Practitioner's Guide:

Peer-to-Peer
Learning Approaches

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Peer-to-Peer Learning Approaches

Brief Description
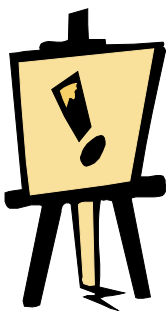
In many government bodies, people are often motivated to talk about the experiences they have made in their own working environment. If they come to another region facing similar challenges, they have the opportunity to compare and reflect what is good in their place, and what they can learn from another. While people living in an environment often "get used" to persisting problems, as they are coping with them in their day to day life, outsiders often perceive problems differently.
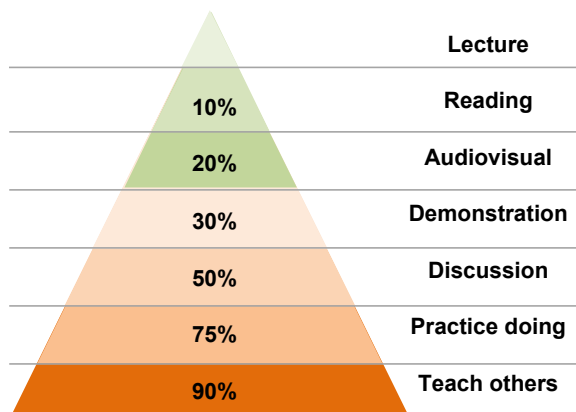
A single chat between farmers or between local government staff from different areas can induce more change, than many lessons of formal training.

Some of the reasons include:
▶ People of the same level speak the same language, have similar practical experience, have much in common with each other and therefore communicate with greater ease
▶ The exchange of experience takes place without expectations, hidden agenda or other pressures. It is up to the peers to adopt, copy or reject any practice and opinion. If an organisation is carrying out a formal training, the trainees might feel some pressure to respond in a certain way.
▶ Outsiders can give an unbiased advice. It is sincere, can address sensitive problems without being politically or personally motivated. That puts the outside advisor in a neutral position (i.e. which can be accepted by the conflicting stakeholders).
▶ Peer-to-Peer learning is demand driven, the most burning issues will be discussed first. Ways of practical implementation gain priority over theoretical discussions.

Peer-to-Peer learning supports the multiplication of good practices, stimulates an exchange of experience from experts of similar working environments from one area or country to another.

Fig. 1: Learning Pyramid

	Lecture
10%	Reading
20%	Audiovisual
30%	Demonstration
50%	Discussion
75%	Practice doing
90%	Teach others

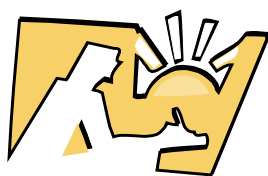*Source: National Training Laboratories, Bethel, Maine*

Peer-to-Peer Learning Approaches

Proposed Main Users

Development Organisations,
National, Provincial and Local Governments

Purpose of the Method

Many government bodies have limited human and budget capacities to appropriately fulfil the tasks a government has to perform. Due to unequal availability of expertise and knowledge within government bodies, good practices are often not replicated. These deficits can be overcome through peer-to-peer learning approaches.

Peer-to-Peer learning is a mutual learning approach. It identifies experts and their successful performance in one area and propagates its usefulness for adaption in other areas, by promoting exchange of their experience and knowledge. The approach can be applied on local, provincial, national or regional level and various formats can be chosen to stimulate this transfer of knowledge.

Therefore, it is important to identify and document showcases of best practices have been successfully transferred from one area to another. The transfer of knowledge includes a critical reflection of a given concept and identification of ways of adopting (or adapting) a concept in one area or another. Peer-to-Peer learning supports the natural behaviour of learning from others with similar expertise, where good ideas and concepts are reflected and adapted into another environment.

Peer-to-Peer Learning Approaches

Advantages

▶ Peer-to-Peer learning supports the idea of self-help and demand oriented learning and appreciative inquiry.

▶ Inter-disciplinary cooperation of experts from various sectors can support a centralised Government in tackling issues from different perspectives more sustainably.

▶ Learning is mutual in both directions, both peers express what they have achieved and what is difficult to achieve. The guest peer brings its own experience which can then be compared under different circumstances.

▶ The learning environment is the working environment. There is no external training telling the people what to do in theory, or an Organisation doing a training possibly with a hidden agenda. The positive results of good practices can be shown on site. This leads to a high absorption of knowledge.

▶ The visiting peer has no personal interest in changing the situation of a neighbouring area.

▶ Expert networks and internet technologies can further support the exchange of experiences after a Peer-to-Peer exercise.

Limitations

▶ Peer-to-Peer learning approaches require extra resources, these can only often be allocated if policies are changed at the national level. Both time and financial allocations are needed for staff to be able to participate in peer to per learning exercises. In many cases, donor agencies support is needed to be able to demonstrate for the success of Peer-to-Peer learning exercises.

▶ Visiting peers must be able to cope with other cultures, other means of transport, and live an a different environment. This can have a negative impact on their motivation.

▶ It is difficult, to assess the quality of a Peer-to-Peer exercise, as its long term impact can not be measured easily.

▶ Centralised top-down governments are not familiar with Peer-to-Peer approaches and have to be convinced of its positive impact and synergetic effect.

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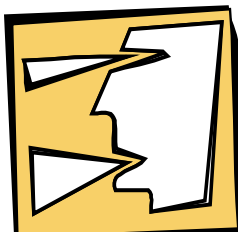
Preconditions

A number of preconditions have to be fulfilled in order to integrate Peer-to-Peer learning in the development policy of a country:

▶ The **national government has some interest** to implement Peer-to-Peer learning to improve its development. This often requires donor support in order to initially demonstrate the benefits to be derived from of Peer-to-Peer learning.

▶ The **identification of the level** (international, national, province, district, village) where Peer-to-Peer learning shall implemented. Is the learning required on decision making level, or on technical implementation level, or is a mix of both necessary?

▶ **Travel within a region is possible and affordable**. Often budget requirements limit the opportunities to travel and exchange ideas and knowledge, but also cultural differences and conflicts might influence the decision where peer-to-peer learning is possible.

▶ **Peers are motivated and willing to travel and share their knowledge.** Some people are not willing to move from one place to another, others do not have an interest to share their knowledge, because it is their only asset.

▶ **Ensure continuation of the learning process after the peer-to-peer learning exercise.** Keeping peers connected to expert networks through continuation of visits, networking platforms, IT based platforms, conferences, meetings, fairs, etc. sustains the effort.

Resources and cost-effectiveness

Seconding peers as experts to a neighbouring countries or within the region is often most cost effective. If experts work at the national level, it is useful to second them to a neighbour country, whereas successful community developers might spread their advice in their neighbouring communities. While most international travel are costly, experience exchange between local governments are cost-effective and most likely have a positive impact.

Peer-to-Peer Learning Approaches

Principles & General Procedures
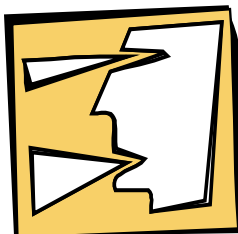
A. Preparation

Step 1: Identify the topics of knowledge transfer

Which are the main challenges and topics that peers shall be exposed to? Having a clear idea on the main topics the peer-to-peer session shall focus, and which take home messages can be potentially expected. This highly depends also on the choice of format, the area or country visited and the experts exposed.

How many topics and aspects can be successfully transferred from one peer to another? Quite often it is also important to not overload the agenda with too much content in order to allow the peers to focus on their particular areas of interest. It is useful to think in stages of development and focus on the next steps necessary for one peer to learn from another. It might be more useful to repeat a Peer-to-Peer learning exercise at a later stage with a different or advanced rather than overloading such an exercise with too many topics or whose application would be required too far in the future.

Peer-to-Peer learning is bidirectional, will both peers have a chance to present their achievements? Peer-to-Peer learning requires mutual understanding, therefore it is often useful, to allow both sides to present their achievements and challenges (see also Step 7). If that is done at the beginning of a Peer-to-Peer session, it is more likely that discussions are lively and the focus is put on joint interests.

This step and the following steps 2-4 are often considered at the same time.

Step 2: Choose hierarchical level(s) to participate

Once the learning topics has been broadly identified, it is important to **identify which experts require Peer-to-Peer learning on which hierarchical or government level**. In many cases, it might be useful to expose staff from different hierarchical levels to jointly elaborate ways of adapting the newly gained knowledge. On the other side, special managerial and technical knowledge might be required on the different hierarchical levels, therefore individual formats should be chosen for peers from different levels.

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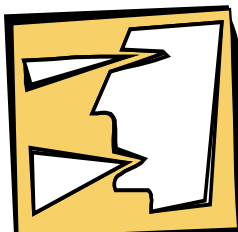
Step 3: Choose format(s) of the Peer-to-Peer learning exercise considering available resources

Different formats can be chosen to create the environment, where Peer-to-Peer learning can be conducted:

▶ A **delegation visit** (often on national level): high ranking decision makers (e.g. Ministers, State Secretaries) visit a country for exchange of information on policy or upper management level, often accompanied by diplomatic protocols. This format often requires large amounts of resources (finances and manpower), and mainly focuses on transfer of knowledge on policy or decision-making level.

▶ An **administrative partnership**, often based on a memorandum of understanding. Leader and employees of an administrative body see, experience and discuss the procedures, decision making structures and technical approaches with their advantages and limitations. By establishing an ongoing relationship, there is a resource person, that can be addressed with questions at any time. For employees of an advanced administration, it is an opportunity to reflect upon their gained experiences and to share them with others.

▶ A **cooperation between professional associations** - similar to an administrative partnership - is also normally based on a memorandum of understading. There exchange of experiences often focuses on: set-up and structure of the association, statute, financing model and exchange of expertise during joint conferences, that result from such partnership.

▶ A **study tour or exposure trip** (group size is relevant to allow for sufficient in-depth discussions), often conducted for about 10-20 people with a similar professional background on implementation level. The smaller and more homogeneous the group, the higher the level of detail, that can be exchanged during discussions and field visits.

▶ A **conference** (often for 1-5 days), which supports multinational exchange of experiences from all sides and provides an interface between academia and government/implementation level. These often help to stimulate awareness in policy making processes or help technical experts to discuss complex issues in breakout sessions.

▶ A **seminar** (often 1-5 days)**,** which allows an in depth exchange of experiences of experts on implementation level, and can be designed for a direct purpose.

▶ **Visit to pilot areas of implementation** (hands on experiences), which allows outsiders to gain a first hand view on implementation activities and tangible results while talking to implementers and target beneficiaries.

▶ **Participation at a fair or other event** (every peer promotes her/his achievements and expertise)

▶ **IT based networks** (e.g. Facebook, skype, twitter, webinars, mailing lists etc), often used to follow up activity to sustain learning processes, after experts have met as real persons in a previous workshop or conference.

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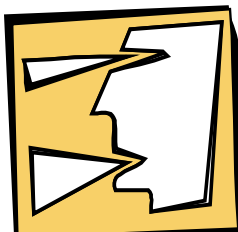
▶ **Cooperation projects with universities** or other academic institutions - often a win-win situation for both government and universities: the government can delegate important research questions to the university and the universities gain insights into teaching demands.

Step 4: Identify advanced/successful show cases or pilots and champions who implemented them

It takes time and efforts to identify show cases, where transferable knowledge exists. Many developing projects develop their own successful pilot areas in which they can demonstrate successful implementation of their topics. In their case, it should be considered, how much resources were necessary to make the pilots a show case, as government resources are often limited.

However, similar state institutions often face the same or similar problems within a region. Therefore, it is often recommended to investigate on experiences gained and achievements made in neighboring countries/areas within the same region, within a similar cultural/physical context. However, it is also useful to expose peers to a highly advanced area in order to create a vision of what can be possible in the future.

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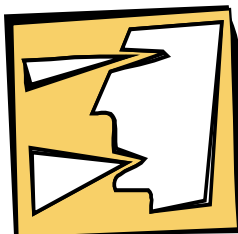
B. Implementation

Step 5: Conduct peer-to-peer learning exercise(s)

Depending on the chosen format, the Peer-to-Peer learning exercises can be implemented. This requires:
- Planning and allocation of budget, required resources and time lines,
- Timely invitation of participants including agenda and confirmation of the participant's availability,
- Organization of logistics, such as venue, travel & accommodation arrangements (visa and insurances), appointments with key experts,
- Provision of information and skills (e.g. for IT based learning) to prepare the peers well for the event,
- Informing the media about the event, or Embassies in case high ranking people are involved.

Step 6: Reflection

It is useful to conduct a lessons learnt workshop after the peer-to-peer learning exercise. The peers can reflect on which knowledge was gained during the Peer-to-Peer learning event and which knowledge can be adapted within their given working context. Outsiders, that did not participate in the exercise have a chance to learn from the peers.

Step 7: Shifting the perspective

While some formats directly allow the exchange of experiences between the peers in both directions, it is worthwhile considering to shift the perspective again. If a study tour or seminar was done in order to transfer good practices from one country to another, it might be useful to invite the previously visited champions to the country / area, where the newly gained knowledge is adopted. This shift of perspective also strengthens the dialogue between the peers and allows the advanced peer to perceive the environment, in which the gained knowledge shall be adapted or adopted.

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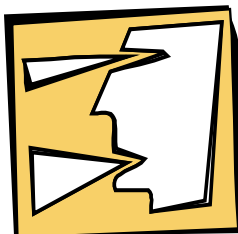
Step 8: Connect peers to networks of expertise

Learning processes should ideally not end after a peer-to-peer learning exercise, as they have just been the stimulus of applying changes within a working environment. Therefore, it is important, that peers continue to stay in touch with a network of experts performing similar tasks. This happens by informal or formal networking, which can be done in many ways:

- ▶ Exchange of contact details,
- ▶ Mutual invitations to conferences and other related events,
- ▶ Joint organization of seminars and workshops,
- ▶ Donor driven activities by regional funds,
- ▶ Development of IT supported expert networks (facebook groups, webinars, skype conferences, mailing lists, learning platforms etc.)
- ▶ Invitation to Lessons learnt workshops after successful implementation

Peer-to-Peer Learning Approaches

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