

# The Power of peer Learning

## How learning communities can drive social change

This paper reflects upon our experiences of running learning communities within the 'Sport for Development' sector, outlining the role a 'community' can play in bringing together key stakeholders to improve the quality of programme delivery. They function by working directly with practitioners, to identify and disseminate good practices from the field. The paper explores the challenges that a learning community can directly address for both individual actors, as well as the wider sector. We discuss the key benefits from the approach and our experiences at inFocus of forming, running and growing a Learning Community to maximise its' learning potential.

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## Challenges with Peer Learning

Organisations around the world are working 'on the ground' directly with communities to address social problems and drive social impact.



When running a programme, project or activity within a community, it is critical for organisations to understand what **IS** working and what **ISN'T** and how to more effectively generate social change. At inFocus we draw upon the concept of '**triple loop learning**', a concept first applied by Argyris & Schon in 1978, who identified three 'levels' of learning - single, double and triple loop. Single loop learning is the simplest form of learning and involves checking whether we are 'doing things the right way'. It involves watching for and correcting deviations from how the organisation 'usually does things' (avoiding deviation from the norm). Double loop learning involves changing the rules, by asking the question 'are we doing the right things'? This helps organisations to reframe their thinking and fosters innovation and creativity. Finally, triple loop learning involves questioning how we decide what **IS** 'the right thing to do', as well as the overall rationale and values that an organisation or community operates by. There are numerous barriers to organisational learning at these different levels. Firstly, there can be a lack of evidence about the most effective activities to use in a particular context, either through a lack of robust monitoring and evaluation capacity at the organisational level, or gaps in external research and evaluation. There are also a lack of effective mechanisms for organisations around the world who are working in a similar area, to connect, identify and share good practice in a structured way.

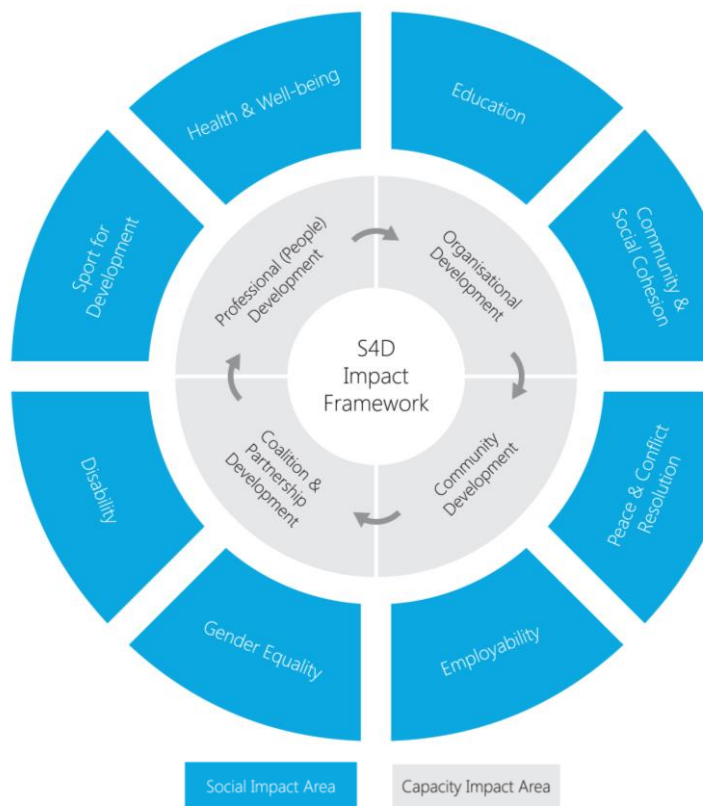
“ Collaboration allows us to know more than we are capable of knowing by ourselves ”

Paul Solarz

## The role of Learning Communities

A Learning Community (or Community of Practice) brings together organisations to exchange knowledge, share methods and results and map out both commonalities and differences in approaches. The notion that we use of ‘community’ in this context, does not refer to any specific location or form of association, rather it is metaphorical.<sup>1</sup> A Learning Community is characterised by a shared area of practice, mutual learning and the exploration of different ideas and perspectives by its’ members<sup>2</sup>. The aim of an inFocus Learning Community is to improve the quality of programme delivery by identifying and disseminating good practice, based upon strong M&E practices, shared measurement<sup>3</sup> and research that objectively identifies the most effective methodologies in the field.

inFocus works across each of the **Social Impact** and **Capacity Development Impact** areas outlined below. Our approach recognises the importance of working across all socio-ecological levels.



**Good Practice** : A method or technique that has consistently shown results superior to those achieved with other means, and that is used as a benchmark” [www.businessdictionary.com](http://www.businessdictionary.com)

## The benefits of Learning Communities

From our experience of running learning communities, we have found a number of benefits to running a learning community:


1. Building the knowledge and understanding across the community of one another’s work. This helps to avoid practitioners (particularly new entrants) ‘reinventing the wheel’
2. Improving programme quality across the community, through the identification and integration of good practice into programme design
3. Increasing the validity and credibility of the field of common interest and supporting efforts to scale up the field and attract new partners
4. Coordinating and improving access to the evidence base for the community and enabling practitioners to benchmark efforts effectively

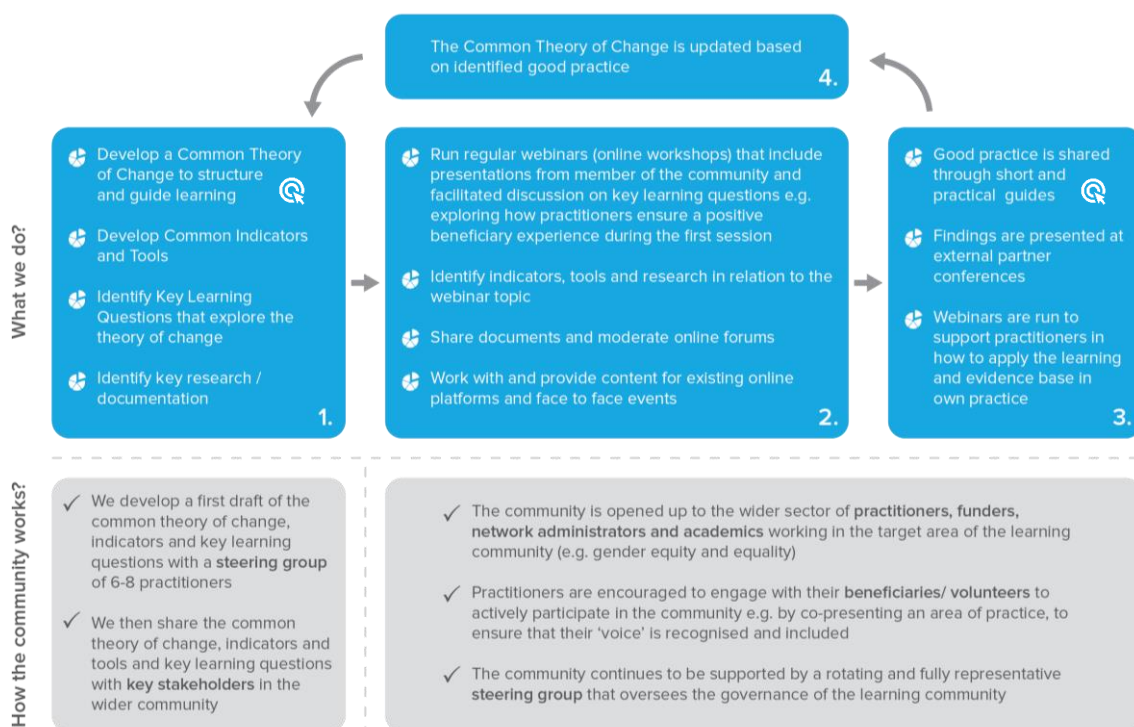
<sup>1</sup> Johnson, Hazel (2007). Communities of practice and international development. *Progress in Development Studies*, 7(4) pp. 277–290.

<sup>2</sup> Hearn, S. and White, N. (2009) Communities of Practice, Linking Knowledge, Policy and Practice, ODI Background Note, November 2009

<sup>3</sup> shared measurement refers to organisations who are working on similar issues, developing a common understanding of what to measure and developing tools that can be used by many charities, social enterprises and funders working towards similar goals.

## How our learning communities work?

The diagram below outlines our approach and the different stages of running a learning community, with examples of resources that are developed and shared with the community, along the way. You can click on examples of documents produced through the process by clicking on the  symbol.



## Our learning so far

In our experience of the last two years, we have identified a number of key principles for the successful running of a learning community:

- Accept there will be a fluidity to member participation, with different levels of engagement, according to individuals' available time and current interests
- To generate new and more profound insights, encourage members to share their tacit knowledge from both work and life experiences and design highly participatory workshops that encourage interaction and proactive engagement
- Encourage a diversity of subject matter to ensure the Learning Community evolves and is not static but, rather, flexible, nimble and able to always adapt to new priorities
- Combine excitement with challenge, where the process of drawing out lessons learned is engaging but also at times provocative and challenging member perspectives, always handled in a non-judgemental and open manner that enables everyone's voice to be heard
- Utilise the abundance of various technologies and tools that are accessible and straightforward to use, to ensure that access is equitable and learning is communicated and shared effectively



If you would like more information on learning communities, please feel free to contact me at [damian@impactinfocus.com](mailto:damian@impactinfocus.com)