

A practical approach for supporting learning in development organisations

Reflections on the FCDO Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development (K4D) Programme

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Overview

The Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development (K4D) Programme, which started in 2016, comes to an end in September 2022. K4D is a programme funded by and for the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (initially with the Department for International Development, DFID, which was merged with the FCO in 2020). To reflect on the processes and approaches of learning that K4D enabled over the years, a special Working Paper series will be published. One important pillar of the programme was to facilitate learning processes through learning journeys. A total of 33 learning journeys took place during K4D. This summary looks back at the K4D concept, the learning journeys, the learning processes it supported, and the outcomes enabled.

The paper finds that there is evidence that K4D learning journeys have helped enable sound, informed decision-making through collective understanding of issues and options, and through internal consensus on directions. Effective learning spaces were created and the methods used (including online tools for participation) were able to capture and share internal learning, foster internal connections, present external evidence and bring in other perspectives. However, success in enabling external alliances for decisions and change was more constrained, since most learning journeys engaged only in limited ways with external organisations. Further challenges were encountered when staff were redeployed to respond to political (Brexit) or international development (COVID-19, Ukraine) priorities.

K4D and the concept of Learning Journeys

K4D supported the take up of evidence and promoted learning first in DFID and later in FCDO. Learning is key in the fast-changing and complex arena of international development and diplomacy. To deliver consistent and coherent learning processes for staff, organisational learning is central, as it creates an environment in which an organisation enables staff to reflect on experience and external sources of evidence, generates new knowledge, tests and adapts to respond to changing contexts. To enable these processes, the concept of learning journeys came into place. The premise of the K4D learning journey is to combine evidence syntheses and other external inputs with the know-how and practical

knowledge of colleagues and partners, through a structured dialogue. Facilitated learning spaces bring together both explicit and tacit forms of knowledge. Held and commissioned by FCDO, these spaces provide an architecture for operational and strategic learning. As such, learning journeys entail a personal and organisational investment, requiring the commitment of time for participation in spaces for the generation of knowledge and learning. This investment is expected to create ownership of the activities and learning objectives by the relevant staff.

Assessment of the 33 K4D learning journeys shows that the top three thematic areas covered were: i) Inclusive Development, ii) Environment and Climate Change, and iii) Conflict, Fragile States and Security. Most of the journeys were not directly linked with a specific geographical region. On the other hand,

many learning journeys embedded focus countries, which were often used as case studies. The requests for learning journeys often came from UK-based head-office staff, which might explain the lower number of clear regional or country focused learning journeys. In total, K4D learning journeys facilitated 152 events. These events ranged from launch events, workshops, to larger roundtable discussions. Three purposes for initiating learning journeys could be identified: i) to strengthen learning and access to evidence and best practices (e.g. raise awareness on a specific issue), ii) to contribute to specific programmes or interventions (e.g. theory of change, diagnostics, guidance), iii) to build internal and external connections (e.g. breaking silos, identifying good practices and sharing experiences).

Theory of Change

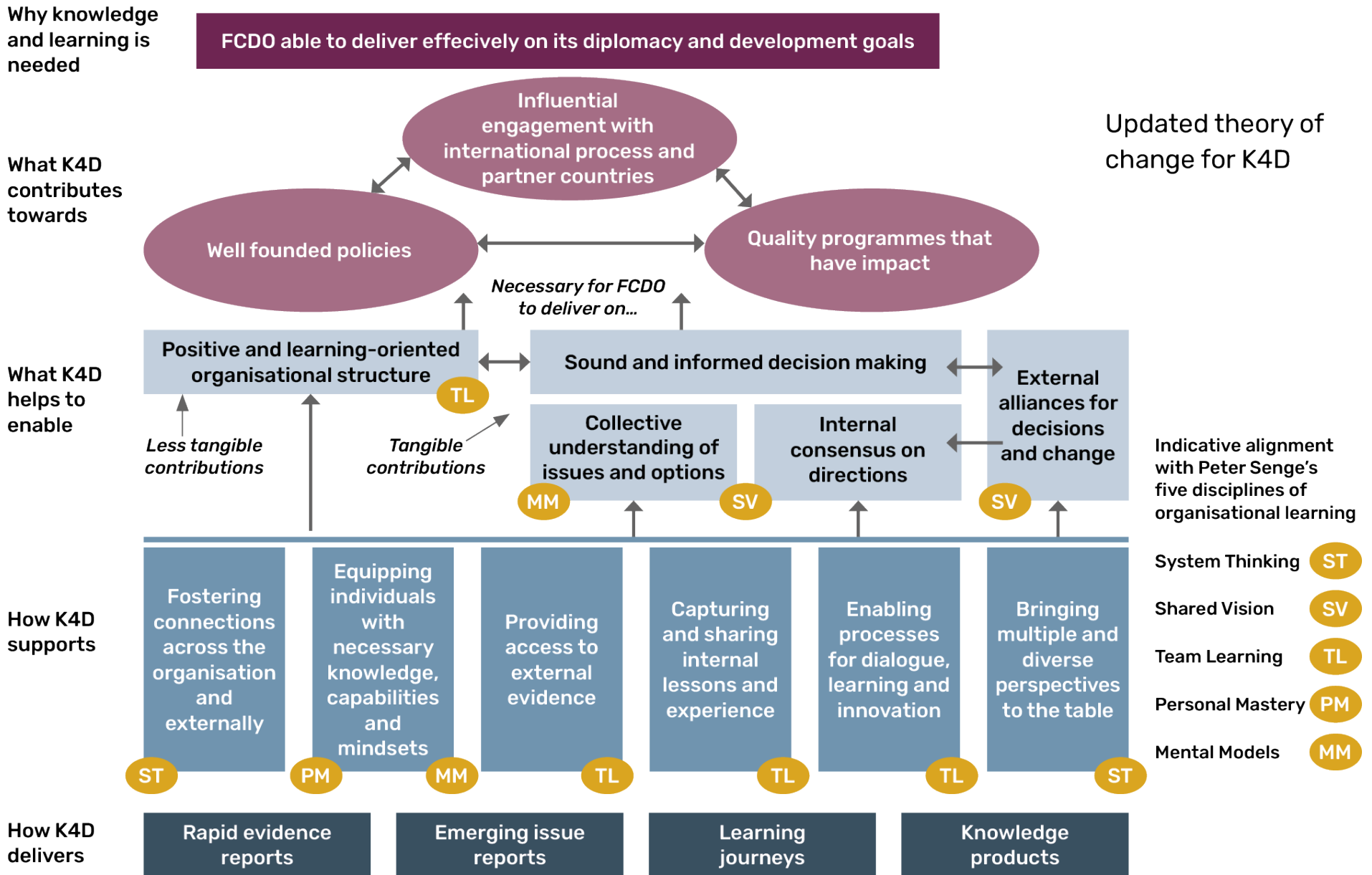
The working paper constructed and tested the theory of change that was adapted from the initial one (see Figure 1). Three dimensions are key in this framing. Firstly, we explicitly connect knowledge and learning processes to decision making. Second, we trace a connection between individual learning, internal organisational learning, and learning with external partners and stakeholders. Thirdly, we acknowledge the critical role that more intangible knowledge, learning and engagement processes play in creating a culture for sound and informed decision making, yet which can be hard to directly quantify. The foundation of this theory of change is the individual and group learning processes that are enabled through learning journeys. Learning journeys: open up spaces for staff to connect across FCDO; bring in new processes for effective dialogue, learning and innovation; are often instrumental in opening dialogues by bringing new evidence, other perspectives and voices to the table; support the organisation with external evidence and expertise; enable staff to capture and share their own experiences, lessons and knowledge; and support individual staff to develop the knowledge, capabilities and mindsets necessary to be effective in their professional roles.

Learning processes in learning journeys

One key process in learning journeys was to foster connections. We see that these connections were mainly internally focused, although some learning journeys had contributions from external organisations (e.g. other donor agencies, partner organisations) embedded within the design of the learning journey. As many learning journeys had a multi-disciplinary approach, understanding linkages between disciplines relies on an exchange of knowledge and experiences across specialised groups and departments. The learning journeys that were most successful in building and fostering connections had members of different teams, cadres, and organisations present within the core organising team from the outset. This ensured ownership and engagement of multiple teams throughout the entire learning journey. Connections were easier to make when a learning journey was organised in the lead up to a special event, conference, or summit.

Several learning journeys started with an internal focus, then invited external practitioners, partner organisations, civil society organisations, and other donor organisations at the later stages of the journey. This was mostly the case for learning journeys that focused on new topics, where the initial internal discussions were designed to facilitate internal thinking, and to identify knowledge gaps to discuss later with external organisations. Other journeys deliberately did the opposite, starting discussions with externals and ending the journey with internal discussions on how to use that information to improve internal practices. Importantly, knowledge generated through these connections, such as lessons learned and experiences, could be captured and stored throughout the learning journeys. For example, the learning journeys captured knowledge by facilitating participatory processes in workshops (such as collaborative scenario planning, role play games, rich picture drawing, photography, and video presentations), but also captured information and lessons learned by conducting interviews with external experts and other key stakeholders in

Figure 1. How K4D learning and evidence services contribute to organisational learning and decision making within FCDO



videos and reports. This also made learning journeys of great interest for existing networks or communities of practice. In some cases, time constraints reduced the innovative pedagogic ambition.

One of the main objectives of learning journeys was to equip individuals with necessary knowledge capabilities and mindsets. “Strengthening capabilities” was often targeted at specific tasks, such as country diagnostics, developing a Theory of Change, and specific service delivery. However, there are challenges to covering all FCDO capability needs; it is necessary to scope out the client’s needs and to prioritise carefully from the beginning. Importantly, learning journeys made evidence accessible in various ways, such as guidance notes, infographics, policy briefs, and briefing packs for diplomats.

From learning processes to outcomes

Learning journeys played a key role in sound and informed decision making, through creating internal consensus on direction, and improving collective understanding of issues and options. Participation in a learning journey increased capabilities to share knowledge and engage with others on emerging and complex topics. Many participants appreciated how they were able to

make links between theory and practice through the learning journey processes. They valued learning journeys for bridging gaps in internal knowledge, and in some cases, enabling participants to open up from a technical to a political conversation. Good decision-making is underpinned by having confidence in the appropriate evidence, and time to deliberate on it in safe spaces (internally or with external experts). For example, this working paper mentions some evidence that learning journeys informed the former-DFID Africa Strategy; contributing to agenda setting and improved discussions on food systems with high-level staff. In more specific ways, several learning journeys contributed to decision-making on programme design. For example, one learning journey contributed to the development of former-DFID business case for a new Africa Climate programme.

However, the higher the outcome levels in the theory of change, the more challenging it is to identify causality between Learning Journeys and specific outcomes. Monitoring and evaluation processes struggle to capture such evidence, particularly as learning journeys are one of many other learning and political processes that impact on programme, partnership, and policy outcomes. Higher level outcomes are outside the direct sphere of influence of an evidence and learning programme such as K4D.

Lessons learned

What are the lessons learned from the K4D experience with learning journeys?

- > Unpacking the ‘black box’ of organisational learning: There is a need for a more sophisticated understanding about how learning inputs lead to organisational learning. There needs to be recognition of how learning inputs and processes make indirect, as well as direct, contributions to outcomes, and acknowledgement of the intangible nature of some aspects of a positive and learning-oriented organisational culture.
- > Valuing the process elements of learning: Facilitated spaces for learning create or strengthen group interactions, enabling people to analyse different sources of evidence (including knowhow) and generate new knowledge together. Learning should be linked to practice and should inform ongoing activities, business planning, and implementation decision-making (i.e. adaptive management).
- > Valuing the relational elements of organisational learning: Investment in organisational learning requires not only provision of knowledge, but also enabling the interconnection between individual learning, internal organisational learning and learning with external partners and stakeholders. Central to this, is the creation, strengthening and resourcing of spaces in which staff can come together to reflect on practice, discuss evidence, question or identify problems, and co-create potential solutions.
- > Combining theory, evidence and practice: Combining theory and practice is valued by participants and is at the core of a learning culture. Evidence reviews combined with online workshop/webinar discussions, bring together policy makers and programmers within the organisation to share and deconstruct their individual experiences.
- > Capacities of the external learning provider: A consortia approach has provided FCDO with a breadth and depth of expertise across its thematic priorities, with an ability to draw in researchers and thematic leads across leading academic institutions. A consortium can ensure that researchers have the range of expertise and can produce relevant knowledge outputs in a timely way. Researchers also need to be adaptive and responsive within a demand driven model. Flexibility is key for responding to the changing needs of the organisation, and reshaping a learning journey at key moments.
- > What’s needed internally to the learning organisation: Leadership support within the learning organisation is critical for the legitimacy of the K4D programme and for ensuring active engagement of staff. This leadership needs to encourage and enable staff to engage; leading by example by joining the learning journeys themselves, as well as advertising and communicating learning opportunities across the organisation.
- > Facilitations include strong external communication and data systems: social media presence has enabled K4D knowledge products to be widely shared enhancing the public-good benefits of K4D. New Data systems, currently being developed, will ensure existing products are accessible over time, and that updated evidence can build on these and be produced in similar formats.

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