



EVIDENCE AND LESSONS FROM LATIN AMERICA: LESSONS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE PROGRAMME

SUMMARY

ELLA is a knowledge exchange and learning platform. Over the last three years, it has synthesised knowledge on more than 20 themes relating to development in Latin America on economic, environmental and governance issues; run six learning communities between Latin American, African and South Asian peers to support exchange and learning on these issues; and supported networking between professionals and organisations across these regions.

This report brings together lessons and reflections, of a practical nature, based on this experience, drawing on the design and implementation of the programme. This summary contains the main lessons and reflections highlighted in the report.





LESSONS: THE DESIGN OF ELLA

Programme Design: There is no shortage of practical literature and organisational knowledge to draw upon, and select from, in designing a knowledge management programme.

The Market for Latin American knowledge: 'Matching' Supply and Demand: For successful south-south knowledge exchange programmes, an intimate knowledge and understanding of the context and issues in both 'poles' is required.

Supply vs. Demand-led Knowledge Production: When considering a demand - led approach, a key decision will be how widely to draw the net: how varied is the 'demand group' with which you will work? This will influence the shape of your programme.

Research Uptake: Knowledge and Learning: One design issue in research or knowledge management projects is the extent to which research uptake and use falls within the project boundary – essentially this is a funder decision. At some point a project will tip from being a research into a broader development project, in which research knowledge is just one element.

Language: 'Translating' knowledge and ideas from one culture and language into another – and asking people to work in their non-native tongue – presents acute challenges that need to be adequately addressed and resourced if knowledge is not to be 'lost in translation'.

Context: Knowledge sharing across continents raises considerable challenges regarding context. The best way to ensure that key contextual issues and underlying enabling factors are successfully examined is probably to involve both knowledge sharing parties in the dialogue to identify these. Ideally the knowledge would be co-produced.

LESSONS: SUPPLYING KNOWLEDGE

Who? The Target for the Knowledge Products: In order to disaggregate knowledge products for different audiences (government, civil society, researchers), sufficient resources are required to fund the production of parallel communication products for each, which will vary both in content and presentation.

What? Content of the Knowledge Products: Different audiences are likely to want very different knowledge products: both the type of development experience reported upon, and the detailed content relating to that experience.



How? Format of Knowledge Products: In seeking to synthesize research on an issue, and to ensure its accessibility to, and use by, decision makers, it is almost certainly helpful to break down production and formatting into a two stage process: initially, production in a research paper format; and secondly, the translation of this into one or more communication products.

Fine-tuned formatting of knowledge products, to reach different audiences, is the ideal: resources are needed to achieve this. The standard four page brief probably works best for advisers and programme managers, but is too long for senior policy makers and likely too lacking in detail for researchers.

Policy makers (in Africa or Asia) require integration of the local context into briefing material from Latin America, for the products to be more useful.

Production of the Knowledge Products: general: Set aside adequate time and budget for skills and capacity development when researchers are expected to depart significantly from their normal line of business.

Production: agenda setting: In producing knowledge briefing documents, be sure to consider carefully the breadth of the research issue to be addressed: best to err on the side of a narrow research question.

Production: researching: A comprehensive literature review across a continent, in this case Latin America, presents significant logistical challenges – non-availability of digital material, multiple languages, scarcity of primary research in many cases – and this should be factored into ambitions and the choice of themes.

Production: writing up: Writing effective communication products is an acquired skill. Either contract this out to specialists or be prepared to invest in skills development, and continuous support and feedback over time, to develop researchers' skills.

LESSONS: FACILITATING LEARNING - ONLINE

Design: online course vs. community of practice: Sharing lessons between regions is most naturally fostered as a two or multi-way process of exchange. But sensitive attention to the delivery of the learning and exchange can still successfully promote the 'export' of lessons from one region, in programmes such as ELLA.

Other design considerations: The design of an online learning course cum community of practice needs careful consideration of many factors including thematic breadth/content, intended size of the community, the length and pace of the learning programme, and the learning methodology.

Participant identification and selection: On balance, it is practical to aim for learning communities which are made up of people from across the spectrum of organisational backgrounds (government, civil society, research community etc.)



Moderation of the Alliance: Moderating an online community learning programme is fun and rewarding, but it is very demanding: dealing with a large number of varied contributions from different country context and sector perspectives, playing a proactive role in the discussion, responding to new issues as they arise, keeping to deadlines, and turning out summaries on time.

LESSONS: FACILITATING LEARNING - FACE TO FACE

Design: National Learning Groups: Arranging in-country meetings, connected by VC to another continent, raises particular challenges relating to timing, technology, the convenience for participants, and resource intensity. But with adequate resourcing and careful planning they can be made to work.

Study tours: In selecting participants for a study tour, consider criteria carefully: senior officials, with position power to exert change, but with less proven commitment to learning in the alliance; or more junior officials perhaps with the opposite characteristics. The mix of those selected is also an important consideration: diversity or homogeneity?

It is a low risk strategy to buy all flights once study tour participants are identified, and not wait for visa confirmations – all participants were granted visas, and waiting until they are confirmed often results in higher flight ticket prices.

There are many, many lessons for the successful implementation of a study tour. The most important is that the study tour should be seen as a knowledge sharing process in all its stages: preparation for the tour, the tour itself and follow-up to the tour. Both organisers and participants need to devote effort and resources to each of the three stages.

'Learning into Practice' Awards: In designing knowledge or research programmes, where the funder emphasises that the research knowledge should be put to good use, agree at the outset on the proportion of funds to be directed at the use of the research knowledge, and where this sits in the project logical framework.

LESSONS: MANAGEMENT

Managing a consortium: When running a multi-sited programme that straddles many countries and cultures, be sure to test out what from of communication works best in different cultures: the most notorious divide being written vs oral communication.



Monitoring and evaluation: Measuring the outcome and impact of knowledge sharing programmes is challenging due to their diffuse and diverse effects. Conducting “tracer” studies, and capturing “stories” from know “beneficiaries” can help provide a structured interpretation of impact.

ICTs: When using internet technologies, do not under-estimate the time and resources required to ensure that both the management team and participants are trained up in and fully conversant with all the technologies involved.



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A. Introduction

This report begins by briefly describing the remit that was set by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), and then gives a short overview of the 'Evidence and Lessons from Latin America' programme (ELLA) in response to this remit.

The main part of the report reviews the considerations involved in the design of each component of ELLA, and the reflections and lessons as we implemented and adjusted the programme. This draws together lessons that were recorded in project quarterly reports and the conclusions from a three day Lesson Learning workshop held in Lima in mid-2013.

The report is intended as a down-to-earth and practical contribution to the management of knowledge projects, from the perspective of south-south knowledge exchange and learning. Much of this is far from 'rocket science', draws upon our many mistakes, and should be treated as a humble contribution to lesson sharing among the K* community.

The Report complements an ELLA Monitoring and Evaluation report which is also available on the ELLA website: <http://ella.practicalaction.org/>

B. The DFID remit and the ELLA programme

The Remit

The DFID remit was broad, challenging and ambitious: share Latin American research findings and knowledge on a selection of development issues, for this to be put to good use in Africa and Asia. The underlying assumption is that a series of barriers hinder access to knowledge about development in Latin America, and that if African and Asian decision makers were more knowledgeable about this development, this could help them improve their own policies and practices.

The remit implied two main responses: the supply of knowledge about Latin America relevant to the needs (or demands) of African and Asian decision makers, and processes to support the access, understanding, adaptation, adjustment and intended use of that knowledge. As a knowledge project, the boundaries largely limited the programme from direct funding of the developmental use of the knowledge, though this was the higher level goal (or intended impact) of ELLA.

The ELLA programme

The two main components of ELLA have been:

- The identification, collation and synthesis of knowledge on recent Latin American experiences on selected economic, environmental and governance issues; and



- Learning programmes between Latin American, African and South Asian professionals to support exchange and learning on these issues.

Responding to sustainability objectives, ELLA has also supported networking between individual and organisations across the three continents.

Knowledge: ELLA has synthesised knowledge of Latin American countries' recent experience on more than 20 policy and practice issues in economic development, environmental management and governance. Some experiences are innovative, others are tried and tested. Themes have been chosen on the basis of assessed demand and recognised contributions from Latin American countries to the agenda. The Knowledge Products (KPs) are designed for policymakers, practitioners, researchers and donors in Africa, Asia and elsewhere, and have been widely disseminated.

Learning: ELLA has run six Learning Alliances (LEAs) between professionals from Latin America and their peers in Africa and Asia, involving some 1800 people in total. These programmes offer time-bound structured exchange and learning, based on the KPs and other Learning Materials (LMs). The online component of the LEAs operates in a 'private space' in the ELLA website accessible by LEA members. Online activities include use of an interactive wall, discussion boards, question and answer sessions, and multimedia.

Offline LEA activities have been focused in a few core countries, selected for each Learning Alliance: National Learning Groups (NLGs) organised in African and South Asian capitals. For a limited number of participants, each Learning Alliance also included a study tour to Latin America to gain first-hand understanding of the experiences covered in the online learning; plus awards for selected individuals and organisations to put learning into practice.

Networking: The Programme supports networking on ELLA themes between individuals and organisations across Latin America, Africa and South Asia, through working relations between partners in the Learning Alliances, a platform for networking through the website, and the KP Spotlights links on Organisations

Website: The ELLA website has two spaces: a 'public space' that houses the ELLA knowledge products, with a bespoke search engine to other Latin American knowledge, plus news relating to ELLA themes; and a 'private space' for those participating in the LEAs. Each LEA space has a Learning Page, where the core 'curriculum' was followed through a structured series of Discussion Threads; and a Networking Page, where members of the Learning Alliances are free to network on issues relating to the theme.

ELLA has been implemented by a consortium of mainly Southern based development research and practice organisations. The Latin America regional office of Practical Action Consulting (PAC), based in Lima, Peru leads the ELLA consortium. Three Latin American 'Regional Centres of Expertise' (RCEs) have produced the ELLA knowledge materials and led the Learning Alliances: GRADE, a think tank based in Peru, led on economic issues;



SSN Brazil, a research and practice organisation based in Rio de Janeiro, on environmental issues; and Fundar, a research and advocacy organisation based in Mexico, on governance issues.

A network of four African and Asian 'Demand Brokers' (DBs) have communicated with partners in those regions: PAC regional offices in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Nepal, which outreach to East Africa, Southern Africa and South Asia respectively; and Kite, a development NGO, based in Ghana with outreach to West Africa. Network support to the consortium has been provided by the UK-based International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

C. The Inception Phase and Design of ELLA

ELLA, originally called a Synthesis of Policy and Research Lessons from Latin America, began with an inception phase in the second half of 2010. The purpose was to review the case for a potential market for Latin American knowledge and to determine a design for the programme.

Programme Design

To help design ELLA, we reviewed the extensive applied literature on research synthesis, knowledge communication, online learning, Communities of Practice and south-south exchange. DFID's own Research Communication Programmes (RCPs) as they were then termed, were a particular source of guidance - including the IDS Managing Knowledge for Development programme (which includes ELDIS) and CABI who manage DFID's R4D Research for Development programme, and a Triple Line assessment of some 13 DFID RCPs.¹

The ODI RAPID programme (Research and Policy in Development) and K* Communities of Practice such as the Knowledge Brokers Forum (KBF) and Evidence Based Policy in Development (EBPDN) were also a rich source of knowledge. For direction, we also trawled large research programmes such as that run by GDN, and by IDRC in Latin America, and south-south exchange programmes such as the World Bank's South-South Exchange Facility. These were complements to the knowledge management experience of the ELLA consortium of partners, including programmes such as Practical Answers, a global service run by Practical Action.

Lesson

There is no shortage of practical literature and organisational knowledge to draw upon, and select from, in designing a knowledge management programme.

¹ Triple Line (2009) 'Learning lessons on research uptake and use: a review of DFID's research communication programmes'



The Market for Latin American knowledge: 'Matching' Supply and Demand

To review the case for the market for Latin American knowledge, in the Inception Phase we (boldly) attempted to identify the 'comparative advantage' that Latin American countries had in terms of policy and programme experience and knowledge on particular issues, and to review the potential demand from African and Asian countries, to guide the thematic focus for ELLA. We used online surveys, structured interviewing with some 400 professionals, and carried out desk-based literature reviews, including on the near term policy and emerging policy agenda across African and South Asian countries.

This approach appeared to confirm that many professionals in Africa and Asia had relatively poor access to knowledge about Latin America, plus a desire to learn more:

	Africa, Asia Users	Global Users
How interested are you/ your organisation in gaining development knowledge from Latin America? (%)		
Very interested	52	75
Interested	47	25
Not interested	1	0
How much knowledge do you/ your organization accessing on development experiences in Latin America? (%)		
None	16	3
Very little	38	17
Some	28	38
Quite a lot	14	22
Extensive	4	17

Source: ELLA user survey, 600 respondents

Latin American interlocutors had a strong sense of successes and failures in Latin America, but relatively little understanding of the knowledge needs of African and Asian decision makers, whereas the latter had a strong sense of their needs but little awareness of what Latin America had to offer. From the research, we teased out a likely 'match' between supply and demand –DFID also provided guidance and inputs – to identify the following broad themes on which ELLA would focus:

- Economic Development: extractive industries, smallholder agriculture, labour and financial markets
- Governance: accountability, human rights, gender equity
- Environmental management: climate change adaptation and mitigation, the urban environment



Within the broad themes identified above, we sought to fine-tune the thematic and issues focus as the Latin America-Africa-South Asia dialogue developed (see later). But the key point is that to have successful knowledge exchange – in this case across continents – requires knowledge of the issues in countries in the two continents. This requires knowledge inputs from both ‘poles’, or as a fallback professionals with broad geographical experience.

Lesson

For successful south-south knowledge exchange programmes, an intimate knowledge and understanding of the context and issues in both ‘poles’ is required.

Supply vs. Demand-led Knowledge Production

The knowledge production industry is sometimes criticised for being too supply-led – responding to the agendas of the suppliers – with insufficient attention to what is being demanded by whom.

There was a significant risk that ELLA could fall into this trap, hence the attempt to focus on enquiring about demand during the Inception Phase. But the question was: whose demand exactly? Which countries in Africa and Asia? Who in those countries? This raised a tension because the narrower the demand focus, typically the more specific that demand – and if the supply responds specifically to this, the less generic and widely provocative that knowledge supply might be. This was a dilemma: how narrowly or broadly to define the demand.

In the case of ELLA, we went for a ‘half-way house’, responding to the remit to share knowledge from Latin America widely. We identified 12 target countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia on which the programme would focus; a list influenced by DFID’s set of priority countries: Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, India, Nepal and Bangladesh. But these countries are very heterogeneous and within those countries, we also considered the needs of the broad development community – government, civil society, researchers, private sector – as potential customers for ELLA knowledge and learning. A concern has been whether this demand-focus of ELLA was too broad. This is explored further later.

Lesson

When considering a demand led approach, a key decision will be how widely to draw the net: how varied is the ‘demand group’ with which you will work? This will heavily influence the shape of your programme.



Research Uptake: Knowledge and Learning

If research into practical development issues is to prove useful, it not only needs to respond to demand (actual or potential), it will also require a process of ‘uptake’ by those demanding the research. ‘Research uptake’ has been described as an eight stage process,² in which research knowledge has to pass through awareness, reception, cognition, acceptance, referencing, local application, adoption and action, implementation and adherence.

Within the ELLA remit and the bounds established for the programme, we agreed with DFID that we would directly fund and support the first five or so stages of this uptake process. The learning alliances would take knowledge of Latin America’s evidence and lessons through awareness and reception, to cognition and acceptance, and to some extent to incorporate referencing and application to local contexts (see below). Adoption and action by say African and Asian participants in ELLA in their own countries were almost wholly beyond the direct bounds of the programme, though some funds were used for ‘Learning into Practice’ Awards (see later).

Lesson

A major design issue in research or knowledge management projects is the extent to which research uptake and research use falls within the project bounds – essentially this is a funder decision. At some point a project may ‘tip’ from research into a broader development project – where research knowledge is just seen as one (potentially minor) element.

Language

One of the main barriers to accessing knowledge about developments in Latin America is language – material in Spanish or Portuguese that is not accessible to those speaking other languages. A principle objective of ELLA was to get products and services into English and accessible to English speaking users in Africa and South Asia: knowledge products, the website and the learning programmes were all to be in English. We decided against translating into other third languages, on the grounds of limited resource and complexity.³

Language issues presented multiple practical challenges. Researchers for the knowledge products needed to be able both to read in Spanish, Portuguese and English (and ideally other languages), to access the available literature on Latin American developments; and to write in English for the output of the knowledge products. The learning programmes were also conducted in English and the ability, naturalness and even the desire of Latin American participants to communicate in a foreign language was often an impediment to their more active participation.

Language skills were particularly important in writing up the knowledge products. The challenge to find a word or precise phrase in English which adequately captures the full resonance of a word, term or concept in the Spanish or the Portuguese – which has been termed the ‘traducture’ challenge – is sometimes all but impossible to

² riple Line (2009) ibid

³ Subsequently, responding to requests in Latin America, we have translated about half of the synthesising knowledge products into Spanish.



overcome without a detailed explanation, which is problematic when writing ‘briefs’ (for which incidentally, there is no entirely adequate term in Spanish). At the same time, this is also the richly rewarding side to ‘translating’ knowledge and ideas from one culture and language to another, to make that knowledge accessible to the other.

Lesson

‘Translating’ knowledge and ideas from one culture and language into another – and asking people to work in their non-native tongue – presents acute challenges that need to be adequately addressed and resourced if knowledge is not to be ‘lost in translation’.

Context

Much literature on knowledge sharing emphasizes that ‘context is king’, that knowledge is context specific. This clearly presents an acute challenge for any south-south programme, exchanging knowledge across continents. We were conscious of this from the outset, aware that few if any of Latin America’s experiences – in the fields of economic development, governance and environmental management – would be directly replicable in African or South Asian countries.

We responded to this in different ways. We recognised that knowledge about Latin American progress on specific issues could in itself be inspirational and provocative – and to achieve that would be worthwhile in itself – but that this knowledge would have to be absorbed, adapted and adjusted by the reader/user themselves to fit ‘local contexts’, if it was to be used in any effective way.

In the ELLA knowledge products, the Guides and Briefs have a section on the Enabling Context: the enabling factors – historical, social, political, economic, etc. – that enabled different Latin countries to travel a particular path. This was intended to provoke readers in different contexts, an awareness of the underlying variables at play in a given change process, and introspection about whether such enabling factors existed in their own contexts. This section in the KPs contributed to a ‘How To’ understanding, and was appreciated by readers.

With the written products, the work is left to the reader, to interpret and consider implications for their own country and contexts. Complementing this, the learning alliances supported participants from Africa and Asia in the understanding and interpretation of the knowledge that was being shared about Latin American countries. Through a process of comparing and contrasting, and of exchange and dialogue, the alliances were designed to take participants further along the cycle of adjusting and adapting knowledge from Latin America to their own contexts.

The outcome from these intentions is explored later, but a couple of observations are noted here. The feedback from users of the KPs was that the Enabling Factors was often regarded as the most useful section in the KPs: users wanted to understand how to achieve change. At the same time, completing this section of the KPs proved to be a considerable challenge. Typically, research evidence on this was scarce; and living within the Latin context, researchers often found it difficult to tease out the deeper structural that enabled given change processes.



Our reflection on this is that it requires an external interrogator to elicit a rich analysis of the underlying context: a process of dialogue to extract the key enabling factors. The interrogator would ideally come from the country and context, with which the knowledge is being shared, to identify the most relevant and sensitive contextual variables.

The learning alliances did provide a forum for the discussion and dissection of context, though concluding on contextual factors was not always easy, because members of the learning alliances came from multiple, varied country contexts. At the same time, it is the very comparing and contrasting of contexts and experiences that provides the richness in south-south dialogues – the value-added of south-south exchange, provoking new ways of thinking about a problem.

This was not open to the ELLA team at the time, but one way of addressing the context challenge is to involve the two parties to the exchange process, from the outset, in the co-production of the knowledge products. A thorough dialogue could then be expected to elicit more successfully the underlying context and enabling factors.

Lesson

Knowledge sharing across continents raises considerable challenge regarding context. The best way to ensure that key contextual issues and underlying enabling factors are successfully examined is probably to involve both knowledge sharing parties in the dialogue to identify these. Ideally the knowledge would be co-produced.

D. Supplying Knowledge

Objectives

The ELLA programme objective was to improve access in Africa and Asia to knowledge about selected Latin American policies and practices. The target group was decision makers – policymakers and practitioners – but also researchers, focused through the lens of the 12 ELLA target countries. The themes on which we would focus were those identified during the Inception Phase, though we would fine-tune these as we went along.

The key stages for the ELLA team were to be clear about whom we were trying to reach; what it is that these people wanted to know; in what form they wanted to receive this knowledge; and how we should set about producing and disseminating this knowledge – within the practical constraints of the programme budget and time-frame, and taking account of DFID priorities.



Who? The Target for the Knowledge Products

We were guided by the remit from DFID that knowledge generated by ELLA should be put to use – by the group typically called decision makers i.e. policymakers and practitioners. These could be within government – mainly the executive, possibly the legislature, or judiciary in some cases – or wider society – civil society and the private sector. The academic and research community was a legitimate target group, given their role in contributing to the policy process and to examining practice – and specifically given the research need to interpret and adapt Latin American knowledge to the local context.

Given the wide sweep of ELLA – a broad range of themes, taking knowledge from one continent to another – we kept open the option of knowledge products for each of these groups. This approach led to two main outcomes, in practice:

- First, we found that there were few themes, or types of experience, that were of exclusive interest to one group or another – the agenda setting stage of production (see below) typically signalled that the issue would be of interest to government, civil society and researchers
- Second, whereas we hypothesised that different audiences may require different content (the what) and different formats (the how) for their knowledge, the somewhat standardised approach that we adopted to the knowledge production – in response to the budget constraints (ambition, timeframe, budget) – meant that we ended up with a fairly uniform knowledge product in terms of type of content and format (though in this we are no alone).

These issues are explored further below.

Lesson

In order to disaggregate knowledge products – say on the same theme or issue – for different audiences, sufficient resources are required to fund the production of parallel communication products which, although on the same theme, vary both in content and the form of presentation.

What? Content of the Knowledge Products

As a programme funded by DFID's Research and Evidence Division, a key question for ELLA was the depth of the research that would go into the review of the selected Latin American themes and topics. DFID describes various levels of rigour in producing 'Evidence Papers', as set out in the table below. Again the programme constraints (thematic breadth, time-frame and budget) meant that the level of research conducted for ELLA Knowledge Products tended to those akin to the description of the Literature Review.



	Rapid Review	Literature Review	Evidence Paper	Systematic Review
Description	Quick review of key easily accessible evidence on a particular topic/ research question	<p>Overview of research and synthesis of evidence with key conclusions</p> <p>Indication of areas of consensus and debate</p> <p>Likely to include critical appraisal of research</p> <p>Will include peer-reviewed literature and likely to include grey literature</p>	<p>Extensive overview of available and accessible evidence</p> <p>Balanced assessment and critical appraisal of evidence in an objective manner</p> <p>Will include a substantial range of peer reviewed literature and likely to include significant grey literature</p>	<p>Exhaustive and robust review and synthesis of evidence</p> <p>Includes map of evidence, critical appraisal and synthesis of results</p> <p>Will include all peer-reviewed and significant grey literature</p> <p>Criteria (e.g. quality, date range, method) applied to select the evidence to be synthesised</p>
Time	2-5 days	2 weeks – 3 months	2-5 months	6-12 months

Source: DFID Guide version 0; MH/RM/LF 28/7/11

Another key consideration was the extent to which ELLA should focus on established, tried and tested policies and programmes vs. novel, innovative initiatives. The former are much more likely to have been adequately researched, and reported, including for impact evidence, but are also likely to be more widely known across the globe. The latter are less likely to be known about, but are highly unlikely to have generated much in the way of rigorous research, and time frames will often have been too short to assess impact, even where the themes lend themselves to such measurement.

We ‘characterised’ the type of experiences under review as innovative, promising or proven – as set out in the table below.



	POLICY/PRACTICE/EXPERIENCE		
	INNOVATIVE	PROMISING	PROVEN
Description	Recent innovations	Piloted and brought to scale in some cases	Tried and tested, scaled up – well researched
Number of Example Cases	Could be only one	A few cases	Maybe ten plus
Length of Implementation	Less than 2-3 years	Perhaps 4-5 years old	Ten years plus
Expected amount of 'Research' evidence available, including on impact	Likely to be weak/ limited	Promising but incomplete	Strong
Examples	Rights Based Budgeting	Payments for Environmental Services	Conditional Cash Transfer programmes

Source: own elaboration

To some extent, which type of experience is selected is a matter of the programme objectives. But based on discussions with potential knowledge users, we also hypothesised – as a 'caricature' – the possible interests of different audiences in these different types of experience, as below.

	AUDIENCE		
	GOVERNMENT	CIVIL SOCIETY	RESEARCHER
Which audience is most interested in Innovative? (caricature)	Recent innovations	Piloted and brought to scale in some cases	Tried and tested, scaled up – well researched
Which audience is most interested in Promising? (caricature)	Most interested - Governments are keen on policies and practices which are newish (making a difference) but also reasonably proven	Somewhat interested	Somewhat interested
Which audience is most interested in Proven? (caricature)	Somewhat interested – in order to validate existing policy and practice	Least interested – they have likely already moved on	Most interested – researchers focused on most robust evidence

Source: own elaboration



Based on the K* literature and discussions with potential users, we also put together an (incomplete) characterisation of the variations in the content that different audiences might be looking for.

	AUDIENCE		
	GOVERNMENT	CIVIL SOCIETY	RESEARCHER
What kind of information are they most interested in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What policies or programmes were implemented • Impact and results of those policies and programmes • Policy decisions, trade-offs • Policy implementation (more for advisors) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How policies or programmes were implemented • How-to guide, step-by-step information, practical • Challenges, obstacles • Advocacy for policy reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How policies or programmes were implemented • How-to guide, step-by-step information, practical • Challenges, obstacles • Advocacy for policy reform
What kind of results are they most interested in (not considering the robustness of those results)?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost-benefit analysis • Speed with which results achieved • Impact on specific populations (though governments and civil society might be interested in different populations) • Ratio of impact on target groups and general population 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact on specific populations (though governments and civil society might be interested in different populations) • Negative impacts, unintended affects 	Not specific – depends on research question
What kind of hyperlinks for more information?	<p>Senior officials won't open links. Advisors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probably same as Practitioners, though also: • Publications; policy analysis, policy implementation, impacts and results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations – want to know who is doing what • Publications – how-to guides, case studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Publications – evidence pieces, mostly peer reviewed or otherwise 'rigorous'
What kind of Spotlights most useful?	<p>Senior officials probably won't use. Advisors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Probably same as Practitioners, though also: • Publications: policy analysis, policy implementation, impacts and results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations of practitioners – who is doing what • Advocacy organisations • Publications – how-to guides, case studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisations – research • Publications – mostly peer reviewed or otherwise 'rigorous'
Ideal Page Length	1-2pp Senior Official 4pp Advisors	4pp	8pp+

Source: own elaboration



We trialled some Knowledge Products in 2011, and sought feedback from users during a Latin American partners visit to Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and India. Meetings were held with groups from government, the research community, civil society and the private sector.

The feedback from the Visit on the nature of the knowledge materials included the following:

- Materials must relate to demand needs
- Make them specific, practical, useful, with sufficient detail
- Should focus on How To/ the political economy of achieving things
- Make them actor-oriented: who did what to achieve change
- Avoid excessive 'techno-managerial' focus on the What
- Case studies useful
- Interest in how Latin America has learnt from failure
- Interest more in practice than (high level) policy
- More in How rather than What
- Nature of product: practical

One of the issues raised is an interest in learning about Latin American 'failures' as well as 'successes'. In general however ELLA tended to seek out good policies and good practice, to stimulate a positive focus and interest in the 'successful'. In our failure to document failure, we have exposed ourselves to the same criticism as much of the Development industry. In mitigation, we should recognise that many of the Latin American policies reviewed – e.g. in the management of the extractive industries – are very far from being best practice.

Lesson

Different audiences are likely to want very different content in their knowledge products – both the type of development experience reported, and the detailed content on that experience



How? Format of Knowledge Products

The decision was taken early in the ELLA programme to produce ‘communication products’ rather than ‘research products’ i.e. short, accessible products written in a simple, lively style, with strong narrative lines as opposed to lengthy, detailed research reports which are strong on research methodology. This reflected the desire to reach decision makers, who it is understood do not read the lengthy research reports that are more appropriate to researchers and academics.

With hindsight, this ‘short cut’ proved to be immensely challenging. The Latin American Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) had both to synthesise the available evidence on a particular topic, in principle from across Latin America, *and* reduce this synthesis down into a short, punchy communication product – *in one step*. In the event, rolling these two actions or steps into one proved challenging for the RCEs, and complicated quality control. Ex-post we believe that the writing-up process needs to be broken down into two stages: first, the production of a research paper, to ensure academic rigour; and second the production of the communication product, to promote excellence in communication.

Lesson

In seeking to synthesize research on an issue, and to ensure its accessibility to, and use by, decision makers, it is almost certainly helpful to break down production and formatting into a two stage process: initially, production in a research paper format; and secondly, the translation of this into one or more communication products.

For the format of the Knowledge Products, we reviewed good practice among the consortium partners and development research organisations such as IDS, ODI, and CGD. For each Knowledge theme, we determined to produce a Guide, Briefs on specific issues within the theme, and Spotlights on Publications and Organisations, summarising the principal literature on the issue and the main organisations researching the theme.

The Guides and the Briefs were structured along similar lines, with:

- A title, and teaser
- A Summary, with Key Lessons
- A specification of the developmental problem/challenge or research question, addressed in the theme, as relevant to both Latin America and countries in Sub/Saharan Africa and South Asia alike – termed the Common Problem



- The Policy and Programme response in Latin America, together with the available evidence on outcomes and impacts
- The Context for this Latin American experience – the Enabling Factors that underlay the experience and outcomes in Latin America
- Conclusions, Lessons Learned

The target length for the Briefs was around 2000-2500 words, some four pages in length, and for the Guide approximately double this. The Spotlights summaries were each of one paragraph in length.

Did we get the combination of products and the formatting right?

Focus Group Feedback on KPs

During the Learning Alliance Study Tour visits to Peru and Mexico, we conducted focus group discussions on the Knowledge Products with African and Asian study tour participants. The focus groups largely consisted of members of civil society with some representation from research, the private sector and government – and comments should be read in that light – but they nevertheless provided some good qualitative feedback from users on how the KPs are perceived:

Objectives:

- The ELLA KPs work very well as introductory texts – and their real impact is in spurring new ideas and ways of thinking. This ultimately will have an impact on policies and programmes, but this is unlikely to happen directly in terms of a direct transfer or translation from Latin America to Africa/Asia
- Participants suggested the goal for the KPs should be to achieve resonance for readers – which may be achieved in just one small part of a KP – to encourage learning and to stimulate new ways of thinking. This is what the KPs achieve (though it is difficult to measure this)
- The texts are not sufficient, lengthy nor detailed enough to be able to take firm policy actions, say, based on the KPs alone. Even if they were very detailed, many other factors come into play in, for example, shaping policy
- Policymakers want very short briefs with very simple messages, “in their own language i.e. demonstrating the benefit for their constituencies”



- When dealing with policy, it is good to show a range of policy options where this makes sense

KP formats:

- The package of Guide-Briefs-Spotlights is welcome. Each complements the others. They are a tool-kit to be drawn upon for different occasions. The hyperlinking and Spotlights on Knowledge were particularly useful, especially for researchers, and the Spotlights on Organisations help networking
- The length and format of the briefs was also viewed favourably: not too long (4pp is ideal, 6pp is max for most people), well laid out and easy to read.
- The Lessons Learnt section is very important, but could contain more on problems encountered and on failures

Content of KPs:

- The Contextual issues and enabling factors section is key. Latin America's context is very different and policies cannot be analysed without understanding the context. For some, this was the most important part of the KPs and should be dealt with in more detail. One commented that in forwarding to colleagues, she sometimes added more on the context
- African and Asian decision makers are indeed interested in learning from Latin America, but knowledge about Latin America is more helpful when it is integrated with knowledge from closer to home, more linked to local contexts. This should be considered in the future
- The Briefs could contain more on the challenges and processes, on the How Latin America got from A to B
- Participants particularly liked case study briefs. Some preferred detailed individual case studies, others a range of cases in less detail and others a policy brief backed with say two cases. This did depend on audience and purpose, and a mix was probably the right approach

Summary:

- Continue to include innovative experiences within the range of lessons shared from Latin America – despite the inherent lack of evaluation evidence – as new experiences are often a source of inspiration and thinking for readers



- Maintain the format of the set of KPs (Guide, Briefs, Spotlights) as this seems to work, while recognising that the Policy Briefs are suitable for the advisers to policymakers rather than the policymakers themselves
- Focus on greater development of the section in the KPs that deal with the Contextual issues/ Enabling factors

Lesson

Fine-tuned formatting of knowledge products, to reach different audiences, is the ideal: resources are needed to achieve this. The standard four page brief probably works best for advisers and programme managers, but is too long for senior policy makers and likely too lacking in detail for researchers.

Policy makers (in Africa or Asia) require integration of the local context into briefing material from Latin America, for the products to be more useful

Production of the KPs: general

The production of ELLA knowledge products was designed as a three stage process: agenda-setting, research, and writing and editing. The first phase of agenda setting involved establishing the core framework for the theme, produced by the RCE, which was then shared with the four sets of Demand Brokers for their review and commentary on the content and issues to be addressed in the theme. The second phase required the RCE to undertake the identification, collation and synthesis on the available evidence on a theme. The third phase involved the RCE in writing up the Knowledge Product, and a key role played by the PAC ELLA Knowledge Communications Officer in editing the output into a functioning communication product.

Given the target number of themes we agreed to cover, and the 24-27 month time frame for the ELLA programme, we initially programmed some three months for each theme, with each RCE covering some seven themes, 21 themes in total. In practice, this proved too short a timetable for the typical production target of one Guide, four Briefs and Spotlights on some 20-30 publications and some 10 research organisations. More typically, production on one theme took six months or more, so RCEs were working on two or three themes simultaneously.

Determining a clear agenda, undertaking a Latin America-wide review of literature, and in particular the writing up of evidence and lessons in communication product format proved to be challenging. The type of



end product was foreign to some of the RCE researchers, and time and resources were invested in building skills in these areas. In retrospect, however all the implementing partners believe we should have devoted more time and resources to this.

Lesson

Set aside adequate time and budget to skills and capacity development when researchers are expected to depart significantly from their normal line of business.

Production: agenda setting

For each theme chosen, the first stage was to firm up the focus of the theme and the component parts to be researched. RCEs proposed a framework which was put to the Demand Brokers thematic experts for their review – to highlight the issues that were most pertinent to the three or so countries in their region that formed the ELLA target group of 12 countries. One problem here was that for a group of countries as diverse as India, Rwanda and Ghana, there were widely competing claims on the agenda, so choices had to be made, to avoid a shopping list of issues to be covered. In part, the choice was shaped by the ‘supply offer’ from Latin America. One key consideration was how widely to cast a given theme, and with hindsight, we found that we tended to go rather too widely in response to the broad demands. This made it difficult to produce a tight set of briefing documents, and we believe we should have focused each theme and brief on a narrower research question, to ensure focus in the output.

Lesson

In producing knowledge briefing documents, be sure to consider very carefully the breadth of the research issue to be addressed: probably best to err on the side of a narrow research question.

Production: researching

The starting place for this stage is the decision on the intensity and comprehensives of the research. Within the resources and timeframe available, we targeted research approaching literature review standard (as above). The review covered source material available in Spanish, Portuguese and English (and in principle



any language). For the Guide and Briefs, we particularly sought out material in Spanish or Portuguese - this being one of the perceived barriers to accessing knowledge from Latin America. In practice, there were several challenges to achieving a comprehensive literature.

First, in many Latin American countries, there is a strong tradition of publishing research as books, with many of these books only available in hard copy. So to conduct a thorough literature review across Latin America requires access to an excellent library, which was not always possible. Researching hard copy material is also more time-intensive, complicating the task. The lack of easily available material in digital format raises considerable challenges for a programme such as ELLA.

Secondly, for those themes that tended to the new/innovative end of the spectrum, there was relatively limited research material available. This not only extended to a lack of data available on *impacts* of policies and programmes, but also to the existence of primary research of any sort. Thus in some cases, it was necessary to conduct some limited primary research, although this had not been the initial intention of the programme.

Thirdly language issues were a challenge as noted above. A specific problem in accessing Latin America-wide material is the Spanish-Portuguese divide, which despite the linguistic similarities, remains a cultural dividing line in many Latin American studies.

Lesson

A comprehensive literature review across a continent, in this case, Latin America presents significant logistical challenges – non-availability of digital material, multiple languages, problems of scarcity of quality materials in some cases – and these should be accepted and factored in to ambitions and the choice of themes

Production: writing up

The ELLA proposal was to produce short, punchy communication products that could tell a nuanced story on the successes and limitations of Latin American policies and programmes on the different themes. The production of such briefing material is a challenge in any context. Some academics are averse to producing such materials, arguing that their research should not be reduced down to short documents which oversimplify the arguments. Others accept the challenge but find it difficult to meet, as often it requires a form of writing for which they are not equipped.



For many of the researchers in the ELLA Research Centres of Expertise, writing up in the briefing format was a new and challenging experience. This was further complicated because, after an initial trial in which the authors wrote in their own language followed by translation and editing, we switched to asking the authors to write directly in English. This was mainly because the writing and the editing, for the format required, were intimately related; and if we did this first in Spanish/Portuguese and then in English, both the writing and editing would be doubled up, creating an unsustainable workload. But this decision certainly created an additional challenge for the researchers.

Essentially, demanding these outputs from Latin American researchers meant that capacity had to be built over time, beginning with initial training workshop and then through continued practice and feedback from the PAC knowledge communication team. The researchers who successfully built this talent feel as though they have gained considerably from this examination and skills development.

Lesson

Writing effective communication products is an acquired skill. Either contract this out to specialists or be prepared to invest in skills development, and continuous support and feedback over time to develop researchers' skills.

Quality control, peer review

In the case of ELLA, products were peer reviewed internally within each Regional Centre of Expertise, by PAC for communication content and technical content in areas of Practical Action group expertise, and following publication by external peer reviewers whose reviews are also published on the ELLA site.

We decided on ex-post peer reviews, partly because of the accelerated time frame of the programme, and partly because we judged there was intrinsic value in the public airing of academic debate on many of the ELLA themes, especially on the more contested themes such as those on the extractive industries.

Dissemination

Production is of no use without effective dissemination, a task which was made more challenging for an ELLA 'brand' which needed development over time, as a trusted source of valuable research knowledge, evidence and lessons.

We used a range of methods to disseminate our products, including:



- ELLA website: as principal 'home' repository
- ELLA consortium partner websites
- ELLA social media sites, including Facebook which we promoted using FB targeted advertising (at minimal cost), and Twitter
- Sharing sites such as Scribd (for pdf files) and Delicious
- Development knowledge repositories, including DFID's R4D and IDS' Eldis
- Development knowledge sharing sites such as Zunia
- An extensive list of thematic organisations sites, such as GOXI (governance of Extractive Industries) or the IBP (International Budget Partnership)
- Direct mail-outs of bulletins to data bases of people and organisations who have been involved in and/or have an interest in ELLA – in particular in the ELLA target countries

There is always more that can be done to disseminate more widely and we have plans to do more to ensure that our products have reached the resource centres (universities and think tanks) and other targeted users in ELLA target countries, through direct circulation.

We experimented a little with Facebook advertising and found this to be a good low cost means of reaching out to target groups in Africa and Asia. For a while this was a good referral source to the main ELLA site, though (opaque) changes to FB's business model seems to have had some impact on this. Google searches are the principle source of referrals to the ELLA site and we experimented with Google 'adwords' for a short while, but concluded that this was not good value for money.

Where possible we have teamed up with other knowledge repositories to house or link to ELLA knowledge materials, though interestingly at least one was not keen on housing the large quantity of ELLA output without a fee. The K* business can show its competitive side, driven by survival instincts.

In two years of publishing output, downloads of ELLA material have reached over 150,000. ELLA material is made available freely – open access – and a Google search indicates a wide range of sites where ELLA material is available (See Monitoring and Evaluation Report).



E. Facilitating Learning - Online

Design: online course vs. community of practice

The learning alliances were designed with two principle objectives (1) to support a learning process – the access and absorption of knowledge about Latin America, and its interpretation, adjustment and applicability to other country contexts, and (2) to provide a framework for networking between individuals and organisations in Africa and Asia with their counterparts in Latin America.

With this in view, the learning alliances were designed as a hybrid between an online course and a community of practice. The course followed a structured, time bound curriculum, led by the Moderator from the Latin America RCE. The community of practice was promoted through the participants sharing of their own country contexts and experiences in response to the curriculum – as well as in the networking facility, where members were free to post on any issues related to the theme of the alliance.

This two-fold design had its inherent tensions. An online course will follow a fairly fixed curriculum, it is directive and more one-way (teacher-pupil) – which met the ELLA objective of sharing Latin American evidence and lessons with professionals in Africa and Asia. A community of practice is typically a more open forum, with more scope to influence content, it is 'horizontal' and the exchange is very definitely two- or multi-way. The community approach was essential for the multi-way discussion, comparing and contrasting of different country contexts and experiences with those in Latin America – as well as to facilitate networking between members.

Some dimensions of this tension:

- At several moments, observers and participants noted that Africa and /or South Asia had many lessons to teach Latin America, so the learning alliances should be a two/multi-way exchange
- We had to provide the right degree of flexibility regarding the curriculum: in the first round of learning alliances, we perhaps gave the impression that there was more room for participants to shape the agenda than there was, with a four week inception phase to allow for this. In the second round, we were more directive and clear about the fact that the curriculum was largely fixed
- In the moderation and summing up of discussions, the issue arose as to whether the RCE Moderator adopted the role of expert (moderator of an online course) or facilitator (of a 'horizontal' community of practice). In the event, the balance of participants expressed a preference for the expert moderator, bringing together the arguments and drawing together the conclusions
- The presentation of material in the learning alliance was weighted towards Latin America, as the Latin America RCEs were resourced to provide this, while the presentation of African and Asian material relied entirely upon participants. This pushed the learning alliance more towards the online course, but in many cases, contributions from members in practice did ensure a good balance in the agenda



When designing the learning alliances, during visits to Kenya, Ghana, South Africa and India, we received the following feedback from potential participants on the ideal for a community of practice:

- For successful learning, participants will need to 'own' the process
- Participants need to be involved, set the agenda, to have a clear stake
- Some 'champions' may lead and get wider groups involved
- People will want to learn from each other, within country, within the continent and from Latin America
- Participants will want to see a result: a clear learning goal and clear process for getting there
- Need for a definition of critical learning points
- But the process must be two-way: not just about learning from Latin America. Also the case that Latin America will learn from Africa and Asia
- Mix of methods proposed for Learning Alliances – online exchange, question and answer sessions, online conference etc – will work
- Posted questions must get answers, active moderation
- Key will be to sustain participants' interest: a real challenge in all online learning/ exchange groups

Overall, we concluded that we did largely manage to reconcile the one-way vs. two/multi-way inherent tension in the alliances. Despite the Latin America push, most of the learning alliances were successful multi-way exchanges. Nevertheless, in an unconstrained environment, greater prior resourcing, research, material and understanding of the issues and the environment in the contrasting contexts - Latin America vs. African vs. South Asian, and ideally at country-level - would have permitted a richer multi-way dialogue and greater exchange of lessons.



Lesson

Sharing lessons between regions is most naturally fostered as a two or multi-way process of exchange. But sensitive attention to the delivery of the learning and exchange can still successfully promote the 'export' of lessons from one region, in programmes such as ELLA

Other design considerations

Thematic breadth. Achieving the appropriate range of issues to be covered within the learning alliance theme was not easy. Where we went wide, it was the case that some participants were only interested in some of the modules. But if we narrowed the curriculum too much, it was likely that the learning alliance would have less appeal to the broad set African and South Asian countries targeted by ELLA. On balance we felt that we should have gone narrower and deeper in order to treat issues in sufficient depth, though this would have required a more intense exercise to engage the right potential participants (see below).

Size of alliance: number of members. DFID was keen that we should reach out to a sizeable number of people (target of 1000-1500 in the logical framework). We had some concerns that (a) if the learning alliance became too large, it would become too difficult to moderate and (b) that participants may be more active in smaller like-minded groups. In the event, the learning alliances varied in size from 200 to 450 members, and with active contribution rates in the range of 10-15%, with an equivalent percentage of occasional contributors, these numbers proved manageable for the Moderators, though slightly less so for the participants (see below).

Length of learning programme. We designed the learning phase of the first round of three alliances to last five to six months: three modules, each with five or six topics, each lasting a week or so. The concept was that the alliances would be relatively 'slow burn', requiring commitment of about an hour or so per week from participants. After this first round, we concluded that this was too long: demands on participants were too great over too long a period, and participation rates fell off significantly in the last module. In the second round, we shortened the learning curriculum to three months, which proved more successful.

Pace and demands of the learning phase. In line with the design, throughout most of the alliances, the RCE moderators maintained a regular routine of posting a topic each week, with related reading (and video) material, and two or so questions for that week's discussion. Participants had one week to respond, and interact with each other and the Moderator, after which the Moderator would post conclusions, which were also open to comment. However at the same time as (or indeed 2-3 days before) the Conclusions from Week One were posted, the topic for Week Two was launched. So in effect there were overlapping Discussions.



We never fully resolved whether this was the right pace at which to run the learning alliance. The weekly rhythm kept up the pace of new ideas and materials, it appealed to many people especially those who were more office bound (not on field trips), and it stopped the alliance from becoming too long and drawn out. On the other hand, the pace was demanding, most people reported that a minimum two hours a week was needed to keep up (read materials, others' comments and make a contribution), and absences from the office/ the internet meant that some also fell behind. It is possible that a slower pace covering less ground may have worked better.

Learning Methodology. The core of the methodology was a series of topics for discussion. The Moderator introduced the topic (often with a short video), provided resource materials, and posed questions, typically on the lines of requesting members to compare and contrast the situation in their countries with that in Latin America, in an attempt to identify possible lines of action to address specific challenges. The initial Moderator's post would trigger the contributions from, and exchanges between, members and active moderation from the RCE. Each discussion was wrapped up with Moderator written conclusions, which were left open for a second round of commenting – though typically this attracted many fewer comments, given that the alliance was already moving on to the next discussion (see above). In general, this methodology worked well (subject to previous observations). One issue was the amount of supporting material provided. In some of the alliances, we probably provided too much and should have done more to highlight the priority or critical texts.

Lesson

The design of an online learning course cum community of practice needs careful consideration of many factors including thematic breadth/content, intended size of the community, the length and pace of the learning programme, and the learning methodology

Participant identification and selection

We advertised the learning alliances through the ELLA consortium of partners – the contacts of the Latin American RCEs and the African and South Asian Demand brokers – through global and regional networks and organisations working on the learning alliance themes, and through the social media. The Demand Brokers – and their contacts data base – played a key role in ensuring that we reached out to potential participant from the ELLA target countries, and we were successful in doing so: 59% of participants came from these countries overall and another 21% from Latin America.



Applicants filled in a short online application form. In the second round of alliances, we designed a rather more detailed online form for completion, as part of raising the bar for applications, to screen out less committed applicants: in the first round of alliances, more than a quarter of members were accepted into the alliance but never participated. As the core of the alliance was a learning programme, late applications, beyond the deadline, were not accepted unless there were exceptional arguments. For the six alliances overall there were some 2470 online applicants, of which some 1650 were accepted. In screening the applications, we aimed for people who were working on the theme within organisations working on the theme; from a mix of sector backgrounds (government, civil society, research, private sector); of mid to higher level seniority. The quality of their applications was also a consideration. Applications from the target countries were favoured.

Whether to have participants from a mix of sector backgrounds and seniority was the subject of some debate in the design. We followed the recipe of seeking mixed perspectives, and the assumption that discussions will be richer with varied views from different organisational perspectives. But there are arguments for more homogeneous groups, in which participants are closely matched with their peers, and feel part of a like-minded community, encouraging more participation in the group.

In the event, we attracted professionals from across the organisational spectrum. Representatives of civil society were the largest group (43%) – especially for the governance topics which had a strong civil society flavour – followed by researchers (22%), government officials (15%), the private sector (6%), donors (3%), media (1%) and independents (10%).

We assumed in design that take-up from government officials was likely to be lower: possibly less commitment to open exchange in community forums, stronger institutional incentives elsewhere, potentially less IT access and time. And we largely designed the National Learning Groups (see below) to address this. However a review of the top (30) contributors to the learning alliances showed that although almost a half are from civil society, one sixth are from government. Excluding the two governance LEAs, contribution is more evenly spread among sectors:

Spread of Top Contributors by Organisational Sector

%	Civil Society	Government	Research	Other*	Total
All LEAs	47	18	18	17	100
Excluding Governance LEAs	33	23	23	22	100

Source: ELLA statistics

* Private sector, independents, media, donors



An analysis of top contributors by age group shows that this closely correlates with the membership population. It seems the technology challenge does not undermine contributions from older age groups, nor does the issue of experience impede contributions from younger groups, or possibly these two factors cancel each other out.

Spread of Membership and Top Contributors by Age Group

%	<25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56+	All
Membership	4	38	32	19	7	100
Top Contributors	2	41	30	21	6	100

Source: ELLA statistics

Lesson

On balance, it is practical to aim for learning communities which are made up of people from across the spectrum of organisational backgrounds (government, civil society, research community etc.)

Moderation of the Alliance

A great deal has been written about the art of moderating communities of practice or learning communities, with the aim of raising the quantity and quality of the interactions between members. So we will be brief here. In the big picture it is very desirable to have moderators who have both the technical expert skills and knowledge, AND good facilitation skills, combined with a professional commitment to ensuring the learning and exchange remains on target on schedule (not easy given the demands of the task). In general we felt we managed to respond to this challenge. Our focus group discussions revealed the following picture:

Focus Group Feedback on Learning Alliance Moderation

During two of the study tours, our focus groups discussions on the management and moderation of the online LEA, the following main points came up:

- Be very clear from the beginning about the learning goals



- Ensure you adhere to a regular routine of publishing the (weekly) Discussion Posts and Analyses, sticking to deadlines for Contributions
- Set discussion questions which call for reflections – rather than just a list of position statements from different countries – not only on the Moderator’s presentation and questions, but also on other participants’ contributions, encouraging inter-activity among members
- Avoid over-loading members with too much essential reading
- Encourage contributions from Latin Americans (beyond the RCE) alongside those from Africa and Asia
- Be pro-active in moderation: a regular presence, responsive, answering questions during or at the end of the week, commenting on contributions and stimulating further debate
- Produce clear, crisp, timely analysis at the end of each week’s discussion
- Be pro-active with members in encouraging use of both the Learning and Networking Pages, clearly distinguishing their distinct purposes

During the course of the learning alliances, we also twice asked an external consultant to review our performance and make recommendations:

External Consultant Recommendations on ELLA Learning Alliance Moderation

First round of Learning Alliances:

- Be sure to introduce the supporting material
- Ensure an active Moderator presence – not only quantity, but also quality
- Be collegial and personal in tone, pick up on relevant issues, ask question, motivate participation.
- It is not enough to refer back to the initial questions: let the dialogue develop, keep an eye out for emerging issues that you have not thought of



- Be timely in responses, reacting quickly to interesting responses
- Be personal and engaging, to encourage identification of issues
- Should be dialogue, two-way, not just answering questions
- Be sure summaries acknowledge participants
- Allow time for 'Catch up weeks'

Second round of Alliances:

- Clearer introduction of moderating team and guidelines
- Reinforce guidelines and curriculum at outset: it is insufficient to just post attachments
- Make greater use of the good resource materials, exploit them more
- Moderator: keep up frequency, guide discussion, picking up relevant issues, ask follow up questions
- Allow degree of flexibility to take-up emerging issues
- Try to respond to all lines of enquiry
- Get participants to describe any attachments they enclose
- Weekly summaries should reflect process as well as content
- Consider more variety in tasks

Lesson

Moderating an online community learning programme is fun and rewarding, but it is very demanding: dealing with a large number of varied contributions from different country context and sector perspectives, playing a proactive role in the discussion, responding to new issues as they arise, keeping to deadlines, and turning out summaries on time



Online Learning Alliances outcomes

So how successful were the online learning alliances? The ELLA Monitoring and Evaluation Report provides details on the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the online activities. But here in summary, are a few results:

- Considerable demand exist for participation in this type of exchange and learning programmes
- Log-in and contribution rates were reasonable (as follows), improving during the second round of learning alliances (LEAs 4, 5 and 6) compared to the first (LEA1, 2 and 3), as we learnt lessons:

	LEA1 Extractive Industries	LEA2 Citizen Oversight	LEA3 Adaptation in Arid Regions	LEA4 Small-scale Farming	LEA5 Human Rights	LEA6 Climate Resilient Cities
Number of members	245	241	438	259	191	268
Logins (% members)						
Never	27	25	28	20	18	18
Occasional (1-9)	45	51	51	39	46	48
Regular (10+)	28	24	21	41	36	34
Contributions to Discussion (of members)						
Some (1-3)	22	22	25	31	31	28
Occasional (4-9)	7	9	10	18	12	9
Regular (10+)	9	11	8	15	18	17
At least once	38	42	43	64	61	54

Source: ELLA statistics

- Many of the discussions proved very enriching: the discussions have been summarised in a set of Learning Alliance Highlights for each Learning Alliance, available on the ELLA website



F. Learning Alliance: Face to Face Activities

In designing the Learning Alliances, we recognised that a key class of people that we were trying to reach might be less likely to engage in an online learning community; and also that (virtual, remote) online learning would preferably be complemented by face to face experience of the lessons from Latin America. So we built in two further components into the design of the learning alliances: National Learning Groups in selected countries; and a study tour to Latin America for selected high performance members of the alliance.

National Learning Groups

For each learning alliance, we identified between one and three countries (out of the targeted 12) where our research indicated that there would be the strongest demand for knowledge from Latin America on certain themes. This was more evident for some themes, such as the extractive industries, than others e.g. smallholder farming, which was potentially relevant to all the target countries.

Learning Alliance	NLG Country
LEA1: Extractive Industries	Ghana, Tanzania, India
LEA2: Citizen Oversight	South Africa, Nepal
LEA3: Dry-lands Climate Adaptation	Ghana, Kenya, Zimbabwe
LEA4: Small-scale Farming	Rwanda, Nepal
LEA5: Human Rights	South Africa
LEA6: Climate Resilient Cities	Bangladesh

In these countries, we offered an in-country series of five to six National Learning Group (NLG) meetings, which broadly followed the curriculum and timetable of the online learning alliance. The NLGs were specifically designed to reach out to those who might be reluctant or less able to engage in online learning, and to offer a richer learning experience to those who might engage both on- and off-line. In the former category, we had in mind government officials, especially more senior officials, a key target group for the sharing of evidence and lessons from Latin America.

Other design features of the NLGs included the following:

- Prior analysis of the country context, to identify the issues
- An attempt to get good representation from government, but also more widely from other organisations
- Aiming for a core group of 10-15 members



- Local expert facilitation
- Video conferencing link to the Latin American RCE
- As with the online alliance, a focus on comparing and contrasting the Latin American experience with that in the given country, to stimulate ideas about policy and programme actions
- An objective that the learning and discussions would lead to actions

Lessons drawn following the first round of Learning Alliance NLGs

- Be sure to agree on clear learning goals for the NLG meeting series, focused on the key issues and needs faced in the NLG country and individual NLG member needs - using the Context Papers that have been prepared by the Thematic Experts
- Focus the meeting series, to go for depth over breadth, where possible structuring the series around the core unifying theme
- Five meetings are planned for each NLG: the first will be introductory, discussing and agreeing on the main issues, and setting learning goals; the second, third and fourth will tackle three core sub-themes; and the fifth will be for gap filling, summarising, drawing conclusions and agreeing actions
- In each meeting, the Thematic Expert facilitator should work hard to integrate fully the RCE joining by video-conference (VC) – and the technology should be well set-up to support this
- Always have a Plan B in case the technology fails, ensuring prior circulation of all materials
- In addition to their own experts, RCEs should look to field other Latin Americans to contribute by VC to the NLG discussions, as has been done successfully in some cases
- NLG members to be encouraged to go online where possible, so that they can access all LEA materials and discussions, and have the opportunity to participate online

In practice, despite the guidance, the NLGs did present a number of practical and logistical challenges:

- Tailoring the Learning Alliance knowledge supply to the very specific needs of different countries was challenging in resource terms for the RCEs



- Achieving good levels of attendance – at a physical meeting, lasting two plus hours (plus travel) at a set time – required careful work and planning: much easier for people to tune into an online community at a convenient time of one’s own choosing, for as long as they wanted, focused on their own particular needs
- This resulted in some churning of membership of the NLGs, introducing some inefficiency into delivery
- Given the time differences between South Asia, Africa and Latin America, finding a good time that worked for everyone was very difficult. There were many early starts for the RCEs
- The contact with the RCEs relied on the quality of the internet connection chain. A Plan B fall-back was essential for all meetings

Interestingly the absence of local coordination fora on some of the learning alliance themes meant that members were often meeting for the first time to discuss the issues raised by the alliance. This was appreciated by members, though this did not easily facilitate a focus on lessons from Latin America. Conversations in some cases ensued in the local language adding another level of complexity to the exchange.

Despite the challenges, the NLGs pursued useful lines of enquiry that resulted in actions in different countries: contributions to the Kenyan Climate Change Action Plan, setting up a think tank on the extractive industries in Tanzania, networking on transparency and Freedom of Information issues in Southern Africa, to name a few (See the ELLA M&E report for more details).

Lesson

Arranging in-country meetings connected by VC to another continent raises particular challenges relating to timing, technology, the convenience for participants, and resource intensity. But with adequate resourcing and careful planning they can be made to work.

Study tours

As part of its package, each learning alliance offered the possibility of a study tour to Latin America for high-performing individuals. Six study tours duly took place, each with some 12 members from across the learning alliance membership countries:

	Learning Alliance	Tour to:
First round: November 2012	Extractive Industries	Peru
	Citizen Oversight	Mexico
	Climate Adaptation in Dry Lands	Brazil
Second round: May 2013	Small-scale Farming	Peru
	Promoting Human Rights	Mexico
	Climate Resilient Cities	Brazil



The design and implementation of study tours is a complex operation, and this section will not do justice to the issues. Rather it seeks to pull out some main lessons. The design needed to address the core process, learning methodologies, one vs. two way considerations, and the length and size of the study tour.

Core process. The overall objective was a learning goal: to learn from Latin America's experiences so that this knowledge could be used and assimilated into decision making processes 'back home', in the broadest sense. This would be achieved by participants:

- Preparing carefully for the study tour
- First-hand exposure to the Latin American experiences studied during the online learning alliance – to 'see, feel and touch' these experiences
- Sufficient time and space to reflect upon these experiences, consider them critically in relation to the situation in their own countries
- Time for a plan of action subsequent to the study tour

Learning methodologies. Reflecting the above objectives, participants were requested to prepare their own learning goals in relation to the study tour objectives and programme, and learning materials for the tour activities were sent to participants ahead of the visit (See below, on Preparation).

During the study visit, the core learning methodology involved ensuring sufficient time both to reach out to the Latin American organisations, policy makers and programmes that members visited – and to think about, reflect on, and discuss what they had seen and heard, and what the implications were for their own countries and their own work 'back home'.

When taking people to the other side of the world, at some considerable expense, there is a big temptation to pack the agenda and to expose people to as many experiences as possible. But it is vital that participants have enough 'down time' to think and reflect – and to record this – during the course of the tour itself. This process of internalising knowledge and understanding is key in the learning process and has to be protected.

One way vs. 'two' way exchange, and networking. Although the study tours were clearly advertised as an opportunity to learn about what is happening in Latin America, some participants were keen to continue the two- (multi-) way exchange aspect of the online learning alliance, and present on their own countries' experience. Country perspectives were important for the exercise to reflect upon and internalise the Latin American experiences, but faced with the practicalities of time constraints, it was important to manage participant expectations on the amount of time available for (long) presentations about their countries: a fine balance.

Size and length of the study tour. These are key considerations, in part determined by resource availability – study tours are expensive. We decided on a group of 12 participants for each tour: partly determined by resources; but also by what we believed was the maximum size of a manageable group, taking into account the additional 4-5 accompanying members (see below). We tested this number out on the first round of study tours and decided that it had worked so repeated the pattern for the second round.



Travelling to Latin America for many participants meant one to two days each way, including awkwardly long waiting times when changing planes. Allowing for travel time, the consideration that many people might find it problematic to get away from their regular work routines for more than two weeks, concerns regarding likely travel and learning fatigue, and factoring in cost, we opted for study tours of up to 10 days. We found that this worked in the first round of study tours and we kept with it for the second round.

Participant selection. The key issues here were what sort of participants we should aim for, how individuals should be selected, and how mixed the group should be.

We were clear that we wanted to attract individuals who would come with an open and fresh mind to this learning opportunity, but who were also (or could soon be) decision makers in a position to leverage change in their own countries. So we sought out mainly mid- to senior-level officials, principally from government and civil society.

The study tour was competitively advertised among all learning alliance members, requesting applicants to set out their position and work, and how they believed they would benefit from the study tour and be able to use the knowledge gained on return to their countries. Applications were scored against the quality of these proposals; and on the evidence of the individual's past commitment to learning, as measured by their contributions in the online learning alliance (or in the National Learning Group meetings), with this latter attracting the larger weighting.

However, in selecting participants, we also factored in people's likely ability to use the knowledge gained to leverage change in their countries based on their job profiles. Compared to the two other criteria, this is a less obviously transparent criterion, is often difficult to judge, and raises questions about how much weight to give to it. The inside knowledge of the ELLA Demand Brokers was important here – though this could only stretch to 'known' individuals and was still a potential source of tension in the selection process.

The mix of the group - age, seniority, organisational background, culture - presents some interesting challenges. We were committed to attracting a mixed group in the interests of a diversity of views and a richer exchange. For the most part this worked, but two issues are worth noting. First, the mix of seniorities (and the related level of experience) needs consideration, partly due to the expectations of standards, and partly because mixed levels of experience, status and background can raise some tensions.

Secondly, a culturally broad group requires careful planning and preparation on expected 'rules of behaviour' to ensure that people from widely different backgrounds can live and work together harmoniously over 7-10 days of intense activity and interaction.

Lesson

In selecting participants for a study tour, consider criteria carefully: senior officials, with position power to exert change, but with less proven commitment to learning in the alliance; or more junior officials perhaps with the opposite characteristics. The mix of those selected is also an important consideration: diversity or homogeneity?



Study tours are expensive and it is important to ensure that each and every individual is well chosen. Although we did not do this, with hindsight, we think it would have been a worthwhile investment of time to telephone interview the candidates pre-selected for each tour before finalising the offer of a place, to ensure that our shortlisting had been effective.

Preparing participants for the study tour. This involves both practical aspects, and preparation for the learning experience. Because of the sheer amount of logistical juggling to organise a tour to a Latin America country for 12 people from all over the world, it is important to ensure that concern for the practical does not crowd out preparation of the didactic (both before and indeed during the hectic implementation of the tour).

Organising flights and visas is inevitably a challenge. Outsourcing may be a good idea, though we do not do this. Organising visas to Mexico, Brazil and Peru is complicated by the countries generally have limited consular facilities, in Africa especially, and often due to the need for transit visas. About two months minimum is needed between the time of the participant selection and the visit itself to organise visas and travel. Out of 70 participants selected for the six tours, all eventually got the necessary visas, though one was erroneously turned back while en route.

Lesson

In retrospect, it would have been a lower risk strategy to buy all the flights straight away before waiting for visa confirmations – as eventually all participants got visas and waiting until all were confirmed resulted in paying higher prices for 'last minute tickets' in several cases

Other practical considerations relate to:

- Enquiring about personal preferences, diet and health and ensuring that each individual has travel insurance in place, to cover any medicals needs in particular
- Providing practical information on the study tour programme, travel and links to tourist type information what to expect in the Latin American country; and making it clear to participants how arduous (they generally are!) the study tour will be, so that expectations are accurate

To avoid a dispersion of energies on cost issues, care and clarity is needed from the outset over what costs will be covered by the programme and what falls to the participants: international flights, any domestic transport in the origin country, costs en route, visa and visa-related travel costs, insurance, vaccinations, in-country costs in the destination Latin America country etc. Where the dividing line falls is a programme decision, though clarity with participants is key, and limiting expenditures to major items makes for simplicity.



The RCE prior sharing of good learning materials for the in-country learning experience was key to preparing members for the study tour. Participants had been through the online learning programme, but this needed to be complemented with relevant background information on (a) the study tour country itself (b) the specific of the study tour focus and (c) the study tour organisations, people and programmes to be visited. Advance circulation of this material and an expectation that members will be familiar with it on arrival enables the tour to 'hit the ground running'. In practice, an introductory day was scheduled in all cases to go over these materials and other preparatory issues.

Based on this detail, we also asked all selected participants to prepare their own learning goals prior to the visit. We linked up participants before their travel to Latin America, encouraging them to meet where there was more than one member from a given country.

Implementation of the study tour. In line with the learning goals for the tour, the programme was divided between time spent visiting and discussing with external actors, and witnessing their policies and programmes in practice, and time spent as a group discussing and reflecting on the issues. The tours typically began and ended with group days: introductory and concluding sessions. These days were essential. Ideally at the beginning and end of each day, there would be an opportunity to review the learning goal and programme for the day, and at the end of the day an opportunity for reflection.

Packing all this in however could lead to some very long and tiring days, especially where significant travel was involved (e.g. visits to rural areas) and it is important not to fall into the trap of over programming. Where the tour last more than 7 days, and/or involves travel, scheduling in some 'down time' for recuperation is important (a half day or so, in the middle of the tour).

The ELLA study tours involved meetings with government officials, civil society representatives, researchers in some cases – very largely, the peers of the participants on the study tours – as well as the groups of citizens, farmers, local communities, women and men who were the intended beneficiaries of the policies and programmes under study. Care is needed in the preparation of those to be visited, briefing them, and ensuring that an appropriate 'meeting structure' is planned, with enough time for questions and discussion (not just a presentation by the visited organisation).

For most of the study tours, ELLA fielded four or more people to accompany the 12 visitors: one person in charge of logistics, two people in charge of content, and an interpreter. In many senses, the more accompanying the better, but for a group this size, three to four represents a bare minimum. Interpreting should be professional and simultaneous, using headsets.

Follow-up to Study Tours. Prior to departure, on the final day, participants were asked to firm up their action plans on how they were expecting to use the learning – ideally subject to discussion within the group.

Some of the study tour participants have fed back actively on their follow-up activities either through the Networking Pages of the learning alliance, by email or directly to ELLA project management (the Demand Brokers, as well as the RCEs and PAC). In many cases, however, given the diverse origins of many of the participants, it has been less easy to follow up. A strategy which concentrated resources on individuals from fewer countries and organisations would have mitigated this problem to some extent.



Lesson

There are many, many lessons for the successful implementation of a study tour. But perhaps the most important is that the study tour should be seen a knowledge sharing process in all its stages: preparation for the tour, the tour itself and follow-up to the tour. Both organisers and participants need to devote effort and resources to each of the three stages.

ELLA management conclusions after the first round of study tours

Profile of participants and composition of group

Consensus that there are few problems mixing senior with non-senior participants; that a diverse group is good; and that seniority should be sought out because it reflects the ability to make change and have a strong action plan (though non-senior people can also influence change, so they should continue to be included).

Application and selection process

Selection criteria:

- Participation in the LEA
- Action Plan – extent to which the applicant articulates a clear and reasonable plan for effectively using the knowledge gained
- “Reach”/seniority/capacity to carry out action plan – personal characteristics of the applicant that indicate likelihood to make use of knowledge, such as: the person’s position in his or her organization (i.e. seniority); their organization (i.e. the organization itself is well placed to influence change, engaged in many network, public sector policy maker, etc.); or any other personal or organizational characteristics
- Diversity of final group selected: geographic; sector (public sector, CSO, research, private sector); gender



Consider holding individual Skypes with each selected candidate to confirm match with the tour and to manage expectations (will fit this within the established timeline for selection)

Learning Programme: tour design, objectives and purpose

What should be the objective of the tour?

- Main objective is for participants to gain knowledge of Latin America that they can use in their own countries
- The tour objective should be for participants to gain exposure to a variety of experiences, focusing on practical implementation
- A complementary objective: participants share their experiences with each other and with the tour organizers/experts (i.e. two or multi-way learning)

Challenge of the main objective (using knowledge)

- Problem with the objective of using knowledge is that it is difficult to follow-up and 'track' implementation/use
- Other problem is that whether or not they implement is outside of our – and often the participants' – control, i.e. political context, political will, funding
- Given these challenges, tours do need considerable focus throughout the tour on how to use knowledge gained (in the reflection sessions, and in structuring the first and final day)

Should the study tour cover many subthemes or just focus on one theme

- Citizen Oversight – participants had varied interests so it was impossible to make them only focused on one, would not have met all participants interests
- Climate Change Adaptation – no one minded that the first tour covered a broad range of themes, it worked well



- Next round of tours will however be more focused simply because they will hold less meetings – given that the consensus was of too many meeting last time, with insufficient time for reflection

Reflection and learning

Time and resources to be devoted to ensuring good preparation of participants prior to visit, with sufficient background resource materials provided on the country, the theme and the institutions to be visited.

Participants to arrive with well laid out personal plans for learning and how they expect to use their learning, for exchange and discussion on first day

Planning for first day, last days and for reflection during the study tour is vital. Adequate time to be set aside for this.

Learning Programme: tour agenda and structure

Consensus that the study tours were too intensive and that a day off in the middle of the tour is required for any study visit of more than 6 days.

Dealing with participants' tiredness: consider asking them to arrive in country one or more days early, first day is only half day, do half day off in middle, half day at end, do not require them to do dinners together at night, more time off at lunch breaks, start later in the morning

Dealing with participants' other needs, i.e. work, phone calls. Consider: giving all participants a sim card on arrival, half day off in the middle

'Learning into Practice' Awards

To promote the use of knowledge and learning from the ELLA Learning Alliance, 'Learning into Practice' awards of up to \$5000 each were provided, on a competitive basis, for four to five members of each learning alliance. The objective was to fund activities that aimed to inform, influence or change policies or practices, drawing on the knowledge and learning gained from the learning alliance.



The awards were available to fund sharing of ELLA knowledge; exchange and networking with partners; the transformation or adaptation of knowledge; elaboration of policy and practice advice; evidence-based advocacy; programme or project activities.

Awardees were selected on the basis of their proven commitment to ELLA learning and knowledge (past activity levels), the quality of their proposals (use of ELLA knowledge and learning, expected impact, clarity of purpose, cost sharing) and coherence with the work of the individual's employing organisation. Funds were channelled institutionally, 50% in advance and 50% on completion of activities within a six month time horizon.

The awards were able to fund a broad range of activities – and demonstrate the wide variety of good uses that ELLA knowledge and learning is put (See Monitoring and Evaluation Report): from further research and studies, through institutional reorganisation and networking, through to evidence based advocacy. Greater levels of funding for such awards would allow a programme like ELLA to move more along the spectrum from 'knowledge' project to 'development' project, where knowledge is just one project strand.

Lesson

In designing knowledge or research programmes, where the funder emphasises that the research knowledge should be put to good use, agree at the outset on the proportion of funds to be directed at the use of the research knowledge, and where this 'sits' in the logical framework.

G. Networking

The promotion of networking in ELLA was primarily through the learning alliances – online, in the National Learning Groups and through the study tour. The KP Spotlight on Organisations also provides a vehicle for anyone to identify and contact organisations within Latin America.

Facilitating networking is less straight forward than producing knowledge products or running an online learning programme – and success is largely a function of the depth of the relationship that can be established between individuals or organisations. Thus within ELLA, the networking has been most intense and successful between study tour members, NLG members and those exchanging purely online, in that order.

In some cases, study tour members have established continued working relations with the RCEs and Latin American peers, and networking among themselves, especially between study tour members from the same origin country, has been frequent. In the same way, the NLG meetings provided a forum for discussion,



coordination and networking that was on absent on particular themes (e.g. extractive industries, climate resilient cities) in the NLG countries. Online, the Networking Page provides a continued function for members to network, though this has been much less extensively used than the Learning Page.

ELLA learning alliances reached out to a broad and diverse audience, primarily at the level of the individual. An alternative strategy is to narrow down the range and to focus more on networking between organisations – in particular to promote longer term sustainability – but this was beyond the scope of this phase of ELLA.

H. Management

The Consortium

ELLA is a multi-sited project, managed and implemented by a consortium of partners spread across the globe:

- Led by Practical Action Consulting (PAC) in Lima, Peru
- With three Latin American partners: GRADE in Lima, Peru; Fundar in Mexico City; and SSN (itself a partnership between the Centro Clima of the University in Rio de Janeiro, and the NGO Redeh) in Rio, in Brazil
- And four African/Asia representatives: PAC offices in Nairobi, Kenya and Harare, Zimbabwe and Kathmandu, Nepal; and Kite in Accra, Ghana
- With network support from IIED in the UK

Leading and managing such a dispersed and diverse group is inevitably challenging, and there are no 'magic bullets' to ensuring shared visions, values, approaches and effective coordination. Face to face meetings are irreplaceable, but in ELLA, budget (and carbon) constraints limited this to four group meetings over three years, most of which also doubled up as training exercises. Constant communication by email, phone and skype was essential. Written communications are 'necessary but not sufficient': it was important to organise joint skypes to ensure good understanding and clarity. We used Huddle as our virtual joint working space, though there are many alternatives.

Lesson

When running a multi-sited programme that straddles many countries and cultures, be sure to test out what from of communication works best in different cultures: the most notorious divide being written vs. oral communication.



Monitoring and Evaluation system

We used a variety of tools for the monitoring and evaluation of ELLA:

Tool	Monitoring	Evaluation
Online repositories and web analytics		
ELLA Website statistics (Google Analytics, Awstats)	x	x
ELLA website public space: ELLA knowledge page		x
LEA private space: Discussion threads, Resource Library, Networking page	x	x
Spreadsheets		
Knowledge Products		x
Peer reviews		x
News items		x
Facebook posts		x
Twitter posts		x
ELLA Bulletins		x
Third-party websites housing KPs	x	x
Surveys		
KPs pre-use survey (through ELLA website)		x
LEA Getting Started survey	x	
LEA End of Module surveys	x	
LEA end user survey	x	x
ELLA end user survey (for email and RSS subscribers, and people receiving ELLA bulletins)		x
Interviews and focus groups		
Focus Groups with study tour members	x	
Interviews with LEA members by Andreas Hipple, Independent Consultant (2013)	x	x
Interviews with LEA and NLG members by DBs	x	x
Reports		
ELLA Quarterly Reports	x	x
DBs' Quarterly Reports	x	x
RCEs' Quarterly Reports	x	x
Independent Qualitative Impact Assessment of the ELLA Learning Alliance On Citizen Oversight by J. Andreas Hipple, Independent Consultant (April 2013)	x	x
NLG meetings technical reports		x
Study tour members' individual action plans		x
Awardees Final Reports		x



The 'outputs' of research or knowledge projects are typically relatively easy to capture. ELLA is no exception, with good data on knowledge production, and on proxies for the amount of knowledge exchange and learning during the learning alliances.

Rather more difficult is the capture of the outcomes or impacts of such projects, which can be extremely diverse and diffuse. The Knowledge Products can be, and are, freely downloaded and distributed widely, so it is impossible to obtain an accurate picture of that dispersion and even more so, of their actual use. In the case of the Learning Alliances, feedback can be obtained directly from members to build up a better picture of potential impact.

We used some user-surveys in the case of Knowledge Products (download surveys, subscriber surveys), and user surveys, testimonials and some independent evaluation in the case of the Learning Alliances. It is impossible to build up a comprehensive picture but this at least gives a sample of impacts. The ELLA Monitoring and Evaluation Report aims to bring together an overview of accessible outcome and impact data.

Lesson

Measuring the outcome and impact of knowledge sharing programmes is challenging due to their diffuse and diverse effects. Conducting "tracer" studies, and capturing "stories" from known "beneficiaires" can help provide a structured interpretation of impact.

ICTs

The principal use of ICTs in ELLA has been through the website functions and the use of video-conferencing technologies, in particular for the National Learning Group meetings.

When ELLA began, the UK government had introduced strict limits on expenditure on UK taxpayer funded websites. In principle, this was a significant limitation – as the website was to be core mechanism for both KP housing and dissemination, and for the learning and exchange activities, for this inter-continental south-south programme. (At the same time as Practical Action had strict carbon limit targets, restricting international travel and face-to-face south-south exchange).

But by sourcing from a Peruvian supplier, following a tendering exercise, we were able to develop a site within the specified limits, for about £20,000. The Content Management System for the 'public site' uses Drupal. The private learning alliance space was tailored to meet the specification that we needed: none of the then available software downloads met our needs.

The learning alliance space offers interactivity (of a Facebook style), in built video and messaging facilities (using Google) and a variety of other functions.



One question may be whether it is better to operate purely with off-the-shelf software, taking advantage of upgrades as they appear, given the pace at which technology develops.

Internet connectedness across the globe inevitably had some impact on the roll out of the learning alliances. Online members reported few problems in accessing documentation, but heavier files, notably videos (loaded on Youtube), did present download challenges in some locations, and not always in a predictable way.

Connectedness was most severely tested during the National Learning Group meetings, with video-conferencing (VC) connection between the Africa/Asian NLG meeting room and the Latin American RCE, and other attendees (in Latin America or elsewhere in country). Economy VC packages will always be subject to the weakest point in the internet chain of connection between the two or more hubs. So it is important to identify VC locations with the best internet locations and have Plan B for internet failure. Adequate preparation ahead of time for a VC is a 'must'.

Lesson

When using internet technologies, do not under-estimate the time and resources required to ensure that both the management team and participants are trained up in and fully conversant with all the technologies involved.

FIND OUT MORE FROM [ELLA](http://ella.practicalaction.org/):

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ELLA is supported by:

