recognises that "learning is understood differently across cultures and contexts." For Britton (2005) learning goes beyond learning for the sake of learning, or organisations that learn well, but focus on dissemination of the experience

gained and promotion of uptake of good practice. It is imperative that the lessons can be shared within the development aid ecosystem. The ecosystem includes other NGOs, donors, policymakers, private companies, and beneficiaries. Building on the concept of 'learning,' Britton provides insight into the broad character, function and problems that befall organisations who learn. Through the Eight Function Model of the learning organisation, the author identifies the eight key features that an organisation must master to learn effectively. There are learning tools that are directly linked to the eight function model, and the author gives the tool elaborate attention.

Britton (2005) emphasises that NGOs' work today faces several challenges, including a demanding environment that involves growing competition and shrinking aid budgets. As a result, NGOs have become more action-oriented, hence skipping the most pivotal part of learning, upon which Chetley and Vincent (2003) strongly disagree. According to these authors, learning is broad and contains many facets including "beliefs, attitudes, shared understanding and self-awareness." This notion relates to the views of Britton (2005:9), who states that, "it is too easy to assume that by gathering information, keeping it, and making it accessible we have somehow increased knowledge and learning". He adds that this overlooks the fact that knowledge is information that one has reflected on, understood, and can use. As such, Britton (2005) emphasises the importance of NGOs investing in organisational learning to increase the efficiency of the organisation. He argues further that for investment to be justified in an organisation, learning should be a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Britton's view revolves around the importance of learning in an organisation, as he sees it as a tool to increase or enhance an organisation's effectiveness. When work colleagues become confident to share their knowledge and experiences, without fear of reprisals this is when the learning culture becomes apparent Britton (2005).

Many civil society organisations have moved away from project implementation to focus more on public policy advocacy and influencing, relationship building, networking and developing partnerships and movement building. Britton (2005) argues that this shifted focus places new demands on NGOs and these demands, coupled with restructuring, decentralisation, and decision-making, in turn, place more demands on partnership work. Partnership workforces technological changes regarding the development of information and communication technologies towards the people who are working collaboratively. The new demands have forced many NGOs to look towards the concepts of 'organisational learning' and the 'learning organisation.'

Britton (2005) emphasises that an organisational memory is critical to promote organisational learning in the NGO. He argues further that “organisational memory is necessary when the organisation is to shape a collective identity and organisational identity.” Organisational memory is something that many NGOs must start building up in their work with partner organisations. NGOs that successfully build up their organisational memory also need to focus on the people who are a central part of the organisation and its processes. These processes can help people share and use their collective knowledge. The complexity of storing information arises when the NGO has to evaluate people’s knowledge about the information it is producing and storing. Increased knowledge creates common sense and insight that people can reflect on, understand, and utilise the knowledge to enhance organisational learning. Latham and Lock (2006) state that “there must be a shared understanding of the groups in the organisation to be able to enhance group performance.” However, Wright (2004) argues that the challenge facing many NGOs is to transform leaders and managers from receptors of the status quo into passionate advocates of learning by demonstrating its tangible results and benefits. Hence, Latham and Lock (2006) further suggest that the exchange of knowledge is imperative to achieve both personal and organisational goals.

Britton’s book aims to come up with a model that NGO executive management may apply in working towards ensuring that their organisations are successful. The book introduces readers to the learning organisation development jargon by defining some of the field’s characteristic features. Britton’s model relies mainly on Pedler et al.’s (1991) definition of the learning organisation, which is “an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself.” Pedler’s definition is broad because it alludes to include “all” members. In the NGO world, members are not only the staff of the organisation but also includes donor agencies and beneficiaries. What else to say about Pedler’s definition?

Following the definition of the learning organisation, Britton (2005:4) proceeds to look at the importance of individual learning, where he states that “learning organisations are more than simply ‘containers’ for people who are learning.” An important indicator of learning within an organisation is that everyone makes a valuable contribution to the organisational learning irrespective of his or her learning. For this to happen, there is perhaps a need for the organisation to have an understanding of what learning is all about. The concept of ‘organisational learning,’ according to Britton, requires an understanding of three important

terms: “information,” “knowledge,” and “wisdom.” In light of the above, Britton (2005:6) states that an NGO is an organisation with characteristics including the following: “concerned for the people, effective, financially sustainable, participatory in its approach, a good employer, flexible, influential, and creative and innovative”. The book also presents ideas on how an NGO can benefit from becoming a learning organisation. Also, the responsibilities of learning organisations are mentioned and explained, and it is shown that bureaucracy plays a major role in acting as a barrier to learning.

To provide a framework of how a learning organisation may learn from within and outside of itself, Britton postulates his eight functions of a learning organisation. Britton’s eight functions of a learning NGO are interdependent on one another. The functions are outlined and explained, and the conditions under which each function can be maximally utilised for the organisation’s benefit are provided. The functions are: “creating a learning culture, gathering internal experience, accessing external learning, communication systems, mechanisms for concluding, developing an organisational memory, integrating learning into strategy and policy, and applying the learning”. The ‘functions’ These are just suggestions that organisations may use for their benefit.

Following the functions of learning, Britton explains the possible barriers to a learning organisation. He divides these into internal and external obstacles. Britton (2005:20) defines external obstacles as those that “arise from the NGO’s external environment and over which the NGO may have little or no influence, let alone control”; whereas the former are built-in obstacles to learning in an organisation. Britton also indicates the different types of barrier in each category and possible ways of circumnavigating them.

The description of the barriers to learning in an organisation is followed by an assessment of the learning capacity of an organisation. This is facilitated by using an assessment tool, which for his book is a questionnaire. Ways of preparing the questionnaire and examples of how it can be completed are provided in the book. Following the assessment of the gathered data, the organisation, according to Britton, must strengthen its learning capabilities. Some of the major strategies for building learning capability that Britton postulates are individual competence and organisational development. The proper implementation of these strategies results in the profile of the learning organisation being raised.

4.1 Britton's model and central argument

Britton's book acts as a guide to what constitutes a learning organisation, and tries to show how organisations can strive to improve their potential for learning. It tries to illustrate how managers can play a key role in guiding organisations to become learning organisations. It advocates the use of the Eight Function Model in making an organisation into a learning organisation. According to Britton, the understanding of his model and its proper implementation can result in a good learning organisation. Bureaucracy, however, is the major determinant of the success or failure of the model's implementation.

According to Britton, an organisation should identify the need to learn. However, for this to happen, learning should be recognised as a legitimate activity. For learning to be effective, NGO personnel need to feel that learning is an integral part of each individual's work responsibilities. To cultivate a learning culture in an organisation, Aarnoudse (2009) suggests that "the suitable management style, comprehensive training plan of employees, communication training, training to learn how to reflect, [and] working with action-reflection groups" are the major ingredients for the growth of a learning culture in an organisation. While this assertion is noble, it relies on a number of assumptions, such as that an organisation is well-resourced financially and at the human resources level. Often in NGOs, staff members perform a number of functions, which leaves them overworked and with little or no time to dedicate to learning.

Britton (2005) touts having an organisational 'culture' as the overall function that the organisation requires to be a good learning environment. He goes on to state that for the learning environment to be conducive, the learning culture needs to embrace every other function in his model. One can argue that when the learning culture is adopted by employees, it makes it easier for the organisation to learn the other functions. When the learning culture is developed, the organisation seeks to gather internal experience. Britton adds that it is very important that the organisation learn from its experiences before it thinks of engaging the outside world for possible partnerships. This helps the organisation to know and understand its position from the internal perspective. Senge (1990) concurs with the views of Britton (2005), as he postulates that many organisations are unable to function as knowledge-based organisations because they suffer from learning disabilities. The above views amount to a daunting challenge for organisations which requires unity of purpose that is instilled in the employees through the creation of a learning culture.

According to Roper and Pettit (2002), monitoring and evaluation are a form of learning system. Britton is of the view that the conclusions arrived at must then be followed by the development of an organisational memory. He argues that this is the mechanism of remembering recent and previous experiences, which is pivotal to the success of the individuals and the organisation as a whole. From the above views it can be deduced that outside knowledge is filtered and its relevance tested based on the organisation's internal learning; hence proving that Britton's Eight Function Model is interconnected. Britton (2005) argues that

“[w]hen knowledge is acquired, both internal and external, the organisation checks on its communication systems. This is when communication is made open and accessible to every employee. When knowledge is communicated to the employees the organisation's management may come up with mechanisms for drawing conclusions.”

The core features of an analysis of a learning organisation include monitoring and evaluation and strategy development. Britton (2005) states that “the organisation uses the knowledge acquired and uses it to integrate learning into strategy and policy”. He adds that the formulated strategies and policies require an effective management information system, which Mcshare and Glinow (2006) define as structured activities for organisational improvement through knowledge sharing and proper information application. These policies and strategies are then used to apply the lessons learned.

4.2 The Eight Function Model

Britton's (1998) Eight Function Model for organisational learning attempts to answer the question “What does an organisation need to do to learn?” and offers eight key steps to be a learning organisation. The model aims to create a ‘learning NGO’. The underlying assumption of this model is that learning can only be said to occur when it results in action and impact. The model attempts to answer the question as mentioned above by using the eight key functions in which any organisation must excel to learn effectively. These are stated as follows:

4.2.1 Creating (and sustaining) a supporting culture

Britton's model assumes that for learning to become an organisational endeavour, it must be integrated as part of the organisational culture. This statement speaks to one of the challenges explicitly which is “poor learning culture”. This is easier said than done because

learning requires a positive attitude and a commitment from all the departments concerned. A positive attitude is not enough – there is a need for the executive leadership of NGOs to provide resources for learning to legitimise the learning process. Organisational learning should not be an afterthought but should be a collective effort made to achieve a common goal. NGO staff who make personal contributions to learning in the organisation should be explicitly rewarded. In organisations, whether they are business or non-profit, political and power games are rife. There can be tensions between people, departments, and overseas and local staff. Ideally, the tensions in organisations should not hinder learning. However, it can be questioned whether this is something that can be controlled.

Under this function, the major weakness in Britton's model is that it does not attempt to provide a context in which culture can be understood. Britton (2005:13) states with conviction that "if learning in an organisation is to become successful – it must become part of the organisation's culture". However, he neither defines the concept of 'culture' nor attempts to contextualise its meaning. Instead, he provides indications of success for creating and sustaining a supporting culture for learning in an NGO. This is a flaw because the concept of 'culture' is an elusive one, and for NGOs to succeed in creating an enabling culture for learning to happen, there should at least be an understanding of what it means. Hofstede (1996, 2001) is one of the most influential writers on culture, and he provides a cross-cutting definition that is relevant in social science studies. He claims that there are two levels that makeup culture. According to Hofstede, at the first level, there are values. Values are broad, fundamental, and act as a guide regarding what is right or wrong or logical or illogical. Because values are entrenched in a community, the community is sometimes not even aware of the existence of the values, and the values might also be invisible to outsiders. Some writers, such as Brown (1998:27), refer to values as "assumptions" because they are so fundamental that no one questions them. Schein (2004:31) observes that "assumptions" can also be referred to as "mental maps". Schein goes on to argue that there are five types of assumptions:

- a) The first assumption is about humans' relationship to the environment. Can people influence some components of the environment?
- b) Secondly, is there an absolute solution to a problem or it is simply based on assumption? People make assumptions about the nature of reality versus the truth.
- c) Third, making assumptions about human nature; e.g. are people real? How do they

act when they are working independently?

- d) Fourth, making assumptions regarding how human perform activities. Do people think before acting, or do they consider all alternatives then act decisively and quickly?
- e) Making assumptions, about the nature of human relationships. Do humans like to work alone or with other people in teams?

Schein further claims that all cultures are derived from these assumptions. In his previous work, Schein (1993) proposed a three-level model for understanding an organisational culture. These levels are artefacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. They are explained as follows:

- Artefacts are the tangible structures, the systems that can be observed, processes and documentation that can be followed.
- Espoused values underpin the artefacts; they are the strategies and goals of the organisation and the way in which it is viewed by its members.
- Underlying assumptions, which are often unconscious, are the most essential of organisational culture, as they shape the organisation's beliefs.

According to Hofstede, the second level of culture is that of practices. He states that “practices are the visible manifestations of culture that reflect the more implicit values and assumptions”. These include symbols (e.g. logos), rituals (e.g. weekly meetings), and heroes against whom the staff can model themselves. Kemp and Dwyer (2001) have added that manifestations of culture can include such things as organisational structures, control systems, and stories. Africa is an oral society, and culture can be passed down in stories from generation to generation. Uttal (1983) defines organisational culture as a system of shared values and beliefs that interact with a company's people, organisation structures, and control systems to produce behavioural norms. Organisational culture, therefore, refers to the “shared assumptions that an organisation's members learn and pass on to new members”.

The Eight Function Model suggests that the collective discovery, sharing, and application of knowledge in an organisation can be made possible through the creation of an environment that promotes learning. While an individual is at the heart of learning, continuous collective efforts yield the required results for learning NGOs. For this to be realised, management and leadership have a significant role to play in ensuring that an

enabling environment is created and sustained. Management can play a major role in organisational learning through encouraging others and conveying the learning to them. However, management cannot do this alone. There is a need for communication, a positive attitude and energy from staff, and clear incentives for those who take up learning.

An ideal learning culture promotes employees' freedom to explore and discuss one another's assumptions concerning the organisation. This happens when the members can build one another's courage and challenge one another's views constructively for improving the individual and the organisation as a whole. Most importantly, the members will be able to openly discuss problems and mistakes and convert these into learning when problems are exposed and dealt with without blame. Goh (1998) states further that "organisational learning will enable competitive advantage on a timely basis and needs continuous managerial retention, a commitment and efforts". Learning in an organisation can thrive by itself. NGOs need to make conscious decisions to ensure that their employees are personally encouraged to contribute to the development of the organisation's practice and policy and also to ensure that adequate resources are devoted to learning.

In sum, this function provides lofty ideas and ideals related to learning culture, however culture is also related to language, cultural norms and the ability to ensure all an organisation takes into consideration the diversity in any given setting.

4.2.2 Gathering internal experience

Gathering internal experience can be a panacea to the learning challenges that NGOs face, such as weak learning and information mechanisms. Internal experience is gathered through expressing and disseminating lessons learned, and it can be facilitated by the organisation. Britton (1998: 14) states that "[t]his requires an awareness of the organisation of what it does and the impact of what it does". For an organisation to gather internal experience, it needs to prioritise the development of a transparent monitoring and evaluation strategy. "Doing" needs to be more broadly interpreted to include activities such as sensing, feeling, knowing, and changing.

Organisations have two principal sources of knowledge: internal and external. Internal from its own employees and externally from other organisations including community-based organisations, donors, think tanks, and other NGOs. Britton (2005) is of the view that "the process of gathering internal experience and changing it into practical and accessible lessons learned is at the centre of the learning organisation". Chetley and Vincent (2003) seem to

agree with this view, and asserts that “learning is not just about knowledge; it is about skills, insights, beliefs, values, attitudes, habits, feelings, wisdom, shared understanding and self-awareness”. In essence, learning is not just about doing – it involves other activities, feelings, and attitudes. Latham and Lock (2006) argue that there must be a shared understanding of the group’s goals in the organisation to be able to enhance team performance. Shared understanding is essential in an organisation and in gathering internal experience. The exchange of knowledge is necessary to achieve both personal and organisational goals. Britton (2005) adds that “gathering internal experience ensures the learning and sharing of information from within the organisation and facilitates the understanding of implicit and tacit knowledge and how the two inter-relate is essential to carrying out this function”. Employees, teams, and departments see each other as partners in work and are focused on one another’s needs and expectations. Lessons learned through study documents are exchanged throughout the organisation (Britton 2005).

Medlin and W. Jr (2009) state that “involving organisational members in goal setting informs them about their responsibilities and helps them to ensure that the essential resources are identified and provided”. However, Britton argues that gathering internal experience calls for a smooth-running monitoring and evaluation system. Control is necessary during programme implementation, as it helps in tracking daily operations, in ensuring that it is proceeding according to plan, and in contributing to provide knowledge on whether the activities require adjustments or not. NGOs need to put in place learning reviews to identify lessons after projects have ended. Olsson (1998) states that “it is important that management and volunteers have standard views on vision, goals, objectives and the NGO’s ideology”. This is important as it aids in acquiring internal experience. Britton points out that individuals are awarded according to their contribution to their organisation’s evolution. This is pivotal, as it triggers motivation and optimism. Furnham (1997) states that optimism has a positive impact on learning and work success. All these elements are important in acquiring internal experience. Olsson (1998) remarks that the organisation needs to convince volunteers that their time, engagement, and money is worth investing in the organisation. Britton (2005) also emphasises the importance of technology in the organisation. He states that “[m]any NGOs are using the power of ICT to enable an efficient sharing of learning between their members”. NGOs also discern their information from printed literature. This includes reports, memos, and minutes. Britton (2005:31) goes on to offer practical tools and strategies for gathering internal experience including

“regularly examining the extensive use of monitoring, review and appraisal data and building systems for making explicit the tacit knowledge of individuals”. What these steps do not reflect is that organisations by nature are unique as are the people in the groups.

Britton (2005) states that the indicators of a learning organisation are seen when employees are confident enough to express their thoughts and feelings and to share their knowledge with others. While it is good to focus on the indicators of success, the model falls short on acknowledging that for employees to express themselves, it is dependent on many factors including the language that is being used in the workplace. It is also reliant on the culture that is prevalent in the organisation. If the organisation is a closed one, where employees are not encouraged to share information then even though there indicators of success as outlined by the scholar this will not be useful. Britton also goes on to state that the indicators of success for an organisation that gathers internal experience include the growth of the organisation’s explicit wisdom. The author, however, does not give an explicit explanation on how this. It is not clear how one can measure the growth of an NGO’s precise wisdom. Perhaps this can be measured by the number of publications that the organisation produces. Or how many times an organisation or some of its staff is quoted in the notable keynote on relevant subjects.

Sallis and Jones (2002) explain what the indicators are when success is achieved, and they go on to suggest that “there is knowledge comprehension, knowledge creation, knowledge assessment, knowledge mastery and application, production of new and active systems, knowledge sharing and preservation of organisational knowledge”. The indicators are clear but do not spell out how “explicit wisdom” as explained by Britton can be achieved. Britton (2005) notes further that an indicator of a successful gathering of internal experience is that employees, teams, and departments see one another as partners in work and are focused on one another’s needs and expectations. Furthermore, lessons learned are exchanged throughout the organisation. This does not take into consideration that NGOs by nature, to function, they require funding. Competition for funding is stiff and some, as explained in Chapter two do not share information with other organisation for fear of losing out on funding to competitors. Some NGOs also want their beneficiaries and donors only to believe what they say as the “gospel truth” and do not advocate for an alternative view.

4.2.3 Accessing external learning

Britton (2005) believes that the organisation cannot learn only from internal experience and the cultivation of a learning culture: it also requires external information. He argues that learning in NGOs has two principal sources: the organisation itself and experience by others. To learn from others, the organisation “must actively seek learning elsewhere” Based on Britton’s views, it can be seen that there are new demands placed upon NGOs; hence the need to have a holistic approach to learning and transformation. Brehm et al. (2004) state that “NGOs face constant dilemma of having ambitions far greater than the resources they have to achieve them.” He adds that partnerships provide an important setting for organisational learning. These partnerships can be with other NGOs whereby they form a consortium, for example in South Africa, several NGOs came together in 2010 and formed the Gender Fund to fight the scourge of domestic violence. The alliance was formed by HIVOS, Ford Foundation and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) with a mission to work collaboratively on combatting the scourge of domestic violence in South Africa. To support the notion of partnerships providing an enabling environment for learning, in its final report the Joint Gender Fund concluded that societal problems require working together to ensure that they are eradicated. Private sector cannot do it alone and civil society needs to work with the government as well. For Britton (2005), provides some options for accessing external learning for NGOs for example participating in training courses, attending workshops and conferences, organising staff fellowships and exchanges and joining networks. The networks can either be physical or virtual based collaborative working spaces. These suggestions work on the assumption that NGOs do prioritise learning and that they do have the resources to attend conferences. A simple scan on the NGO portal, Ngopulse.org, a South African NGO information portal shows that most training courses that are relevant to NGOs are not for free. NGOs have to pay to attend the courses. The courses also require a time investment, which the previous chapter showed that it is a scarce resource. Because of the lack of resources most NGO staff work on several projects, which are usually time-constrained, hence there is limited time to attend training courses. There is also the need for the courses to be prioritised at a managerial level if all staff are to benefit and make it part of an organisational ethos to prioritise learning.

Senge (2006) presents the alternative view that an organisation “should learn to learn” before engaging with the outside world. This entails the organisation knowing what learning is, why it wants to learn and how it wants to learn. Senge (2006) argues that learning in an

organisation is essential for being able to meet external demands, motivate workers, and develop the organisation and the individual. Thus, in other words, the organisation should first understand itself before it can understand or access outside learning or form any partnerships. External experience requires a genuine openness and willingness to enter into dialogue with a broad range of organisations in the government and private sectors respectively. The organisation must be willing to share lessons learned from failure as well as from success. Partnership and collaboration are also important.

Accessing external learning is not only necessary for organisational learning but is also beneficial for the individual. Latham and Lock (2006) agree and remark that “the exchange of knowledge is valuable in the workplace to achieve both personal and organisational goals”. The same applies to partnerships: both parties benefit from cooperation. Therefore, the organisation should learn through participation in various networks. Britton suggests several strategies to access external learning including “valuing the potential of all contacts with the outside world” and “seeking out opportunities for joint work with organisations that have specific areas of expertise.” Expertise can be found in different types of organisations including government departments and academic institutions. NGOs do not have to just look for the expertise in similar or like-minded organisations. However, for the information to be useful, there is a need for a strategy for information documentation and dissemination. There is high turnover in NGOs, and if the information is not shared with other staff, there is a likelihood that the information that is gathered externally will not be available to other staff.

4.2.4 Communication systems

Communication systems seek to promote a free flow of information throughout the organisation’s hierarchy. Britton (2005:14) reiterates that, “communication systems, both formal and informal, are the circulatory system of knowledge and provide life-support for learning in an organisation”. There are various mechanisms (e.g. email and bulletin boards) for sharing experiences, and they are readily available to all sections and employees in an organisation. McInerney (2002) suggests the following ways of boosting performance: encouraging communication, offering opportunities to learn, and promoting the sharing of appropriate knowledge artefacts. Employees should be capable of making their knowledge and wisdom accessible to the organisation. Systems must be designed in such a way that they are not so ‘heavy’ that information and learning sink without trace, or so ‘light’ that they dissipate (Britton 2005).

An effect of the growth of ICT in communication has been the strengthening of the assumption that ‘learning simply requires the communication of information’. Organisations must focus on the quality and relevance of what is communicated rather than simply increase its quantity and availability. Britton (2005) argues that sharing information is not the same as sharing knowledge.

He goes on to offer strategies to improve communication systems in the organisation:

- Evaluate the utilisation of existing communications systems. The reviewing of communication systems need not to be done by management only, but also requires the participation of other staff members. A consultative approach need to be taken to ensure that all voices are heard and a review is done on what works and how it can be reviewed. NGOs need not reinvent the wheel but can also learn from peer organisations. The challenge that is most likely to befall NGOs is the shortage of extra hands to take on a “new” task to review and develop the communication systems.
- Map knowledge flows to identify bottlenecks and possible areas for strengthening communications. While this is a good suggestion for improving communications in an organisation, the challenge is having enough resources to carry the tasks needed to “strengthen” the communications. The resources can either be financial or human resources and these are oftentimes, lacking in the NGO sector.
- Develop a knowledge management strategy (Powell, 1999) and recognise the difference between knowledge and information. As already indicated by this study, differentiating between information and knowledge is not an easy task and this can be extended to developing a knowledge management strategy.
- Limit use of electronic mail. One would argue that this does not need to be limited to electronic mail only, but to all communication. Not only does clarity of messaging save time, it also ensures that staff members spend time on what is important.

Britton (2005) notes further that there are indicators of effective communication in an organisation. These include open communication channels throughout the organisation, between teams, departments, and locations. Employees should also be capable of sharing their knowledge and wisdom with the organisation.

While Britton's strategies for effective communication systems as a tool for learning are clear, they do not take into account variables that are related access to information, cultural differences and skills related to information gathering.

4.4.5 Mechanisms for drawing conclusions

For NGOs to build strong learning organisations, monitoring and evaluation are critical processes because they ask three key questions, namely 'Are we doing the right thing?', 'Are we doing it well?', Moreover, 'Are there better ways of doing it?' (International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2013). The assumption that learning is a precursor to monitoring and evaluation is no longer influential in the NGO sector. Monitoring and evaluation is a tool to be used to support planning, directing, and decisions, with the ultimate goal of continuous programme improvement. It helps to improve the effectiveness of ongoing and future programmes while also applying knowledge learned from past programmes. For an NGO to know the effectiveness of its policy and advocacy engagement, there is a need to assess whether the methodologies used are working. Monitoring and evaluation need to be built into the learning process and the learning needs designed specifically for the organisation.

Britton postulates that the process of drawing conclusions and identifying lessons learned is the main characteristic that differentiates organisational learning from simple information exchange. This is in line with Debowski's (2006) argument that knowledge management is the process of identifying, grasping, arranging, and distributing intellectual assets critical to the organisation's future performance. There has to be general knowledge about how the information is to be used or the conclusions to be drawn from the information gathered. Identifying lessons learned requires clarity. However, individuals may need assistance in reflecting on what they have learned and drawing conclusions from their experience. Reflection should happen as near to the source of experience as possible.

This view concurs with that of Sallis and Jones. These authors believe that knowledge management comes in stages, and an organisation must they implement these stages if they are to see a change. Sallis and Jones (2002) state that "there is knowledge comprehension, knowledge creation, knowledge assessment, knowledge mastery and application, [and the] production of new and effective systems". Thus, there is a stage that must be observed after acquiring the information or knowledge. Britton argues that learning from experience is for everyone, and learning lessons from monitoring and evaluation and field visit reports are

important too. Britton proposes that experiences not just analysed individually, but collectively. This analysis is done according to the theme, using all recent experiences that relate to that theme and coming up with a final decision as to whether the organisation succeeded in learning.

Britton (2005) states that “gathering the internal knowledge experience and changing it into practical and accessible lessons learned is at the centre of learning organisation”. The tools and strategies that can be used include ensuring that a performance appraisal system has space to identify the learning needs.

4.2.6 Developing an organisational memory

Organisational learning in NGOs has two principal sources of information: what the organisation does and what others do. NGOs typically work with other organisations. What exposes NGOs to new ideas is learning from businesses, state enterprises, and donors. When learning from other organisations, it is crucial for NGOs to develop an organisational memory. Remembering is an essential element of organisational learning. Information needs to be downloaded so that others can access it. This involves unlocking each’s memory.

According to Britton (2005), “to promote organisational learning in the NGO, there has to be an organisational memory”. Britton states that there is a problem in several NGOs because they lack organisational memory. He defines “organisational memory” as the ability to retain knowledge for future use. Sallis and Jones (2002) echo the same sentiments when they state that NGOs must master knowledge and must subsequently preserve organisational knowledge for future use. Britton (2005) states that learning should be encouraged and supported because this will contribute positively to the development of the organisation, hence developing its memory. He argues that “where knowledge management has made an important contribution, it has usually been because the NGO has taken a second generation approach and developed an organisational memory”. He notes further that “[i]t is easy to assume that by gathering information, storing it and making it accessible that we have somehow increased our knowledge and learning. This overlooks the fact that knowledge is information that individuals have reflected on and understood, internalised and can use”. This gives a clear indication of why he encourages NGOs to develop an organisational memory.

According to Britton (2005), organisational memory is important when the organisation is to shape a collective identity; an organisational identity. He makes the point that it is

impossible for an organisation to create a collective identity if there is no memory that binds the organisation together. In other words, organisational memory acts as a unifier and common denominator in the business of the organisation and its future. Britton notes further that remembering is a crucial element of organisational learning and that no one can deny that organisations can forget. If learning is locked in the heads of individuals, the organisation becomes vulnerable if those individuals leave the organisation. A learning organisation needs mechanisms that enable an individual's memory to be "downloaded" into a knowledge management system so that everyone can continue to access that person's knowledge long after s/he has moved away from the organisation. The organisation must help in the process of unlocking each's memory and develop systematic ways of ensuring that knowledge and understanding are made widely accessible to colleagues both in his or her organisation and beyond. This openness facilitates the learning process. Finally, the organisation should be focused on work improvement. Thus, all written reports and important documents should have an annotation and made readily available to all staff. The key strategies and tools include developing an intranet or documentation system to ensure that organisational memory is not lost, documenting staff expertise to augment consulting income.

4.2.7 Integrating learning into strategy and policy

Britton (2005) states that "[o]ne way of building lessons learned into the fabric of an organisation is to develop strategies and policies which embody the lessons it has learned". He argues that this can provide the organisation with a framework that can aid it in making decisions and in allocating resources strategically. All this is done by making use of the experience and lessons learned from other agencies. Britton quotes Ball and Dunn's (2005) remark that the Commonwealth Foundation is a perfect example of United Kingdom-based development organisations also managed to extract their experience to develop "the people in aid of best practice". Britton (2005) is of the opinion that "integrating learning into organisational strategy is more challenging but potentially rewarding". On the other hand, Mintzberg and Quinn (1992) argue that the strategy implemented by an organisation is rarely the original strategy that the organisation intended to implement. Britton (2005) sees this as a result of a changing and unpredictable environment, which has had the consequence that organisations no longer prepare a five-year plan. He argues that organisations should instead reflect on various elements of emergent learning ideas and internalises strategy and learns

from. In so doing, the organisation will be better able to respond to new opportunities and threats as they arise in the future.

4.2.8 Applying the learning

Chilean economist Max-Neef (2009) has claimed that while we know a lot, we understand very little. In an interview with a media news outlet, Max-Neef gave the example of economists who study poverty and develop theories about it from their nice air-conditioned offices. These economists know about poverty, but this does not mean that they understand it. Having knowledge does not necessarily lead to understanding. To attempt to understand something, one needs to somehow be part of it. Leaders in a learning organisation know that learning is a continuous process, that change takes time, and that there are no quick-fix solutions. Leaders are not only responsible for learning in their organisations. They are not responsible for accessing external learning on behalf of staff. They should also encourage experimentation and reflection and accessing external learning. Ideally, all members of the organisation should keep abreast of new developments in their field and access external learning.

There are many different types of knowledge and many different ways of knowing. Nonaka (1995) states that knowledge has been increasingly recognised as a vital asset for organisations, both in its tacit and explicit forms.

Senge et al. (1994) remarks that

“In Chinese, the word learning is represented by two characters. The first character means to study and is composed of two parts: a symbol that means to accumulate knowledge, above the symbol for a child is a doorway and the second character means to practise constantly and it shows a bird developing the ability to leave the nest. The upper part represents flying the lower symbol, youth”.

From the above quotation, it can be seen that learning encompasses many things, which range from studying and accumulating knowledge and the ability to fly to applying what was learnt and having the ability to leave the nest. This can be equated to development and exploring new ideas. Britton (2005) argues that the ultimate test of organisational learning is the ability to apply what has been learned. In addition, Senge (1994) posits that “only when learning is applied in the work setting can we say that a continuous learning cycle has been created”. Learning is not limited to the internal organisation, but to others through

practice, advocacy, and capacity building. In NGOs, learning cannot only be one-sided. Donors and partners also need to be involved in the learning process (Britton 2005).

4.4 The reception of Britton's book

Britton's (1998) "The Learning NGO" puts forward the relevance of the 'learning organisation' concept for NGOs. The book provides a framework relevant to organisations that are visionary, growth-enhancing, and developmental; not only for society but for the leaders who are contributing towards this end. Many scholars concur with Britton's views, as Goh (1998) argues that organisational learning will enable competitive advantage and requires continuous managerial retention, commitment, and efforts. A diagnostic tool ('Learning NGO Questionnaire') was used to assess their organisational learning. Learning NGOs should include a learning approach, a participative policy, enabling structures, a learning climate, and self-development for all.

Since NGOs are intended to bring about social transformations, it would be interesting to conduct a study on NGOs to determine the extent to which the NGO leaders are inclined towards themselves for self-change. While Britton's idea that a learning organisation is one which "exists only when tied to complex processes such as practices, systems, and relationships" is acknowledged by several prominent scholars, the view needs to be debunked. The political nature of learning has been backgrounded in subsequent decades, but the emphasis on social change is re-emerging. "Social change" is defined as the process by which a discernible and significant alteration in the structural functioning of a particular social system takes place.

NGOs should focus on both social and emergent change. Emergent change describes the day-to-day unfolding of life; the adaptive and uneven processes of unconscious and conscious learning from experience and the changes that result from this learning. This applies to organisations and societies adjusting to shifting realities. Ito (2013) refers to learning for social change as connected learning; and goes on to describe this learning as when one is pursuing knowledge and expertise concerning something about which one cares deeply, with the support of friends and institutions who share and recognise this common passion or purpose. This type of learning is agnostic about the method and content area.

4.4.1 Organisational structures

What constitutes an organisation as an entity is open to dispute amongst scholars. Taylor (1996:79), for example, notes three sets of learning relationships within organisations:

between individuals acting together, between individuals and the organisation, and between the organisation and others outside of it. The concept of ‘organisation’, according to Weick (1995), can be defined in three ways. Firstly, there is the organisation as a rational system, defined as “ a collection that aims to the pursuit collectivities oriented to the pursuit of relatively specific goals and exhibiting relatively highly formalised social structures”. Secondly, there is the organisation as a natural system, defined as “ collectivities whose participants share a common interest in the survival of the system and who engage in collective activities, informally structured, to secure this end”. Thirdly, there is the organisation as an open system, defined as “coalitions of shifting interest groups that develop goals by negotiation; the structure of the coalitions, its activities, and its outcomes are strongly influenced by environmental factors”.

4.4.2 The organisation as a site and frame for learning

From the organisational perspective, learning in the workplace is spatially and temporally bounded by the organisation’s contours. The individual’s learning becomes understood as a nine-to-five job that is rewarded by a salary. Valuable knowledge is defined according to competencies that benefit the organisation. Learning tends to be recognised mostly in the experience that the organisation has access to; knowledge that can be spoken, deconstructed, and shared (i.e. through dialogue), rather than knowledge that remains encoded in organisational artefacts. From the organisational perspective, learning can be viewed as something that is instructional, knowledge that can be imparted.

The problem here is the confusion between individual and organisational learning, which is often glossed over in learning organisation literature. Dixon (1993), for example, is careful to note that organisations do not learn, people learn. She proceeds to outline methods for fostering learning in organisational groups, which are extrapolated from teaching techniques for individual adults. Applying individual learning processes of action and reflection, and constructing and transforming meaning perspectives to an organisation, assumes that an organisation is a definable, intelligent entity. It is not, nor is it stable and bounded. Can the fluctuating combination of these sub-groups truly be considered as a single monolithic organism that somehow “learns” and has memory? Individual learning undoubtedly alters both the inner fabric and outward characteristics of the organisational system, but where does the ‘knowledge’ created by all of this learning reside?

In the individual's spheres of activity, a single workplace organisation is only one (and sometimes a tiny) part of the individual's purposes, growth curve, dilemmas, and preoccupations. Studies by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) show that people often have more than one job simultaneously, take on temporary and volunteer work, or work at home while visiting many different organisations to conduct business. Thus, they often move between many overlapping organisational communities. When learning is defined regarding the existing perspectives, skills, need for multi-skills, and values – such as shared vision – of a specific organisation, each person's multiple identities (and knowledge) are obscured in the push for centralised internal organisational coherence. The multitude of changes, meanings, and realisations that comprise an individual's daily experience both inside and outside of the organisation are thus often invisible, unnamed, and unvalued. This is because their identities and knowledge do not align with the organisation's perception of itself as a unified block under the learning organisation ideal. Marsick and Watkins (1990) go as far as to describe a person's ongoing "incidental" learning as "dysfunctional", implying it does not advance the organisation's goals. Too rigid and narrow a formulation of what counts as knowledge from the organisation's perspective potentially alienates the individual from his or her meanings and fails to allow these meanings to flourish and contribute to the community, however, they are defined.

Most NGOs focus on projects based on their vision and mission. NGOs need to learn about their performance, cost-effectiveness, and practice. They need to monitor and evaluate their projects and develop stronger accountability systems for their stakeholders. These include grassroots, upward donors and other stakeholders. NGOs can also learn from their peers through communities of practice. Through good practice manuals and documents, NGOs can both reflect on their own stories and actions and learn from others. NGOs can also learn through a project-based learning route: an electronic global information system that provides access to grey material on all projects, incentives for exchange learning visits, short sabbaticals to write project experiences, and workshops. NGOs can create job descriptions that emphasise learning.

Policy- and advocacy-related learning should be stressed in NGOs. Development policy involves leading, supporting, and mobilising stakeholders, and taking collective action to improve impact, engagement, and advocacy. Project experiences and the lessons of practice are building blocks of NGO operational policy, but they must be generalised if the strategy is to have any meaning. Generalisation is achieved by identifying critical common elements

in theory- and advocacy-related learning. NGOs' advocacy targets institutions at a variety of levels: international organisations, national governments and departments, corporations, trade unions, and other NGOs. Advocacy has a wide range of meanings for NGOs. For most organisations, advocacy is seen as involving efforts to change institutions' policies in ways that are pro-poor and for the marginalised. The confusion about the meaning of advocacy arises from the fact that its central purpose is often mixed up with the range of approaches to advocacy, the mixture of activities that can be part of advocacy, and the variety of target groups that advocacy can involve. NGOs can support advocacy-related learning by increasing stakeholder capacity for documenting and sharing lessons learnt and conducting advocacy work. NGOs can also harness and package existing knowledge, good practice, and lessons learnt from community-based actions and disseminated this to crucial practitioners. Furthermore, they can promote good practice and policy dialogue.

Visionary thinking also entails local ownership of learning. The term "ownership" is heavily contested in development literature. It is not clear whether ownership is fought for in the sense that Nor is it used in the organisational sense, referring to the owners of a business firm or the members of a non-profit association. Instead, 'ownership' refers to relations among stakeholders in development or humanitarian action – especially the big donor's ability to influence the aid and policy agenda and to muster and sustain support for it.

What matters is that NGOs do learn. There will always be tensions between participatory learning and respect for multiple ideas on the one hand, and the discipline imposed by the need to link learning with policy, advocacy, campaigning, and public engagement on the other. NGOs need to manage tensions effectively. In managing tensions, it is crucial for teams to be honest, humble, and open to sharing their concerns with each other. These are the qualities that underlie genuine learning in any organisation, but if NGOs still retain their claim to a distinctive identity as value-based organisations, then they ought to be particularly well-equipped to develop themselves in this respect. An analysis of the literature on learning organisations and organisational learning processes allows for certain indicators of organisational learning to be identified. Accordingly, the following key indicators are put forward for consideration:

- NGOs must recognise that organisational learning is much more than a matter of making information available. NGO staff must be given the time and opportunity to learn.

- Advocates of alternative theories and approaches need to think of NGOs as communities, not merely as formal structures. They should identify and target key individuals within NGOs who can share information, promote ideas, and influence policy and practice.
- NGOs should place greater emphasis on the practical aspects of learning. It is relatively easy to argue for a new idea successfully, especially if it is presented in simple terms, but much harder to explain how to put it into effect operationally. It is here, crossing the boundary from policy to practice, that NGOs need to learn more.
- Organisational learning is a combination of planned and unplanned efforts to learn. Although it can and does occur accidentally, learning by chance is not something NGOs can afford to rely on.
- Major international NGOs are multi-layered, complex, and diffuse systems such that the learning process must be carefully structured if it is going to be successful. It is not possible for people to learn everything all the time, and this leads to learning that is aimless, amorphous, and fragmented. Learning concepts and knowledge either disappear into organisational structures remain lodged in the heads of one or two individuals. NGOs experience high turnover and this becomes a problem when the individuals who have expertise in a particular area leave the organisation.
- It is imperative that there is a balance between different parts of the organisation and between learning for different purposes. It is difficult for NGOs to strike a balance between participatory, field-based learning and learning that feeds into wider policy- and advocacy-related work. Field-based staff are usually located far away from the office and work directly with the communities in which they are based.
- Organisational learning is inspired by “learning champions.” The champions in a work environment ensure that learning is on the top of the agenda for organisation, attract other committed workers, and ensure that there are improvements on existing learning structures and procedures.
- It is a priority for NGOs to educate their donors and beneficiaries about the work that they do. This is important so that the donors are aware of the development process as intertwined with the learning approach. The learnings and outcomes of the NGO can be used as income for the NGO through consulting fees.
- Donors are fond of talking about the “capacity building” projects that they fund

However, they are yet to show commitment to tangible learning projects with tangible outcomes and results. Donors should be reminded in funding applications that capacity building and learning require adequate resources. NGOs should be allowed to add “organisational learning” as a budget line in funding applications. This would go a long way in raising the profile of core NGO activity.

- Adding “learning” to the job descriptions of individuals gives added legitimacy to the activity of learning in development.
- For an NGO to be a high-performing learning organisation, work processes must be performed while paying conscious and deliberate attention to every aspect of knowledge.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter analysed Britton’s Eight Function Learning Model and provided a brief description of each function. The model suggests that there are eight key dimensions in which an organisation needs to perform well to learn effectively and thereby to reach the intended goals. The Eight Function Learning Model comprises creating a learning culture, gathering internal and external experience, creating a communication system and a mechanism for concluding lessons learnt, developing an organisational memory, integrating learning into strategy and policy, and finally applying the learning. While Britton’s functions can be relevant in trying to solve this challenge in weak information systems, the main problem with his approach is that it is overly simplistic. The model does not address all the learning challenges that NGOs face. Some of the functions offer a simplistic solution to the challenges discerned.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion

This study provided a useful lens through which it was possible to examine and evaluate knowledge management principles from both a non-profit and a knowledge network perspective. The study also indicated how learning in NGOs can be stimulated. The application of knowledge management principles, such as organisational learning, to the non-profit sector is relatively new. However, NGOs have much to gain from the examination of their practices in a knowledge-resource-heavy sector. The concept of the 'learning organisation' is increasingly relevant to NGO management due to increased complexity and uncertainty, and the rapidity of change in the organisational environment. Intangible assets have become more important to organisational success than the traditional factors of production, land, labour, and financial capital.

NGOs are embedded in the worlds of action and understanding simultaneously. Their presence crosses national boundaries, and they possess a value system which in theory promotes learning and communication. NGOs have a strong set of comparative advantages in learning terms. Furthermore, organisational knowledge assets are a major component of the intangible assets otherwise known collectively as "intellectual capital". Organisations that are not able to embrace shared learning and knowledge generation at the organisational level simply disappear.

The study also revealed that learning is a personal process. There is a need to balance being a learning NGO and the need to take a strategic approach to organisational learning recognising that learning is individual. It is impossible for an organisation to sustain competitive advantage without continually learning and developing new knowledge. It is essential to note that the development of an organisation cannot be divorced from the development of those individuals who comprise its subsystems and the supra-systems in which the organisations are embedded. Organisations are unique, with distinctive biographies, weaknesses, and strengths. While a comprehensive model of organisational learning remains elusive, the wide-ranging scholarly conversation and debate have provided rich insight into the central questions of how and what people learn in organisational settings.

The inability to learn and remember is a widespread failing of the development community as a whole. However, it is a particular problem among NGOs, as there are few reasons to disseminate the positive lessons of development, and many more powerful reasons to conceal and forget the negative ones. However, interactive, authentic partnerships among NGOs and public and private organisations are required for sustainable impact on development, and today's trend is towards an improved partnership between NGOs, governments, and the private sector. This trend obviously helps NGOs to develop core competencies, take advantage of different expertise, and influence policy actors. Learning places considerable demands on the organisation. Most importantly, learning will only flourish if it is encouraged, and this requires an organisational culture with some important characteristics:

- The desire to learn can be stifled through discouragement or fear, or it can turn into complacency through lack of incentive. However, the desire to learn can be re-awakened in the NGO sector. The study has shown that people have three fundamental work-related aspirations: they want to produce the best out of their roles, they want to be appreciated, and they want to be proud of their organisation. At the heart of it all is the desire for mastery and self-fulfilment.
- To be effective, the work that NGOs do must be knowledge-based. It is imperative for NGOs to know what works to be sustainable and to improve their performance.

The study exposed the challenges that NGOs face regarding learning, such as organisational culture, attitudes, incentives, systems, and priorities. The activist culture in NGOs often sees learning as a luxury: separate from and secondary to 'real project work'. NGOs need to create time and space for learning. Differences in learning styles and languages are also a feature of the large, dispersed, multicultural staff that is common in NGOs. Changing NGO culture is always difficult, but by introducing the right incentives and structures, it is possible to encourage staff to prioritise inquiry, experimentation, and risk-taking.

Learning requires self-criticism, humility, honesty and openness, and the ability to welcome error as an opportunity to move forward rather than viewing it as a mistake to be rectified. This is not only relevant in NGOs, but also in the corporate sector. There are no ways to develop these attitudes in people, but certain factors such as hierarchy and fear of failure can be addressed to make the organisational environment conducive to their development. However, in NGOs, there is a myriad of challenges, as discussed in the study. These include

weak incentives and rewards for learning, the concealment or punishment of errors, inertia, defensiveness, and complacency. Furthermore, territoriality may override openness and transparency within the organisations: risk aversion is common, and job insecurity and short-term contracts make staff less likely to invest time in learning. NGO staff are less likely to invest time in learning because they lack a stake in the long-term future of the organisation and feel they cannot influence the outcome of events.

The critical issues are resourcing staff and ensuring that they feel that their opinions and experiences are valued. The reality, however, is that in centralised management structures this basic advice is often ignored. Staff need to feel secure that they are not going to be punished for making time for reflection and learning, and learning must be legitimised. Donors can help here by including additional resources for learning in grants and holding NGOs accountable for what they learn. In NGOs that exist to transfer financial resources to projects or partners, there must be an explicit link between learning resources received, and the incentives for learning are to be made concrete.

In most NGOs, systems for accessing, storing, transferring, and disseminating learning are underdeveloped, under-resourced, and inefficient. Information overload is common. There is a vast amount of information around, but too little structure to ensure that the right people get what they need at the right time. The study reveals that there must be a balance between the different kinds of learning or learning for different purposes: particularly between internal and external learning, formal and informal learning processes, and respect for diversity and the need to achieve coherence. A pre-occupation with documented knowledge and information storage is common in NGOs – a throwback to conventional banking concepts of education in which the aim is to accumulate facts. However, such knowledge may quickly become obsolete and may block the entry of new knowledge into the system – learning is a continuous process in which information and knowledge appear, disappear, and reappear. Building learning capacities should take precedence over building costly structures for information storage and retrieval.

These learning challenges can be solved by ensuring that there is participatory learning in the field. Field learning can be done through direct experiential learning among staff members of the organisation. The learning can be linked to sound practice policy and advocacy work. If learning is not taking place at the grassroots level, then other players in the learning system will be affected. As discussed in Chapter 2, NGOs are multicultural entities: hence, converting learning into knowledge and knowledge into learning requires an

imaginative approach using visual communications and dialogue. NGOs should prioritise encouraging action, reflection, and learn on a continuous basis. This needs strong leadership that emphasises that learning is a process of personal growth, not just the accumulation of knowledge. While it is important for NGOs to learn from others, it is also important to note that blueprint approaches to planning, rushing, and the imposition of external agendas leave no space to reflect, let alone learn.

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