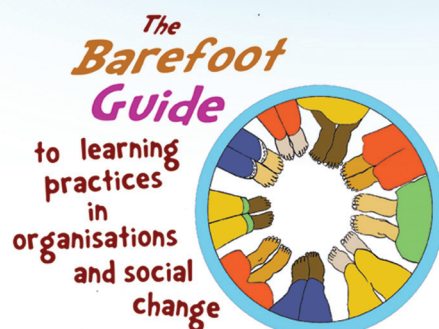




# The Heart of Organisational Learning

*findings of an action research on  
organisational learning practices*



[www.barefootguide.org](http://www.barefootguide.org)



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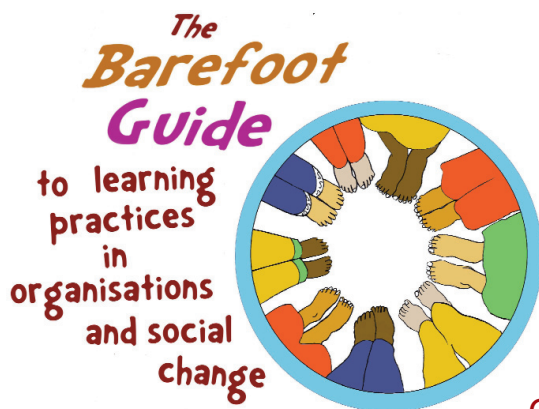
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From the beginning, the Barefoot Guide to Learning Practices in Organisations and Social Change was a collective effort. The Guide, known as the BFG2, is not just another book on organisational learning, it is not written by one person, nor is it a collection of essays. It is the joint effort of a group of development practitioners from countries across the world, keen to learn from each other, and to document their experience and knowledge for others to draw from.

Having consolidated what we already knew about learning practices in the process of writing the Guide during the course of 2009/2010, the group turned its attention to new experience and new knowledge. We wanted to know how other practitioners in a wider circle of civil society organisations learn; we wanted to encourage our organisations to keep learning; we wanted to apply our own 'advice' – and see what happened. Would a book such as the BFG2 make a difference to organisations, including our own, wanting to improve their learning practices so that they could be more effective in their social change work? Herein lay the 'map' for the next year of working together: In 2011, the group, having said goodbye to some members and welcomed a few new ones, entered a clearly defined phase of action research.

This document shares our questions, and our key findings. It also gives an account of the action research process we followed, for action research itself, we discovered, is a remarkable learning process.

### QUESTION ONE:

## How can civil society organisations improve their own learning practices?

Civil society organisations can improve their own learning practices by:

- having mandated and dedicated people playing the role of learning facilitator;
- having leaders who never stop asking questions about organisational practice and strategy, and who encourage a culture of learning;
- supporting communities of practice where participants learn collectively from one another in a safe environment;
- embarking on an intentional, systematic and strategic process of action research.

As you read through these findings in more detail below, we invite you to consider how all these approaches link organisational learning with a deepening of relationship between people in organisations. We found underneath all the raw data and stories we analysed, a clear imperative to revive the importance of relationship between us, colleagues, social change agents, within and between organisations.

QUESTION TWO:

**What contribution can the BFG2  
and similar materials make  
to these processes of improvement?**

The BFG2 is a useful resource to enhance organisational learning practices both in stimulating the thinking of learning facilitators, and as a study guide for groups. It is most effective when used in community.

## Action research

### Why action research?

Our interest was not so much on generating more information, but on the change we believe is inherent to learning. Our interest was in experiencing what happens when organisations commit to a programme of learning, and to enhancing their effectiveness in bringing about social change.

We liked the action research approach because it mirrored our interest and intentions. Action research has a capacity building orientation with the dual aim of promoting transformation while at the same time gathering information.

*'Action research pursues action (change) and research (understanding). Its intent is always to explain and enhance'*

(Dick 1999)<sup>1</sup>

### What is action research?

*Action is doing. Research is finding out.*

Action research is like a big umbrella – home to a wide range of methods and approaches such as participatory research, collective or co-operative inquiry, appreciative inquiry, and whole systems research.

To avoid confusing ourselves with the different methods and tripping over unfamiliar research terms and jargon, we had to begin by forging a collective understanding of action research. If we could agree on key principles and a broad process, getting the labels right for what we wanted to do, we hoped, would be less of an issue.

### Some principles of action research

1. Action research is about information and transformation. It is inherently about social change and empowerment.
2. Action research is a collaborative endeavour.
3. Action research requires a mind-set of shared curiosity and not individual certainty.
4. Surfacing, making sense of and valuing the 'knowledge-of-the-doers' is important.
5. Action research is systematic and rigorous: It is an intentional commitment to a planned process of inquiry, reflection, risk and change.
6. Action research is not static: there is room for questions and plans to change along the way.
7. All involved are both subjects and researchers. There is no distinction between those who act and those who research. For us, 'all involved' meant the donor, regional holders, the core (leadership) team, workshop facilitators, initiating organisations and those invited to take part.
8. There is an obligation to show how you arrive at your learning (findings), in other words, to produce evidence and to share your findings.
9. Action research is not a linear process, but follows an action learning cycle, with each action accompanied by observation, reflection, sense-making and planning.

1 Dick B (1999) *What is action research?* Available online at <http://www.scu.edu.au/school/gcm/arp/rigour.html>



## Outline of a typical action research process

An action research process typically cycles through phases of action and reflection:

- In the *first reflection phase* researchers develop a plan of action for the first action phase
- In the *first action phase* they are engaged in exploring their question through action and experience, and record their findings.
- In the *second reflection phase*, researchers share the findings from the action phase and collectively begin to make sense of the data. They also plan the second action cycle and review their research questions and methods.

A full cycle comprises reflection, action and back to reflection. This cycle can be repeated a number of times and ends with a major reflection phase. The cycle happens at both an individual level and at a collective level.

## BFG2 action research

In our project, the research cycle happened on organisational, regional and global levels. Twenty four organisations took part in a year-long process of action and reflection. Two representatives from each organisation formed into six regional hubs, which met for further reflection and planning. Regional hubs formed in South East Asia; South Asia; Southern Africa; Western & Central Africa; East Africa; and Europe. Those responsible for launching the action research regionally, also took part in a global hub where overall planning and reflection workshops were held three times within the project. The last of these was a sense making or harvesting workshop, on which this report is based.

**If you are interested in conducting action research yourself, or would like to know more about our experience of how this process worked at regional and global level, be sure to read the section entitled Overview of the BFG2 action research process at the back of this document.**



## How can civil society organisations improve their learning practices?

### Learning Facilitators are key

Organisations can improve their learning practices by having mandated and dedicated people playing the role of learning facilitator.

*A learning facilitator in an organisation makes it much easier to keep the learning going.*

For full report on this finding, please see paper entitled *Learning Facilitator* by Prabhat Failbus (PRIA) available on [www.barefootguide.org](http://www.barefootguide.org)

### What is a learning facilitator?

*“A learning facilitator is a loose term for anyone who helps or is interested in helping her/his organisation learn from experience. It is a role but not necessarily a formal position.”*

A learning facilitator is a role that many within an organisation could play. It is not a specific job title, nor necessarily a formal position. It is more about learning facilitator-ship. It is important, however, to have organisational sanction from leadership and peers alike, in order to play the role effectively. If not adequately encouraged and supported by the leadership, both the facilitator and organisational learning will be negatively affected.

This section looks at the roles learning facilitators can play within their own organisation as well as within a broader community of practice. It recommends the responsibility is shared between more than one staff member, arguing that two are better than one! The section also briefly touches on the importance of understanding adult learning and refers the reader to the BFG2 for detail.

### What roles does a learning facilitator play?

A learning facilitator's role includes initiating, designing and facilitating processes, following up and holding colleagues to account, ensuring learning rhythms are respected, pushing for depth in reflection by asking good questions, and sometimes even sparring with others. This helps create focus and momentum.

Learning facilitators are not only there for the learning of others – but also as learners themselves, sharing their experiences and learning with others in the group. In this sense, they are also role-models.

Learning facilitators have a responsibility to keep leadership informed of what is going on, whether things are going well or not. Without open communication, learning is likely to remain within the team involved and less likely to permeate the whole organisation.

All those involved in the action research were learning facilitators. As such they took responsibility for driving the action research within their own organisation. While this took different forms within the different organisations, there were a number of commonalities to the role. In our experience, learning facilitators are:

- **listeners:** listen, reflect and respond to the needs and interests of individuals and organisation.
- **strategists:** focus learning on what matters by linking the learning agenda with real needs and interests.
- **initiators & guides:** introduce colleagues to and guide them through the action research process.
- **motivators:** connect with people's will, not only the intellect – and inspire them to learn from experience and improve their actions.
- **change agents:** complete the whole action learning cycle by grounding learning in changed action, attitude or understanding.
- **challengers:** help people move beyond their comfort zones.
- **supporters:** support is necessary for the risk and vulnerability involved in unlearning and learning.
- **trend setters:** help define, establish and sustain an environment & culture conducive to learning.
- **learners:** pay attention to their own learning and participate as a learner, not only as a facilitator.

## Understanding the importance and principles of adult learning

Many of the learning facilitators in the action research were either already playing this role as part of their job, or stepped into the role for the duration of the research. Some had formal training in adult education, others had none. We found that while neither former experience nor 'qualifications' were necessary, it was important to have some understanding of how adults learn as well as basic facilitation skills. In particular it was important for learning facilitators to be sensitive to the principles of adult learning and to recognise that adults learn differently and have preferred ways of learning.

The excerpt shared below illustrates a common dilemma faced by learning facilitators working with adults:

*"What I realized from the workshop is how important it is to find the right balance between staying in charge on the one hand as far as setting objectives, keeping time and introducing working set-ups like role plays and games are concerned, and at the same time letting go on content. The content will come when I deal with adults who are experts in their own fields. I, as a facilitator of learning, need to help them to unleash their expertise, reflect on it and share it, and I do not at all need to feel responsible for that content. We as a group do not need to come up with one solution, one answer. We do need to see people start reflecting and asking themselves and others critical questions".*

[See chapter 12 of the BFG2 for more on adult learning principles, styles and steps.]

## Two are better than one

There were two learning facilitators in each organisation, and both participated in the regional hub workshops. Two are better than one – not simply because of continuity (What will we do if a learning facilitator leaves? Who will carry things forward, in the organisation, in the hub?), but because of the benefits of sharing the responsibility between more than one person. And because of the relationship that develops between the learning facilitators as they work together. As a team, the two facilitators form a mini community of practice: they are able to support each other, share frustrations, doubts, ideas, progress and work load, reflect on what is happening in their organisation and strategise the way forward, together.

## Learning facilitators as regional holders

In our action research project, learning facilitators from the initiating organisations were also regional holders, responsible for facilitating the regional hub. In this capacity we played the following additional roles:

- **initiator** Recruiting and inviting organisations to join the action research programme, explaining the purpose, approach, practicalities and requirements. Meeting with organisational leadership and (potential) learning facilitators.
- **manager & coordinator** As regional holders, learning facilitators were responsible for making logistical arrangement for hub workshops, for keeping in touch with members between workshops and for monitoring the progress of the action research process.
- **facilitator** Regional holders facilitated the inter-organisational processes. Developing the design of the workshops, selecting appropriate contents and choice of the methodology (small group discussions, case studies/stories or role plays, reading material etc.) to cover the contents were key responsibilities of the learning facilitators.
- **documenter** Documentation of the entire regional process was another important responsibility of the learning facilitators. In some instances, for example, in Southern Africa, the learning facilitator recruited a colleague to document hub workshops. The documentation/reports become the record of the 'learning' and 'change' experienced during the AR process.
- **participant** Regional holders were also learning facilitators in their own organisations and as such had a dual role at hub workshops where they had to both facilitate and participate. Facilitators found creative ways of managing this double responsibility. In the Southern African hub, the facilitators agreed that one would focus more on facilitation and the other on presenting their organisation's research – they both worked at making sense of the findings. In the South Asian hub, there were three regional holders, from different organisations in different countries. They each took a turn to host one of the hub workshops, introducing a different style, culture and leadership. The only disadvantage they experienced in this way of doing things, was that none of the three felt responsible for holding the process between workshops. Hubs reported an increased sharing in responsibility for hub workshops as the process progressed, among participants. This fits well with the politics of action research and adult learning and is to be encouraged.

## Learning needs leadership

Organisations can enhance their learning practices by having leaders who never stop asking questions about organisational practice and strategy, and who encourage a culture of learning.

*It was found that in most organisations guidance and interest of senior leadership – particularly the head of the organisation – towards the learning question of the action research process, assisted the process tremendously.*

Formal and informal leadership, personal and organisational leadership are necessary, firstly to make organisational learning possible, but also for it to flourish. As we know from the theory on learning, each individual within an organisation must take responsibility for learning – a personal responsibility for one's own learning and one's role in and contribution to the learning of the collective, and this we found to be true. We were, however, struck by the difference it made to have the active support of organisational leadership. We would go so far as to say it is a prerequisite. Interestingly, the role of leadership was mentioned only briefly in the reports and stories from those organisations whose leadership was deeply invested in learning. It was in the experience of those whose leadership was disinterested or absent, that we saw how this 'lack' restrained the process and inhibited learning.

Organisational learning needs the stewardship of leaders. Stimulating a desire for learning, focusing it on what matters, providing support, creating a learning environment and designing process to hold the content requires the attention of leadership, though they need not be solely responsible for it. Learning facilitators, i.e. anyone within an organisation who helps or is interested in helping her/his organisation learn from experience, have a vital part to play.

This section focuses on the role of formal, organisational leadership, CEOs, directors and senior managers, looks at why they are needed, and suggests ways of drawing them in.

*For the full report on this finding, please see the papers Leadership for Learning by Jacqueline Verhagen (PSO) and Leading Learning by Tracey Martin, available on [www.barefootguide.org](http://www.barefootguide.org)*

## Why does learning need leadership?

Organisational learning needs leadership to:

- **ensure strategic relevance of learning agenda** Leadership helps secure a link between the organisation's vision and strategy, and the research or learning question (which focuses the learning).
- **drive change** Learning is directly connected to change. Leadership is directly connected to the responsibility for driving and grounding desired change within an organisation. For an organisation to change its actions and practices takes courage, and such courage must be demonstrated by those in positions of leadership.

■ **shape culture and environment** Leadership support for learning helps establish a culture and conducive environment through the provision of adequate resources (including budget, time & human resources), opportunities, direct involvement (modelling), and by maintaining a clear connection between the learning agenda, core business and strategic objectives. Leadership support, and especially their participation in learning says, 'this is worth doing!' [see chapter 3 of the BFG2 for more on creating a learning culture]

As learning processes are human processes they require quality time. Without devoting quality time and space to such processes they become technical exercises that fail to inspire and motivate people. Learning is made extra difficult when learning is not recognised as part of the 'work' of the organisation, where learning facilitators and staff are not afforded sufficient time to dedicate to learning processes and activities. *'It is hard to learn when your head is full of other responsibilities and deadlines'* said one learning facilitator.

■ **account** Leaders play an important role in holding individuals and the organisation as a whole accountable for learning. What does this mean? It means, that like other aspects of our work for which we expect and are expected to account for, learning is important and should be integral to our jobs.

## What kind of leadership does learning need?

The ideal leadership for learning is the leadership who never stops asking questions about the organisational practice and strategy; who connects learning with the broad objectives of the organisation to make change happen, who allocates sufficient time, space and resources, who is centrally involved and takes responsibility for driving and grounding the resultant ideas and changes; who models the new 'action' or 'attitude' and helps others find the courage to change too. If leaders aren't learning, the rest of the staff may be less motivated to learn. If management decisions do not give time and space to learning, it won't happen, except perhaps on the margins. If learning activities are seen as less important than other activities, staff will get the message and won't focus on them either.

Leadership is not always a visible or tangible thing, nor is it always easy to identify its various components. Learning facilitators from organisations where senior management were supportive of learning noted that leadership for learning meant more than just having permission, time and access to organisational resources to organise learning activities. In addition to these practical things, there was an understanding that what learning facilitators were doing was important for others, for themselves, for the organisation and even for the sector at large. This support remained firm even when the organisation was rocked by difficulties.

## What can you, as an organisational leader do?

**Reflect:** Start by taking a look at yourself – what kind of person are you? What is your leadership style and how does this affect the way you work, the way things are done in your department or organisation? (See *Chapter 2 of the BFG1*). Next, take some time to think about how you learn (see *Chapter 12 of the BFG2*). Does the current set up enable you to learn as an individual? If you are not learning, then others are probably finding it difficult too.

**Discuss:** If you are part of a leadership team or member of a board, you might want to ponder the following questions as a team exercise. How do you learn as a group? Do you take account of individual learning styles? What kinds of processes do you use in your meetings? What form do they take and do they encourage learning?

Feedback from our peers and others is an important part of learning. How do you get feedback from the rest of the organisation on your work? What do you do with this information? How do you know whether your organisation is learning successfully or not?

**Enable:** Unless your organisation has no hierarchy at all, the learning facilitator (even if they are responsible for a larger team) will find it difficult to change things without your support. You will need to:

- Make time and resources available for learning processes and the development of and change to more learning-friendly ways of working.
- Show that you value learning – attend events, read reports, give as much attention to learning as you do to fundraising, ask people how it is going.
- Give the learning facilitator authority to change things – show that you support them.

### Change

- Be a role model – tell everyone what you have learnt and how it is changing what you do and enabling you to better lead the organisation.
- Learn from others in the organisation and let them know you have done so.
- Spend time in different parts of the organisation learning what they do.
- Spend time in the communities where the organisation works – value what you can learn from the community. Perhaps they have something to tell you about the best ways to run meetings or to manage scarce resources. For example, some communities have developed ways of making sure everyone is able to express an opinion – e.g. the talking stick that is held by the person who speaks and gives them the authority to speak uninterrupted. If your board meetings tend to be dominated by two or three people, this might be a way of hearing from those who are more reluctant to speak.
- Talk to your donors about what you are doing and why. Show them how it has led to improvements in your work. Ask them to work with you to enable you to learn better. Share learning with them and learn from them and other organisations they work with.

If you are involved, change can happen much more quickly. If you change yourself, others can be empowered to change. If you give time and space and resources to learning, the organisation can become a learning organisation.

## How do you, as a learning facilitator, get leadership buy-in?

When leadership isn't initiating, holding or even interested in learning, learning facilitators need to take action to influence them and get them on board. This may be a relatively simple task, but more likely will take enormous effort and dedication. Here are a few practical suggestions that members of our group found useful.

- **invite participation** Inform senior leadership of what you are planning to do, what you are doing, what kinds of insights you have already gained and how these could influence or contribute to the development of the organisation. Invite them to come on board, invite them to support you and suggest ways in which this could be done. Be clear about the role you'd like them to play, about the contribution you would like them to make.

*(See BFG1 chapter 2 for a description of the four temperaments: understanding a little more about the make up of senior leadership in your organisation may help you plot how best to approach them).*

- **show direct link with organisation's interest** Be sure you can show the link between your learning / research question and the burning issues facing the organisation that are preoccupying his/her mind too. In other words, be able to show leadership the relevance of what you are doing or proposing to do. In instances where senior management needed to be convinced of the action research, the learning facilitators found it useful to find the 'right' words, words management used and could relate to, and to frame the proposed research question in a way which connected with management's priorities *without* compromising the original meaning.

- **advocate** Continue to promote the importance of learning and raise awareness about the time, space, attitude and resources it needs among organisational leadership.

- **keep communication going** Learning facilitators have a responsibility to keep leadership informed of what is going on, whether things are going well or not. Without open communication, learning is likely to remain within the team involved and less likely to permeate the whole organisation. Avoid simple transfer of information, report style, if you can, and rather engage in dialogue about the process, the learning and implications for the organisation. This in itself is advocacy!

## Why does leadership need learning?

A learning organisation can respond appropriately to changes in the local, national and global context. Its staff can make informed decisions and act on their own initiative. It will be respected by the communities it works with, and partnerships with other organisations will be equal and mutually beneficial.

People in learning organisations don't need to be controlled by endless rules and regulations that take up time that could be better spent on social change. They don't continue doing things that don't work. They are able to take informed decision and act on their own initiative to bring about social change.



## **Establish and participate in communities of practice:**

**Organisations can enhance their learning practices by supporting communities of practice where participants learn collectively from one another in a safe environment.**

*Communities of practice inspire learning and bring individual, organisational and inter-organisational learning together.*

*Communities of practice involving learning facilitators from a number of organisations will strengthen local organisation and increase their resilience.*

This section, based on the experience of six regional hubs, explains what a community of practice is, why they are valuable for organisations, and what practices we found useful in forming them.

*For full report on this finding, please see paper entitled *Communities of Practice*, by Tracey Martin available on [www.barefootguide.org](http://www.barefootguide.org)*

### **What is a community of practice?**

In the action research process, regional hubs functioned as communities of practice. They provided a safe space outside of our own organisations where we as practitioners could talk openly to each other about our common interests (improving learning and social change) – about what we were trying to do, and about the challenges and triumphs we were experiencing. This helped renew motivation, gave new perspectives and encouraged members to move forward where they had been stuck. The key words and phrases here in understanding communities of practice are:

- safe-space
- practitioners (do-ers)
- outside own organisation
- common interest
- experiencing
- new

Etienne Wenger, who first coined the phrase ‘community of practice’, says they are ‘a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour’<sup>2</sup> He identifies three characteristics and says that a community of practice must have all of these:

- Domain – it has an identity that is defined by a shared ‘domain of interest’.
- Community – members engage in joint activities and build relationships. There is an implied commitment to the shared interest and the group.
- Practice – members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems – in short, a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction.

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<sup>2</sup> Available on <http://www.ewenger.com/theory/> accessed 19/04/2012

## Why are communities of practice valuable for organisational learning? How do they help organisations learn?

Organisational learning points to the social dimension of learning. It is inherently about learning between people in relationship to one another. Yet, so often organisations overlook the centrality of relationship in their pursuit of organisational learning, efficiency and efficacy. We hoped to avoid this pitfall by establishing regional hubs as communities of practice. However we didn't anticipate just how important they would prove to be.

*Everyone agreed that the hub workshops themselves were important because they gave peer support, motivated people to reflect on their progress and organise learning activities. A safe space to talk with other learning facilitators about challenges, and explore ways to overcome them, was very valuable. It was also inspiring to see what others were doing and this gave people new ideas about what they could do in their own organisations.*

*The collective face-to-face meetings were highly important. It helps enormously when you have sparring partners from outside to help you step away from daily tasks, pressures, frustration, and to see the larger whole and purpose again.*

The inter-organisational composition of the hubs provided learning facilitators with the opportunity to temporarily step back from the work and dynamics of their own organisations, to meet, work with and learn from other practitioners who shared similar interests and issues. The most important thing seemed simply to be the opportunity to talk, in a warm, safe, non-threatening environment.

This engagement with each other helped practitioners broaden their perspectives, encouraged them to consider different points of view and expanded their repertoire of interpretations, ideas and actions. Both formal and informal interactions provided support and guidance to the individual learning facilitators, inspiring their own learning and building their understanding of key themes discussed and their confidence as facilitators.

Hubs were also central to organisations' motivation and commitment to the AR process. Creating a sense of obligation to each other was an important binder. It meant when things were difficult, learning facilitators persevered with the action research and with trying to strengthen learning in their organisation – not because they had to write a report – but because they felt accountable to the hub.

While each hub had a regional coordinator, these coordinators were also learning facilitators participating in the action research. In other words, host organisations were also participating organisations. This had two key consequences: Firstly, by keeping to the action research principle that all researchers are also subjects, power dynamics among participants did not disturb the process nor jeopardise relationships. Organisations that were 'partner' or 'client' organisations of other participating organisations, felt they were in a more fruitful relationship, as they now shared their learning, including failures, honestly with each other.

Similarly all members of the hub had the same role – that of learning facilitator – in the action research process and came together in hub workshops as equals. There is no evidence to suggest that people's job titles in their organisation made a difference to how they felt they benefited from

being part of the hub or how they interacted in it. Everyone was focused on working on their learning questions so they had something in common to talk about and they were ready to listen to each other because they were sharing the same experience.

Secondly, the principle of participation spread the responsibility for creating and maintaining the hub as a safe-space among all participants. People took responsibility for the hub because it served a need: they knew others in the hub would genuinely listen to and support them in their journey.

Such was our experience of the regional hubs, that we are convinced that learning facilitators within organisations will be far more effective if supported within a community of practice. Learning facilitators are more likely to persevere with trying to develop and strengthen learning practices within their organisations when benefiting from collegial support within a community of practice.

## What helps build a community of practice?

It is important to invest in the process of forming and holding the community of practice. There is a need for face-to-face workshops and there needs to be a process of deepening the relationship between the participants and building trust. Without this, the group will just be a collection of people and not a community.

The things that help build communities of practice are by and large the same things that help build relationships between people. Relationships flourish when interests are shared, where risks taken are respected and lead to greater trust and honesty between people and where individuals can bring themselves, their quirks, characters, efforts and skills to engage on something with others. Learning flourishes when there is human connection – warmth, trust and honesty.

Some of the common practices from the six regional hubs that seem to have been particularly effective in enabling groups to evolve into communities of practice include:

- **establishing shared interest** The global research questions set out the shared domain of interest in the broadest terms. It was vital, however, that each regional hub took this further and consciously identified their own common interests. Apart from clarifying the rationale for coming together, a shared interest also helped to establish a sense of group identity which was different (unique) to those of the participating organisations from which members were drawn.

The South Asian hub agreed on a common question which served to define their shared domain of interest. They felt that this helped them to come together as a practice. In some hubs, common questions emerged during the process and this helped them to reflect together on the action research process. Some felt that it was the action research process and the common interest in learning that held them together.

- **storytelling** Storytelling was used in most hubs to build relationships between members, to develop a common understanding of key terms and practices, to aid deeper reflection and sense-making.

In the first Southern Africa workshop, people began by telling stories about a personal learning experience, and then about their organisation's learning practices to get to know each other better and to build a common understanding of the central themes they were researching (learning / organisational learning). They also wrote short stories during their final workshop as part of the sharing and sense-making process.

In the final South East Asia workshop, participants told the story of the action research in their organisation and it was visually recorded. This helped in making sense of the story and identifying the important learnings.

*For more on storytelling – please see Learning Practices: bringing discipline and rigour to organisational learning by Eunice Agbenyadzi (VSO) & Nomvula Dlamini (CDRA) available on [www.barefootguide.org](http://www.barefootguide.org)*

- **individual reflection** The workshops gave space for individual reflection – for people to think about their own learning and grow as learning facilitators. This gave them confidence and enabled them to be more effective back in their own organisation.
- **peer review and affirmation** People gave critical feedback to one another in the workshops. People were listened to and, while they were not simply praised, they were supported in their difficulties and helped to find ways forward.
- **programme** The programme of the workshop should not be too tight. There needs to be space for people to talk and reflect. Whoever is facilitating needs to listen to the will and the mood of the group.
- **cyclical process** The process of having at least 3 workshops worked well for both the Barefoot Collective (when writing the BFG2) and the hubs that used this approach. The first workshop was about building relationships, creating common understanding of the work/process and how it would be taken forward in each organisation. The second workshop deepened the relationships and opened the way for trust and honesty – and therefore deeper reflection. It provided motivation for those who were finding it hard to move forward. It looked for ways to deepen the learning. The last workshop drew out learning through deeper reflection. Between the workshops some sort of action took place. Therefore the space between the workshops was at least one cycle of the action learning cycle (more for some organisations).
- **funding** No-one was paid to participate in the action research, nor to attend the hub workshops. Basic expenses such as travel and accommodation were funded so that it was financially possible for people from different geographical areas to gather face-to-face. A small budget was made available to regional holders for the facilitation of hub workshops. The programme's donors were also participants.

## An alternative to training?

Organisations that support other organisations to learn or provide 'capacity building' for civil society organisations might find it more useful and cost-effective to develop communities of practice than to provide lots of training – or combine training with a community of practice. It would seem to be most beneficial if they were also part of this community of practice – at least initially – not as a leader but as a 'holder', going on the journey with the organisations. This could be framed as an action research activity but it might be enough to have learning questions that are related for the group to have a purpose. Over time this would also develop a corps of experienced learning facilitators who could then work with new learning facilitators in other organisations – enabling a large number of organisations to develop learning practices with minimal resources. If the capacity building organisation then pulled out of a country/sector or region, the expertise would then stay in the local organisations.

## Action research for organisational learning:

organisations can enhance their learning practices by embarking on an intentional, systematic and strategic process of action research.

*Action which is intentionally, systematically and collectively researched strengthens and deepens learning practices within organisations.*

*With action research, you change as you learn. The exploration of our question has reached many places within the organisation.*

*For a full report on this finding, please see Action Research for Organisational Learning by Namrata Jaitli (PRIA) available on [www.barefootguide.org](http://www.barefootguide.org)*

One of the questions we grappled with was, *what is the difference between action learning and action research?* While there is no doubt a more scholarly answer, we would say, *action research is action learning, only with more rigour.* In other words, action research is a tool for learning, a learning process in and of itself.

Without exception, all organisations involved in this action research programme found participation strengthened their learning practices; this section explains why.

### What is it about action research [AR] that strengthens learning in organisations?

■ **AR is Purposeful** One of the most common objections to learning in organisations is ‘learning for learning’s sake’. The alternative to learning just for the sake of it, is learning fuelled by the desire to change and improve practice. Where learning is purposeful, where there is a clearly thought through, valuable reason for doing it, it is far more likely to lead to change. Action research helps you articulate that reason.

Action research requires you to be clear on your purpose. Through its rigorous process of finding and formulating a research question, the learning agenda becomes more focused. Because of the diligence required in both the action and reflection phases, and because of its action (change) orientation, action research helps learning become grounded in an organisation.

Such purpose should not only be identified at the start of the process but should be reviewed at regular intervals to ensure it remains relevant, and to assess whether the organisation is pursuing it with the required rigour.

We found that it was important to have a clear intent on the part of organisational management and staff to really want to improve practice. This speaks to the ‘will’ of the organisation – and calls for a frank appraisal of its members’ willingness to renew and improve their practice...to be open to change.

■ **AR is led by a clearly articulated question** The purpose or rationale for doing action research must be reflected in the research question or questions. In other words, the research question must connect with a real need or desire identified by those doing the action research.

While development practitioners work with hundreds of questions all the time, many learning facilitators and their organisations found it hard to craft a good research question. A good research question took time to develop. There were many stories of the work involved within organisations and regional hubs in order to reach the point where questions could be formulated. This led us to conclude that AR doesn't start with a question...but with a process. It doesn't matter if you don't get the question 'right' first time – it is more important to see it as a launching question and to keep refining it as you proceed.

*'It is important to have a good research or learning question!' we all agreed, but what makes a question a good research question?*

A good question need not be complex, in fact we found simple questions to be most useful. Specific questions that relate clearly to the organisation work best.

A good research question is one that can be 'actioned' and can be answered! In other words it must be do-able! A good research question should be phrased in a way which makes your next steps apparent. This is particularly important as the question must lead to action in what you are researching...and ultimately to change.

A good research question resonates with those involved in the research. Whether the question is formulated by an individual or by a collective, it is important that it has resonance with the group. In other words, it holds interest, relevance and purpose for all involved.

■ **AR is flexible** The process of refining the research question is a recursive, non-linear one that moves between the questions, the learning challenge or problem and the findings. Within action research there is space for the question to become more focused over time.

Not only is the question flexible, the whole design is responsive too. Planning is done in cycles and based on the findings and learning drawn from each action phase.

Lastly, we found that AR is bigger than just one approach. We experienced it more as central principles and a strong political orientation towards transformation and participation, with the freedom to choose the methods that best work in your context.

■ **AR is rigorous** Despite its flexibility, action research is a rigorous, systematic process. This, we discovered, is not the opposite of flexible!!

AR brings discipline to learning. While AR employs practices familiar to many learning organisations and development practitioners, it is the rigour with which they are used that allows for deeper questioning, critical reflection, sense-making – and most importantly, connecting learning back to action – in other words making the change.

Well known learning practices employed in our action research included sharing experiences, reflection on and making sense of experiences, harvesting learning, documenting learning, working with questions, undertaking reviews, team meetings, forming communities of practice, having a learning facilitator and the use of creative activities and metaphor.

■ **AR encourages documentation**

*We document what we observe, we feel, we hear as well as what we see. Documentation can happen anywhere and any time.*

One of the practices that makes action research rigorous is the obligation to document, both during the action phase, as well as during the reflection phases. It is important to record the raw data of your experience as well as the sense you make of it.



*While doing AR we discovered the importance of writing as a way of paying attention to what is going on and writing as a way to learn from our actions.*

We found that documenting experiences, feelings, assumptions and frustrations during the action phase really enhanced both individual and collective reflections. Learning diaries and other forms of documentation worked best where there was a structure for sharing what was written and using it to reflect on the individuals' and the organisation's practice.

Learning, of course, can happen in the absence of rigorous documentation: there were learning facilitators who did not keep research journals, but still reported rich and critical reflection and learning. However, it was clear that regular journalling and other forms of recording ensure accurate accounts from which to work.

Documentation can take many forms. There is the standard written report that most practitioners are familiar with, though many are not particularly fond of. Then there is the more creative use of writing, where writing is a process of exploration and learning as well as a means of effective communication. Many of the hubs wrote stories as a way of processing experiences, making meaning of them and conveying key learnings to their peers. Hubs used drama, folk songs, drawing and videos. Methods such as these communicate not just facts or information, but meaning. They convey the feeling and emotions of learners. The learning that is innovatively documented is easier for others to digest and apply.

The West & Central African hub suggested that a template for documentation should be designed (with staff input) in order to make documentation and the harvesting of learning easier. Learning facilitators there found that it was important for participants in their organisations to understand that documentation is not an end in itself, but a means to an end – that it is not just a routine but rather an integral part of the organisational development process.

*(Please see BFG2 chapter 14 for more on writing)*

■ **AR involves sense-making** Making sense of the data collected is an important step: in the action research cycle, reflection follows one phase of action and precedes the next. The term reflection includes the process of analysing and finding meaning in what has happened and in what has been observed. The collective is important here. As each person recounts their experience, others listen intently, helping to deepen, extend and connect the sense he or she has made of it. In as much as documentation was used to record data and share data, in this step, writing was also used as a tool for reflection. Reflective reports, free-writing, writing stories and poetry are among the methods used.

■ **AR is time-bound** AR is focused on a particular question or set of questions, for a predetermined amount of time. We found that people responded well and could maintain their commitment to the year-long programme.

Time-bound AR provides an opportunity to 'do-it-differently', to try something different for a while, without asking the organisation to overhaul their learning practice forever and ever. A variety of learning practices supports rather than contradicts notions of sustainability.

■ **AR supports capacity building**

*The AR process ultimately contributed to empowering learning facilitators.*

Because action research is about learning from your experience and improving practice accordingly, it is inherently a capacity building approach. In particular, action research helps build capacity



because it strengthens the skills of reflection and testing what you have learnt from it through action. This means you are constantly developing new skills and behaviours that help you to be effective in your context.

■ **AR requires collaboration** A foundational principle of action research is that it requires the involvement of many. Action research is for the independent, but not for the isolated, says McNiff (1988). It requires the active participation of a group.

Perhaps the one thing that really gave lift off to this AR was the centrality of collaboration between organisations. Hubs at regional and at global level became communities of practice. Being part of an action research project that was wider than the individual organisation created a sense of belonging. It also created a sense of obligation to continue and give structure to efforts to increase learning practices within each organisation. Organisations were committed to the hub meetings, learning facilitators were committed to each other, and these commitments fuelled the motivation to conduct the research internally. Personal, formal and informal interactions between members in regional and global hubs provided support and guidance to the individual learning facilitators in different organisations.

Furthermore, collaboration means collectively generated answers to our questions. Evidence from 24 organisations means you can draw useful implications for organisational learning practices and action research for other civil society organisations.

Collective effort was also required within each organisation as learning facilitators worked with their colleagues on their own research questions. However, it was the inter-organisational collaboration that was most profound for participants.

*'Action research is for the independent, but not for the isolated'*

(McNiff 1988)<sup>3</sup>

## What do these four key findings tell us?

When we reviewed all our findings on how civil society organisations could improve their learning, we saw, underneath all the detail, information and stories, a clear imperative to revive the importance of relationships between us. This is not a 'new' idea. We were surprised, but not confounded ...it makes good sense, really. But it is perhaps a harder answer than we were bargaining on.

## Relationships are the heart of organisational learning

Much of what is published about organisational learning points to technology, knowledge management, building skills, ability and capacities. It is the fashion for civil society organisations, NGOs and INGOs in particular, to invest in technological platforms and solutions to stimulate learning and communication. What we found, however, is that bringing human warmth to the process, building relationships between people, and acknowledging and working with feelings were at the heart of enabling and sustaining organisational learning.

To some this will no doubt sound old fashioned and out-of-date, or, worse still, bordering on the sentimental and impractical. Which civil society organisation, in this day and age of economic

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3 McNiff J (1988) *Action Research: Principles & Practice* Routledge

recession and beleaguered funding environments, can afford to spend time and money on anything but key deliverables, producing the results that keep them in business? As it is, many in our sector believe learning is a luxury for the well-to-do organisations. And here we are saying, pay attention to relationships!!

There is an advertisement for something or other on South African television: an elderly couple is being interviewed. They are asked how come they are still married after 65 years? After some consideration, the woman answers slowly, 'in our day if something broke, you fixed it.' Her simple answer points to the difficulties inherent in relationship. They are not for the faint-hearted. Nor is the commitment to spend time, energy and resources on building sound relationships with colleagues and peers, within and between organisations, when all the modern world is concerned with competition, not cooperation, with social media and technological fixes, not 'old-fashioned' contact.

The group of practitioners involved in the action research is not anti-technology, or modern innovation. Technology can and does help relationships by providing easy means of communication; we used skype, email, google groups and facebook to stay connected with each other and keep information flowing. But what really helped to forge and cement the kinds of relationships that made the action research so valuable for participants were the face-to-face, real time meetings. We are convinced of the value of sound relationships between people. We are convinced of the impact of these relationships on learning, and we are convinced that relationships are necessary for change.

Key among our relationship building strategies – the things we can say really 'worked', include structuring the action research around (three) face-to-face workshops at regional and global level, use of creative and participatory workshop methodology, having two learning facilitators per organisation, enthusiastic regional holders, sharing responsibility for regional workshops between hub members, voluntary and self-funded participation, and self identified research questions connecting to organisations' own needs and priorities. Many of these have already been elaborated on in this text. However, we would like to draw your attention to the critical issue of power, and unequal power relations between participating organisations.

As in all groups, there are power imbalances. Our group was no different; some organisations were donors, some others were funded by them. Some were large international NGOs with huge influence, others were very small and locally focused. Some organisations operated in English, while others had only a small command of the language. Some were well funded organisations, others struggling to survive financially. Some were organisational development consultants with a reputation for being 'experts', while others were their client organisations. Individuals, too, held different power positions within their organisations: directors, field workers, consultants, programme managers, advisors. But all these organisations, and individual staff members, regardless of position or power, could only participate in the project as active learners, subjects and researchers.

From the outset, we worked on decreasing the imbalances, not ignoring or denying that they existed, but levelling the field of participation as far as possible. Because equal participation helped neutralise power differences, participants were free-er to chose what to focus on, what to change and how to go about it.

## What contribution can the BFG2 and similar materials make to these processes of improvement?

The BFG2 is a useful resource to enhance organisational learning practices both in stimulating the thinking of learning facilitators, and as a study guide for groups. It is most effective when used in community.

*We thank the Barefoot Collective for giving us a treasured and most valuable resource.*

*The barefoot approach and its philosophy have provided new perspectives for deeper questioning. It has broken off traditional institutional template approaches to working with learning.*

*The BFG2 is not a recipe book, but when you need it, it will be there and you will find something in it that gives you energy, an idea, and the next step to take. It provokes, motivates, inspires and supports learning by individuals and in communities.*

*The BFG2 is a gentle document that can help you name things you could not previously define.*

Twenty four civil society organisations, social movements and networks, working on four continents of the world in six regional hubs and one virtual hub engaged with the Barefoot Guide on Learning Practices in Organisations and Social Change (BFG2) – as part of the action research process. All the hubs reported how valuable the Guide had been – and indeed we have no reason to doubt that it was. However, we recognise that the Guide was not used in isolation, but that it was part of a bigger process which emphasised relationship and community. We know that being part of a year-long action research programme with its regional communities of practice was hugely beneficial to participants. When we first gathered to design and plan the BFG2, we imagined it as part of a movement of people in which learning practices become the roots for social change. Indeed the BFG2 is best used in community.

This section outlines how the BFG2 was used and what its key contributions were perceived to be.

### How was the BFG2 used?

But what does 'engaged' mean? How was the Guide used? Its use varied greatly among regions and among participating organisations. From the one extreme, where whole organisations held weekly study sessions on the Guide, working through the book, chapter to chapter – to the other, where only the learning facilitators 'dipped into it now and again'. The South East Asian hub reported that, "different chapters were used by different organisations because they spoke to the organisation at that stage of its development and were more relevant to their learning questions." This was true across all hubs.

The hubs adopted different approaches to using the Guide in their workshops, but on the whole encouraged members to find the chapters most pertinent to them. Members of the European hub selected and studied a chapter of their choice in preparation for hub workshops, then shared information from the chapter of their choice with each other in small group discussions, which in turn presented key insights to plenary. The Southern African hub held a reading circle at their first regional hub workshop where, after a brief overview of the Guide, each participant chose and read a chapter, then shared what was significant to them in their chosen chapter with the rest of the group. In South East Asia, organisations identified chapters most relevant to their emerging research questions, read it in depth and shared their insights with others in the hub. The virtual hub was set up as a learning circle, and worked through the Guide in sections.

We did not investigate why the use of the Guide was varied: it was intended as a resource, not mandatory material, but some of the reasons given for not using it extensively included:

- We have our own material on organisational learning.
- I didn't have time to study the Guide.
- The Guide doesn't appeal to me.
- It is too philosophical and doesn't give enough practical information.

## Strengths of the Guide

Clearly, different things in the Guide appealed to different people. Overall, however, the following aspects were identified as strong points:

- **people-centred:** the Guide promotes a human approach to organisational learning and is written in the informal, friendly style of one practitioner sharing with another.
- **experiential:** the Guide is based on the experience of practitioners and promotes experiential learning.
- **inclusive:** the Guide draws on and caters for people from a wide range of cultures and countries, in both the north and the south.
- **expansive:** the Guide challenges readers to expand and deepen their practice and offers suggestions on how to do so.
- **comprehensive:** the Guide covers a wide range of pertinent issues in sufficient detail for both those setting out (beginners) and those already experienced in organisational learning.
- **affirmative:** much of the material in the Guide was familiar to readers who found it reassuring and supportive of their efforts. For some, it was the first time they had seen their 'practice in print'. For others, finding terms to label their practice was empowering.

## Dilemmas

The BFG2 AR process has been rewarding – but we are not left without unchallenged assumptions, further questions and unresolved dilemmas.

### Linking learning with social change

The connection between learning and social change is central to the whole BFG2 – yet we cannot claim to have rigorously interrogated this assumption. We have clearly shown how learning facilitators have benefited, we have shown how organisational learning practices have been enhanced, but we cannot show whether this has translated into improved organisational performance, because we did not research that.

### Benefits of learning

Do our findings go far enough in demonstrating the benefits of learning in a world progressively focused on targets and results?

### Learning in large organisations

While many large organisations (VSO, IFRC, VVOB, PRIA) participated in the action research, it was by and large confined to a discrete part of the organisation. Can action research be effectively conducted throughout large organisations? Can it be as effective in large organisations as it was in parts thereof, and in smaller organisations which were wholly involved?

### Forever-and-ever

It is often tempting to set up networks, groups and communities of practice forever and ever. We found, however, that a time-bound community of practice, with a fixed life span and a clear goal was very useful as the commitment asked for was clear and manageable. Of course, there was nothing stopping the regional hubs from re-contracting with each other to enter a new and extended phase of working together.

### Distinguishing action research from action learning

For some participants it was really important to tease out the difference between action learning and action research, especially given that they both follow the same essential cycle of action, reflection, learning, planning, action (though in action research terminology, the word reflection *includes* learning {analyses/sense-making} and planning). We came to a none too definitive

agreement that action research is action learning only with more rigour. The rigour comes from documentation (primarily recording / journaling one's action and observations at the time of the action) and collaborative reflection and sense-making, which may or may not be part of action learning. Collaboration and evidence are also often named as defining features of action research, where action learning can be done by individuals alone and no 'proof' of how they reached their learning is necessary. With action research it is important to be able to explain how you reached your insights or findings – particularly because you want others to be able to learn from them too.

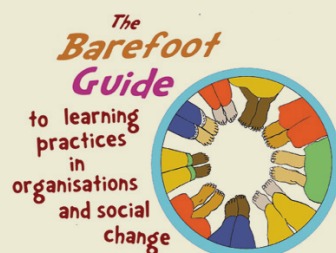
## Privacy, truth and publicity

*Can I tell the truth here?*

Many of the stories told, were told in confidence. There are stories rich in detail that would make fabulous examples of the points we make in this text, but we cannot share them outside of the hubs in which they were told, because they may create a bad impression. Some participants found this a real limitation and frustration – while others were grateful for the honesty and camaraderie within the group and felt that the real value of such stories was in the process of telling and receiving them; making them public was not necessary.

### Invitation

Each of us who participated in this action research benefited enormously: It is our hope that we have managed to convey some of what we have learnt in a way that can be of benefit to you, too. However, reading about something is seldom as fulfilling, stimulating or rewarding as doing it yourself. We encourage you to try out some of what you've read here for yourself. Please visit our website for more ideas and helpful material – and please share your own action learning findings and stories with us, too.



[www.barefootguide.org](http://www.barefootguide.org)

## Overview of the BFG2 action research process

In our action research programme the action research cycle happened on multiple levels: (i) individual, (ii) organisational, (iii) inter-organisational at regional level and (iv) inter-organisational at global level.

Reflection workshops were, in most cases, held three times within each **regional** hub:

The **first** reflection workshop focused on developing a shared understanding of action research, refining organisational research questions, and developing plans for the first action phase. Many hubs used the opportunity to introduce the Barefoot Guide2. Building relationships between members (some were strangers to each other, while in other hubs, participants knew each other well) was also an important task – particularly as the programme hoped these hubs would develop into communities of practice.

The **second** reflection workshop was to reflect on the action undertaken, to make sense of the information collected thus far and to plan for the next action phase. Again we believed that this interim, or second, workshop would be important in helping to maintain and develop the relationships between hub members.

The **third** reflection workshop was to reflect on all the action undertaken and to make sense of all the information collected – as well as to write a report of the hub’s collective learning and conclusions.

Reflection workshops ranged between two and three days each, and many were residential. There were variations on this norm: In the European hub, members met more often but for a shorter duration. They held six, day-long reflection meetings. Participants in West & Central Africa only met all together once, for their final reflection workshop.

The three reflection phases were interspersed with two action phases of between four and five months each.

The **global** hub followed the same pattern of reflection/action/reflection/action/final reflection and report writing, with approximately eight months between reflection workshops. These workshops were attended by learning facilitators from the initiating organisations. A global holder was appointed and tasked with keeping the group of regional holders connected via skype, email, reports etc. between reflection workshops.

The hubs, at regional level, provided a space for collective reflection on actions taken at organisational level. It also helped to gather information which addressed the global questions. At global level, members reflected on regional findings and asked, ‘what picture is developing?’ What answers to the global questions are emerging?’

The hubs at both levels, regional and global, provided a stimulating space to share, learn from and support one another as learning facilitators. Without exception, these hubs reported a growing sense of community and identified this as a key enabler **and** benefit of their participation.

### Who is the ‘we’?

The global hub comprised 2 – 3 practitioners from the following ‘initiating’ organisations:

- CDRA (South Africa) • EASUN (Tanzania/Kenya) • MCNV (Vietnam) • PRIA (India)
- PSO (Netherlands) • VSO (Ghana) • VSO (Thailand/Burma)

This group formed the backbone of the action research programme, serving as researchers and learning facilitators in their own organisations, as regional holders within their regions, and as a global research team and community of practice.



Regional holders were learning facilitators from the initiating organisations, engaged in the action research process, who took on the additional responsibilities of organising and facilitating regional reflection workshops, and were available to provide light support on action research to other learning facilitators.

Each of the initiating organisations invited organisations within their own region to participate in a regional action research hub. Six regional hubs were established: South East Asia, South Asia, Southern Africa, Western & Central Africa, East Africa, and Europe. Each hub consisted of two representatives from approximately four civil society organisations, including the initiating (host) organisation.

These ‘representatives’ were learning facilitators within their own organisation. We used the term ‘learning facilitator’ for anyone who helps or is interested in helping her/his organisation learn from experience. It is a role but not necessarily a formal position.

A total of 24 organisations took part in the year-long research programme. An on-line hub was also set up as an action learning forum, attracting 235 members (of which 10% were active in contributing to discussion) from 76 countries.

## What were we researching?

On a global level, the group decided on two framing questions:

1. How can civil society organisations improve their own learning practices?
2. What contribution can the BFG2, and similar materials, make to these processes of improvement?

At a regional level, organisations were invited to determine their own research or learning question. This was in fact their first task.

In most organisations the research question was defined through a process of conversation among colleagues. In one or two, it was set by top management. In South Asia, the hub decided to formulate a common regional question which all its members would research. The hub anticipated that a single question would be useful in building an effective community of practice and for the comparative analysis of findings from the five participating organisations.

Whether organisational or hub specific, these questions had to directly serve a learning need, challenge or goal within each organisation. The only frame imposed was that organisational questions needed to connect with the global questions in some way. For many, it was this freedom to define their own question and learning agenda that attracted them to the programme and the direct connection between their question and needs that kept them involved.

Research questions varied between organisations, but the following three clusters emerged:

1. Organisational development – e.g.: How can we use learning to strengthen leadership? How can we manage organisational identity?
2. Organisational systems – e.g.: How do you prioritise learning and feed it into planning and review systems? How can you ensure documentation and reflection for learning? How can PME contribute to learning in organisation and partners? How do you systematise institutional learning and convert it into learning products?
3. Strengthening existing learning practices – e.g.: How to ensure practice retreats assist to understand and harness individual contributions? How to facilitate group learning? How to make better use of reflection events? How to translate individual learning to organisational learning?

It was helpful for organisations to view their first attempts at formulating questions as starting questions, and to recognise that questions would likely evolve over time.

It was also important for organisational and hub questions to connect with the global framing questions, so as to ensure some common ground between regions. Along with the strong resonance between the first global and regional questions, organisations undertook to engage with the BFG2 and report back on their experience (Global question 2). The level of engagement varied tremendously, from all members of staff working with the Guide in structured reading and reflection sessions, to only the learning facilitators consulting the Guide from time to time. Both extremes, plus the middle ground, were considered legitimate responses. The Guide was to be seen as a resource, not prescribed reading.

## **What was in it for organisations?**

We imagined the benefits for participating organisations would include:

1. A one-year facilitated programme for developing their own organisational learning practice, based on own questions and challenges.
2. Peer learning and support within a regional community of practice.
3. Support from regional holders on action research.
4. Opportunity to profile themselves as a collaborative and learning organisation.

While funding covered all travel and workshop expenses at regional and international level, organisations were not paid for participating in these reflection workshops, or for the time it took to conduct the research at organisational level.

## **What participating organisations said about the benefits after the AR?**

*The action research process ultimately contributed to empowering learning facilitators.*

*The hub workshops built the confidence of key staff in the organisations and helped them gain an understanding of action research and learning.*

*Thrashing out our 'real' learning question with peers from other organisations as a resource and sounding board, was really valuable.*

*Feeling part of a group of practitioners who share similar interests and struggles, knowing this is a collective process and pulling together with no competition has been an incredible learning experience.*

*The fact that participants all went through an action research process, faced practical challenges and generated practical solutions – that helped immensely to get real experience-based advice – not theory!*

*The action research process has added value. We can do something with the insights we have gained. We are one step further.*

## Participants in the Barefoot Guide 2 Action Research Programme

### SOUTHERN AFRICA HUB

#### Community Connections

Andile Sanayi, Thamie Mana, Sakhiwo Toto Gxabela

**VVOB Zimbabwe** - Robert Chipimbi, Mqaphelisi Sibanda, Michael Brian Gumunyu

#### EDUCO AFRICA

Linda Mtshibe, Alison Lee

#### Community Development Resource Association

Nomvula Dlamini, Shelley Arendse, Sandra Hill, Desiree Paulsen, Siobahin Pothier

### EUROPE HUB

#### PSO capacitybuilding in developing countries

Arja Aarnoudse, Jacqueline Verhagen

#### Transition in the East Alliance

Akke Schuurmans on behalf of Medical Committee Netherlands Vietnam, Merlijn Kouprie on behalf of Worldgranny

#### Voluntary Service Overseas Netherlands

Risette Voeten, Caroline van der Wal

#### International Institute for Communication and Development

Saskia Harmsen, Liesbeth Hof

#### VVOB Belgium

Tom Vandenbosch, Jeroen De Wilde

### SOUTH ASIAN HUB

#### Bidyarthi Jagran Manch (BIJAM)

Mahesh Aryal, Milan Adhikari

#### Sahbhagi Shikshan Kendra (SSK)

Nagendra Singh

#### Unnati -Organisation for Development Education

Swapni Shah, Geeta Sharma

#### Centre for Youth and Social Development (CYSD)

Binaya Rout

#### SAMARTHAN-Centre for Development Support

Harsh Verma

#### Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA)

Namrata Jaitli, Prabhat Failbus, Sumitra Srinivasan

### WEST AFRICAN HUB

#### Ghana Blind Union

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#### NorthWest Association of NGOs Cameroon

Ngang Eric, Ndambi Angemba

#### Voluntary Service Overseas Ghana

Kafui Odoi Mills, Eunice Agbenyadzi

#### FANTSUAM Foundation Nigeria

Comfort Kazanka, Teresa Tesfida

### SOUTH EAST ASIAN HUB

#### Medical Committee Netherlands-Vietnam

Quang Ho Sy

#### Ta'ang Students and Youth Organizations

Lway Phoo Reang, Kevina Maddick, Mai Aung Ko

#### International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Lay Eng Tan, Andy McElroy

#### Voluntary Service Overseas Thailand, Burma and Laos

Thomas Achilles

#### Village Health Workers' Association Vietnam

Tung Thanh Nguyen

### EAST AFRICA HUB

#### East Africa Support Unit for NGOs

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#### Uzima kwa Sanaa

Novatus Urassa, Abdulla Mfuruki, Hassan Bumbuli, Rehema Kilapilo, Vera Pieroeth, Joseph Peniel, Oscar Kakila, Hilda Marko

#### Kamurugu Agricultural Development Initiatives

Peter Mbogo, Lucy Ileri, Michael Nyaga, Doris Ndung'u, Monika Mwaniki, Christopher Mugo

### ONLINE HUB

#### Fauna and Flora International

Helen Schneider

#### Community Development Resource Association

Doug Reeler

#### HIVA Leuven

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