Planning for emergence:

Implications for programme management of working in a participatory and emergence-aware way

Briefing note prepared by Hannah Beardon for the IKM 'practice-based change' workshop, based on the 'IKM: Working with Change' reflections and paper prepared with Daniel Guijarro.

Introduction and background:

IKM: Working with Change shares and tries to make some sense of a series of reflections with people involved in the IKM programme, on how their practice has changed in response to thinking about multiple knowledges, complexity and emergence.

The people involved work in a range of development organisations and contexts, including universities and research institutes in Europe, the US and Africa, grassroots community development processes in Latin America, Africa and Asia, in international development organisations and as independent consultants. From our interaction with them we heard lots of examples of concrete changes in practice which 'emerged' from working in awareness of complexity, diversity, emergence, uncertainty. But they spring ==completely from the context, the role, personality and interests of the practitioners themselves, and the opportunities available to them.== Each shared practical examples and insights into how their practice changed, as well as the limitations and challenges. We felt that more generally applicable and useful would be to identify common patterns behind these changes – what made change happen in the practice and context of these people?

From this we drew some conclusions about the principles of working 'in an emergence-aware way'. Some of these are shared below, in relation to the four areas to be explored at this workshop. There is, naturally, significant overlap between the areas. We have presented these in sometimes quite prescriptive language, but fully expect the workshop discussions to challenge and review the applicability of what is, essentially, people's learning from their own experience.

1. Linearity and predictability:

Problem: *Managing and sustaining change in a complex and unpredictable environment requires very different approaches and tools to those required to produce deliverables defined in advance.*

Understanding context:

We heard from people working on the ground that many development interventions fail (or worse) because they are planned based on inexplicit assumptions and insufficient understanding of context. Basic to this is recognising the 'limitations of our own knowledge' and seeking to open conversations with others to build a more complete picture. This requires us to listen more, and to a wider range of people, which means we need to take time to allow relationships and thinking to mature. Kingo felt that this allows us to reach a deeper understanding of the reality on the ground and create a stronger basis for effective and transformative action – what calls '*development from within*'.

This requires project planning and design to be based on much more debate and discussion with multiple stakeholders, to develop activities based on a deeper understanding of the context and shared vision and theory of change. This also requires assumptions to be explicitly discussed, and routinely revisited with the new learning and evidence emerging from implementation. This in turn depends on routine reflection during implementation on how the plans are working out and how they lead to different changes, including those not anticipated.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *What planning tools and methods do we know which encourage us to recognise and expand the limits of our own knowledge?*

- *How does this require changes to relationships or processes?*

Planning with flexibility

The experience of working with flexibility was very important, allowing an adaptive and responsive approach to project planning and implementation, and for methodologies to emerge during and from the process. Kemly talked about how this flexibility allowed her to focus energy on creating space to reflect and work with herself and the group to develop and adapt the project focus, based on their own vision, capacity and ongoing learning. This brought about different strategies and methods to bring about transformative change in the communities' awareness and use of their own knowledge.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *What are the challenges to allowing flexibility?*
- *What strategies can we pursue to increase the opportunities for flexible planning and reporting?*
- *What evidence would help to make the case? What evidence do we have?*
- *What are the criteria for allowing / negotiating flexibility?*

Working with trust and integrity

This flexibility requires trust, on the part of the 'donor', and integrity on the part of the 'practitioner' (recognising that many of us play both roles in different contexts). On the one hand, Michael explained how this trust allowed him to respond more to the needs of the programme, and interaction with participants on the ground, rather than having to adapt decisions to meet donor expectations. It also allows for more honest communication with the 'donor', reporting on learning and changes, rather than adapting reporting to the initial agreed plan. On the other hand, Mike explained how this required him (as manager of IKM) to have faith in people to follow their ideas, and work in emergent ways, and allowing things to happen which you may not have thought of yourself. Although this requires risk-taking, the risks are less when there is trust, and this is strengthened where people have personal qualities such as generosity and preparedness to listen.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *What is the basis of trust?*
- *What does it mean for our recruitment and management practices?*
- *How does this relate to accountability processes?*

Creating and recreating structures and systems:

Although we heard that rigid, linear systems which require assumptions to remain implicit and results to be predetermined restrict not only action and effectiveness but also communication and learning. However, the alternative was not to remove structures of planning and accountability - people could no more be meaningful actors without any structure as they could with too much. We heard that trying to deal with 'complexity' and 'uncertainty' without any structure saps energy and morale, undermining our own agency.

It is important that structures have meaning and purpose, provide us with a framework from which to act with integrity, and do not solidify but are routinely subject to review and revision based on our learning and our needs. They should work for us, not the other way round. What we saw was an iterative process of reflection and action, experience and theorising, individual reflection and collective sense-making. The opportunity and freedom to do this was what had really enabled developments in people's practice. And as one IKM paper noted, this practice is "*More of an art than a science, requiring considerable amounts of judgement and luck.*"

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *To what extent are our organisational systems and structures meeting our needs (for flexibility, responsiveness etc)?*
- *What examples do we have of changing, adapting structures?*
- *What are the opportunities and constraints to regular review and revision?*

- *Who needs to be informing the structures and systems?*

2. Participation and engagement:

Problem: *INGOs struggle to consistently listen to what they are hearing or to change their practice as a result.*

K ingo found that more awareness of multiple knowledges and the limitations of his own knowledge required him to reflect on how he relates to others, who he listens to and how he understands and values knowledge. Yet many also found working cultures in I N G Os which implicitly favour certain types of knowledge and expertise and marginalise 'anecdotal' evidence or local knowledge.

M any of the issues described above are closely related to the capacity of I N G Os to listen and respond to the voices of stakeholders, particularly at the grassroots. For example, flexibility, trust and space for reflection in particular are seen as essential in order to enable development practitioners to listen openly, rather than limiting participation to 'consultation' on predetermined plans and concepts.

Recognising and redressing 'hierarchies of knowledge':

We found that hierarchies of knowledge and 'expertise' serve to marginalise voices of people who are already socially and economically marginalised. Therefore, development interventions with objectives of equality need to consciously deal with this bias. Recognising the limits of our own knowledge, and the value of others', depends on awareness and critical examination of the models and paradigms we ourselves apply in valuing knowledge, and how these are represented in our own work, the information infrastructure we use and the structures we create. For example, Dejan warned that without careful attention and active intervention, the structures underlying the way we access information on the web will reflect and reinforce existing hierarchies of knowledge. He also considers that the concept of multiple knowledges needs to be articulated and shared more widely.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *What are the challenges to recognising and redressing bias in relation to knowledges?*
- *Are we knowledge-holders or sense-makers and are recipients of aid the objects or subjects of knowledge?*

Recognising the value (and limits) of your own knowledge:

Part of increasing the use of multiple knowledges in development, and redressing hierarchies of knowledge, was for people to recognise what they know, its potential value and its limitations. We found that this applies equally to community groups, development workers, academics and I N G O teams. Some described community processes of sharing and critically challenging local knowledge and constructing collective narratives. This has resulted in greater recognition and value for local knowledge, including new cultural artefacts, and more confident and active information-seeking behaviour. This also contributes to create the conditions for a constructive combination of local and external knowledge, with less threat of imposition and domination of 'outside' knowledge, and more attention to building local capacity to access, understand and apply new knowledge.

We found that this work on 'local knowledges' was also applicable and reflective of work done in development practitioners and academics, described more in terms of 'recognising the limits of your own knowledge', to appreciate the need for listening to and learning from others, as seen in section 1: understanding context. Important to all of the processes described was that of bringing in new and sometimes contradictory information and ideas, what Sebastiao referred to as 'cognitive disturbance', to challenge our own accepted narratives and foster broader understanding and new interpretations. In academic settings, people talked about bringing in people with different perspectives and experience to contribute to courses, including some 'contrarians' who challenge accepted ways of thinking or knowing.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *Do we think of our own development knowledge as 'local'?*

- *Can we encourage more cognitive disturbance in our own/ organisational knowledge? Does this require changes in relationship and expectations of peers, donors etc?*

Negotiating meaning:

An additional challenge for INGOs to work with multiple knowledges is the recognition that much knowledge is socially constructed and context dependent. This complicates traditional ideas of 'knowledge management' predicated on the storage and transfer of knowledge as if meaning were intrinsic to the words or images chosen to document it. We heard about changes in practice and systems in order to allow more opportunities and collective spaces to negotiate meaning, to co-construct rather than transfer knowledge. At least, it requires us to think more carefully about who is included in the sense-making process, for example building in feedback and validation stages in design, implementation and evaluation processes.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *In your organisation/ team, who makes sense of stories and information from the grassroots? E.g. in evaluations, case studies, baseline research, campaigns etc?*
- *What opportunities are there for greater collective sense-making?*

Diversifying voices, formats and media:

In very practical terms, enabling different voices to be heard requires the use of different methods and means of communication, to engage different audiences and represent different perspectives. This may include oral communication, via video or theatre, or social media to engage young people and inspire open debate, and requires attention to local and appropriate language. This was also felt in terms of diversifying teaching staff on development courses.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *What are the challenges to diversifying voices, given what we have said about collective sense-making and co-construction of knowledge?*
- *How can we handle this in our own work?*

3. Individual agency and organisational remit:

Problem: *What kind of staff and organisational culture are likely to enable INGOs to achieve and demonstrate their value?*

Organisations are made up of individuals

The focus of the reflections was on changes to our own practice, rather than organisational learning per se, Nevertheless, we saw that opportunities for reflection on our own experience and learning allowed us to change and grow, and was also a basis for collective and organisational learning and change. Some senior managers noted that they had also been able to create space for others to explore issues such as multiple knowledges and emergence in their work. But we realised that organisational change does not only rely on senior decision makers and managers. In fact, we saw how we create the institutional cultures and structures as much as they define us.

Through interaction with others, and reflection on our learning and our aims, we felt more empowered to challenge and change our own organisations and proactively broaden opportunities for different types of practice and relationships. All too often we internalise the pressure to conform to donor and organisational standards of acceptable evidence or valid knowledge, but as Robin found, we can act with more intention to challenge and counter these top-down and exclusive attitudes. Individual confidence and agency allows us to renegotiate and reshape the structures and systems in which we operate, so that linear structures are derived from, and complemented by, emergent ways of working. As such we become agents of organisational learning and change.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *Is there space for change in our organisations/ relationships that we don't use?*

Space for reflection, and cognitive disturbance...

We heard how awareness can make us agents of organisational change, but we also found that structures and systems can support this process. As Sarah explained, individuals matter, and the connections between them are the basis for new ideas, relationships and practices to emerge. In particular, spaces for reflection, critical thinking, challenge and exploration of concepts and assumptions, such as that provided by IKM Emergent, were considered to be a foundation for change. Several people talked about how IKM had been a space for meeting others, in different areas of work, to step outside our own institutional cultures and structures, test our own ideas and hear other perspectives, develop common discourse with diverse groups, which we bring back to our work. These spaces and opportunities also give us more confidence to act on our learning and ideas when we return to our working environment. We identified an iterative process in all our work, where we reflect on our experiences in order to theorise and more systematically bring our learning into future work.

As mentioned in participation and engagement, the wider these groups and opportunities are, the deeper and richer the understanding of development on which we base our practice and decisions. Josein has found that this space for diverse groups to connect and converse, to validate and test assumptions is key to facilitating pluralism.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *Can we show that reflection is productive?*

Making the case for emergence:

To allow more flexible and emergent ways of working require large-scale change in organisational structures and relationships, perhaps even scaling down operations, and strong evidence and examples from practice are needed to make the case for this type of large scale process to happen. Reflection brings about change, but we also heard that some colleagues are more focused on action often need to see the direct link to the impact their work might have. This requires good communication of how this type of work links to the quality of our practice. Some people talked about building evidence and making the case for more emergent ways of working, and communicating this with peers and stakeholders.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *What evidence do we have to make the case for emergent ways of working?*
- *How can we best use it to open more space for flexible and responsive management?*

4. Accountability:

Problem: *How can we ensure accountability, whilst explaining more complex interactions and value?*

Accountability for learning and quality:

Michael stated that *'there is no formula for social change'*. If we agree that linear planning is not realistic, we need to work with theories rather than certainties. The iterative process we identified involves developing theory based on assumptions and as much knowledge and collective interpretation as possible, testing that theory through action and reviewing learning (from as many perspectives as possible) in order to adapt and improve it as a basis for more effective or ethical action. This shifts the concept of accountability from control - proving we did what we said we would – to showing we are reflecting on and learning from our practice to improve the quality of our work. Other IKM research also found that evaluation should "*empower practitioners and facilitate their professional learning and growth.*"

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *What space and opportunity do we have to open up accountability relationships to represent the kinds of value we are working for?*

Theory-based action, action-based theory:

We have found that a collectively constructed and validated theory of change enables us to relate linear with emergent approaches. By thinking first about the changes we want to see, we can see the big picture in its complexity, with many players and processes influencing change. We make our assumptions about how change happens explicit, and clarify what we consider to be our (project/organisation's) role in that. From there we can abstract our (more linear) process and expected results, but also understand our relationship with other players and processes. We can plan based on this abstracted or simplified element of the predicted change process, but we can assess our progress and spot changes we might need to make by zooming back out to the bigger picture. This can serve as a basis for accountability in many directions, which depends on reflection and validation rather than narrow interpretations of results.

However, we have also found that tools such as Theories of Change can be co-opted or emptied of these more 'political' intentions, as described by Steve in Kenya where DfID are requiring 'theories of change' as a planning tool, sparking an interest in training and capacity building from local NGOs who depend on their funding. We have been asked 'what is the difference from a logframe?', and although there is more of an emphasis on relations, on context, on unpredictability and testing theories and assumptions, in fact this can also be done (to a more limited extent perhaps) using a logframe. Any tool is just that – a tool – which we imbue with meaning and intention ourselves.

Possible questions for reflection and discussion:
- *Can a new tool or framework provide a better structure for accountability based on value?*
- *Do we work to theories of change in changing our practice and the structures to which we work?*

Accountability to whom?

As set out in section 3 on organisational learning, we found that this requires strength of conviction to respond to different pressures – e.g. to fulfil a contract or adapt to learning and opportunity – in accordance not to their relative power and influence, but to our values and integrity.

Overall questions for reflection:

There is a lot of repetition here, as the themes represented are overlapping and complementary. With trust and flexible planning, accountability mechanisms change. To enhance diverse and meaningful participation of stakeholders in INGO decision making and 'theorising', requires and creates changes in structure and relationships... etc etc... So our question is:

- *What are the main underlying or cross-cutting themes, structures, relationships, attitudes etc which could contribute to our vision of change?*

And from there:

- *What opportunities and spaces do we have (or can we create) to move towards that vision?*