ADAPTIVE LEARNING

This is the fifth note in a six-part series discussing whether the social accountability field is already primed with the knowledge and capabilities to design, implement, fund, and learn from strategic interventions. This note takes stock of the way entries from the first two rounds of GPSA applications use learning, monitoring and evaluation to provide immediate feedback to improve the effectiveness of their social accountability interventions. It presents results from systematic analysis of more than 600 applications submitted to the Global Partnership for Social Accountability.

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I. THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AND LEARNING

The Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA) is a global multi-stakeholder coalition of donors and development actors. It provides strategic and sustained funding and knowledge support to civil society organizations (CSOs) working together with governments to solve critical governance and development problems. The GPSA has requested and awarded applications for funding in 2013 and 2014. **All applicants were asked to explain how they would contribute to the GPSA's fourth pillar, focused on Learning for Improved Results. In addition, applicants were expected to use learning in their applications and their projects**.

This note analyzes a sample of 40 out of the 644 **applications** focusing on how they propose to learn, but more importantly on how they use past learning to explain and justify what they have written into their projects.

Our approach to drawing lessons from GPSA Applicants:

- *Selection of a sample of 40 of 644 GPSA applications*
- *Scored each for their strategic political approach*
- *Extra attention to the best and worst applications*
- *4 Components of social accountability strategies coded as present, partial or absent*

Keep in mind that our analysis did not fully reassess the country context to determine whether an application responded precisely to local circumstances. Rather, we assessed to what extent the applicant discussed, analyzed and showed evidence of responsiveness to their own assessment of the local context.

Want to learn more about the GPSA's selection process and our methodology? Check out GPSA-Note 1.

We understand learning as the extent to which each GPSA applicant "gains and uses knowledge, from both its own work and that of others, to influence its policy, strategy, plans and actions."

We want to share data and reflect: how are we doing in the strategic use of learning to adapt our social accountability work as it evolves? What should we individually and collectively be doing to improve our individual and collective use of adaptive learning?

II. PINPOINTING ADAPTIVE LEARNING IN GPSA APPLICATIONS

There is much talk in the development and social accountability fields about the importance of incorporating systematic, real-time learning, as well as monitoring and evaluation into the operation of social accountability interventions, often referred to as adaptive learning (e.g. see **here** and **here**).

At the same time, for too long research, evaluation, and learning have been seperated from strategies and operations. So much so that many of our colleagues think that **the context for work in social accountability and development often fails to encourage adaptive learning and the application of this knowledge into our decision-making** (for different assessments and courses of action see e.g. **here**, **here**, **here**, **here**, **here**, **here**, **here**). Note: **there is no conclusive evidence that these "new" principles for learning in the development world are more (or less) conducive to wider governance reforms than business as usual**; these principles are a bet towards a better future.

In this scenario, it can be hard to find individual examples to illustrate concretely and briefly what we mean by adaptive learning. But it is not impossible. We think that the experience of Samarthan's adaptive learning approach to drive improvement in the transparency and effectiveness of government spending on an employment guarantee program in rural India is useful here. Initially, the CSO decided to use a set of tactics including developing a social watch group and organized wage earners in workers' unions. Structured review meetings with the field team, regular feedback from government officials and threats to the field staff, as well as lack of results, prompted Samarthan to adapt its approach. The organization engaged 1000 villages in different regions, downloaded information from the website, identified two educated youths in each village, and presented a formal report to senior officials. They did all of this while tracking and documenting their choices. If you want to check what happened during and after strategic adaptation see this **case study**.

It is even harder for funder-grantee relationships to institutionalize learning and integrate it systematically throughout the life cycle of their joint projects, starting with the application. Still, the GPSA's **theory of change and results framework** move in this direction, taking a cue from a range of consultations and **this 2013 evaluation on knowledge-based** **country programs by the World Bank** among other resources. We used the questions in Table 1 to verify whether GPSA applicants used and planned to use learning as a basis to justify and improve on their proposed social accountability projects. Our list of questions is not exhaustive. As a caveat, we considered current debates as well as the material we were working with.

Table 1: Key Questions to identify adaptive learning in GPSA applications

1	Does the application provide a clear rationale to justify how past successes and failures inform strategies and tactics, including risk management?
2	Does the project approach learning as an exercise to course-correct and improve its work rather than as a tool to market success/best practices for others to take up?
3	If the project aims to produce lessons for others to take up, (does it presume that the world can learn from their experience or) does it take specific measures / propose concrete MEL approaches that will explain under which conditions their experience will be useful for others?
4	What is the projects approach to scale? Does the project spell out a consistent approach to learning for scaling? Does this approach lend itself to taking into account contextual and politico-institutional factors are likely to influence the implementation of these lessons?
5	Does the project explain how the M, E, L system will be used to help ensure its sustainability (i.e. the continuation of the project beyond the duration of GPSA funding)?
6	Does the project identify the timing and nature of opportunities for learning and iteration of approaches?
7	Does the project fully specify the trade-offs between alternative strategic interventions and provide clear justification for the chosen approach?
8	Does the application draw on and customizes systematic evidence from social accountability initiatives in other countries or sectors?

III. GPSA's LEARNING BY DOING ABOUT LEARNING

The GPSA has a mandate to work on learning and asks all its grantees to contribute, too. In this spirit, the application template for both of its calls for proposals requested applicants to develop a stand-alone "Knowledge & Learning (K&L) component". This component should link and use the proposed interventions as opportunities for learning about strategic pathways. Round 1 included three additional questions on lessons learned and alternatives considered. These three questions weren't included in Round 2 because the questions were simplified. Instead, the questions were integrated into the justification of the proposed social accountability approach, by asking the applicant to refer to their prior experiences, what worked and did not work, and why the proposed approach should work this time around.

Overall, responses did not meet the standard set in the knowledge and learning questions. To some extent, the fact that questions about adaptive learning were less clearly flagged in

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Round 2 seems to have elicited fewer constructive responses in this case. Still, in both rounds the applicants had the opportunity to lay out a knowledge and learning component, and to connect the proposed intervention to their past and ongoing work. Taking a detailed look, we explored how applicants engaged with different dimensions of learning:

• **Building on existing tacit and explicit knowledge to define the strategy and adapting insights to the problem and context:** We checked whether applicants provided a clear rationale to justify how past successes and failures inform strategies and tactics, and 12 did. Only two proposals fully specified the trade-offs between alternative strategic interventions and provided clear justification for the chosen approach given the problem they face in their own context. The applicants' record regarding assessment of systematic evidence from documented social accountability interventions fared worst. However; the merits of building on and adapting existing knowledge in the social accountability field are clear. One proposal learnt that **"National CSOs have attempted to implement social accountability programmes using local accountability networks, much of the work being done by external experts, with little participation of citizens and local government authorities. Unfortunately, this has left no sustainable networks of empowered local social auditors. Bringing together and empowering local networks to carry out social audits is sustainable."** The lesson learned by the CSO was that it is more sustainable to bring together and empower local networks to carry out social audits, rather than bringing in external experts. Accordingly, the proposal sought to train local people as social auditors to empower the local community.

• **Learning as an exercise to immediately refine social accountability interventions:** while ten proposals approached learning as an exercise to course-correct and improve their work, only three identified specific times and

opportunities for learning and iteration along the lines of the Samarthan case presented above. This approach encourages the development of a culture of on-going, free and full communication about what does and does not **work.** This model of problem-driven iterative adaptation is documented. (**here** and **here**)

Tips (& recognition) for making the most of failures?

http://blogs.wsj.com/at-work/2013/03/29/the-manager-who-kept-a-six-year-diary-of-her-mistakes/

http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2011/jan/17/ngos-failure-mistakes-learn-encourage?CMP=twt_gu

http://this.org/magazine/2011/12/01/admitting-failure/

• **Learning as a process to increase sustainability:** Thirty out of forty applications failed to link their monitoring, evaluation, and learning approach to the prospects for the sustainability of the project. The opportunities from linking learning to sustainability are promising. One project worked to align its monitoring and evaluation indicators with the statistical system of the national statistical office so that the project could become a valuable source of comparative data and attract continued support from a wide range of stakeholders interested in the data, increasing the likelihood of sustainability.

• **Learning as a tool to influence others:** Twenty proposals approached learning as a tool to communicate success and/or identify best practices for others to replicate elsewhere (despite widespread agreement in the field that there are no magic bullets). Only one of the proposals that aims to produce lessons for

others explains how they will bind their lessons to specific contextual conditions so that they are useful for others to learn from and adapt.

• **Learning as a path to scale** (or grow **impact**): Only three of the projects have a clear approach to scaling up in the case of success. All too often, the proposal went like this: "We will implement a pilot project in a range of local settings we have identified carefully and where we will work with local stakeholders to ensure adoption and implementation. Work in these areas of primary focus will help us identify best practices that could be replicated elsewhere in the country. However, we realize that many of the key decisions about the process we care about are made at the national level – i.e. not where we are working most of the time in this project. Hence, we will employ advocacy and awareness raising activities for national decision-makers taking advantage of the national networks the applicant already belongs to. These networks will facilitate sharing of best practices and lessons learned to the wider national level audience and through the media for making a strong case for wider adoption of the model. The final phase of the knowledge and learning component of the project will focus on advocacy at the national level for country wide adoption of the model developed by the project. This process of wider dissemination and advocacy will contribute significantly to enhancing the knowledge base on local government dynamics, practices and intervention needs."

Note that this approach does make an explicit attempt to integrate national and subnational work, a step forward in terms of learning if compared to many cases from the past that tended to concentrate social accountability work in capital cities and at the national level. This overall idea is consistent with our knowledge and strategic social accountability in so far as it seeks to integrate work across levels of government taking into account where public policy decisions are made (see GPSA Note 3).

● Beyond this, however, this hypothetical example captures a broader trend in terms of conceptualizing scale and its relationship to learning. For us, it is striking that a similar logic is applied in so many countries and sectors. Even if partial decentralization were ubiquitous, the specific decisions made in each level can and often do vary by sector and country (on the political economy of decentralization see **here** and **here**). We need a more sophisticated understanding of their politico-institutional context and a more nuanced approach to learning.

● On a related issue: strategic social accountability seeks to find the practices that make sense technically and politically for a particular setting (whether national or sub-national) which can be subject to a limited scale-up rather than a best practice that works everywhere. And yet, too often projects that embrace a problem-driven approach and work with what they find in the context for designing and implementing their core, pilot interventions turn to a best-solution driven approach when it comes to growing their impact. It is exceptional to find entries that qualify the replication exercise to particular types of sub-national context or take into account the links between national and sub-national politics to implement reforms (see e.g. **here** and **here**). This probably reflects a major gap in our understanding about achieving scale in development: for what types of problems and under which conditions can we replicate external solutions while avoiding problem identification on-the ground and iterative development of solutions (**here**)?

In short, even if the idea of learning starts out as politically aware for some geographical areas in a country, there is a tendency to turn it into a technocratic effort that eschews political analysis and learning when considering scaling-up.

We, as a field, probably need to give a lot more thought to this apparent tension in our approach to social accountability. There are some examples where this approach seems to have worked (see e.g. **here**).
Still, the apparent universality of this tension could be suggesting what others found many years ago: "similarity among the statements of goals issued by NGOs [non-governmental organizations] around the world confirms the existence of a universal NGO language that owes nothing to the specific problems or cultural traits of individual countries". The challenge for the GPSA and others goes beyond ensuring that funders pick up on this and signal they want to overcome this culture. Undifferentiated changes (or calls for changes) in scaling-up are unlikely to take us very far.

IV. PUTTING FINDINGS INTO CONTEXT

A final set of thoughts about the bigger-picture. We need to put these sometimes less-than-encouraging findings in context. We want to reiterate that the problem and the solution are unlikely to rely solely on civil society grantees. Many CSOs indicate in their GPSA applications that they have been working on the problem/issue for a number of years, receiving support from donors, yet they are unable to summarize what they have learned that leads them to their own proposal. Our analysis suggests that this is regularly found across a majority of GPSA applicants and projects that have been supported by donors in the past.

Even if the GPSA provides funds to its 22 grantees for large projects, it is a small piece of the funding pie in terms of social accountability funding. If we researched how many funders and civil society organizations are learning in practice, **few would probably fare well**.

In fact one of us explored with 100+ colleagues working on social accountability what they were (and were not) doing regarding learning and concluded that funder-grantee-expert relationships are one key source of the problem and the solution (see **here**).

The root causes of the struggle are likely to be in an ecosystem (see **here**) that is larger than the GPSA (To learn about an initiative trying to work on funder-grantee-CSO incentives on learning see **here**, **here**, and **here**). This statement, of course, is not meant to ignore what the GPSA can do to lead, in particular along with its own grantees. But the road ahead probably calls for action on incentives, institutions, and processes available for learning in collaboration with others. The GPSA's network of Global Partners, which has 180+ members including other grant-making organizations, might be able to help out particularly when it comes to the GPSA itself.