The LearningSystem©

An alternative way of managing complex and dynamic development processes with quality and efficiency

The LearningSystem is an outcome-based planning and management system for innovation processes. It was experientially developed in numerous initiatives over the past 7 years, as a response to a lack of tools and methods to manage process-type interventions with an adequate quality, stakeholder involvement and process efficiency without being boxed and stifled by rigid linear thinking in logframes. Often 'process' and 'participation' has been used more as an excuse for weak planning & implementation and non-accountability for weak results, rather than meaning a true commitment to engage stakeholders in quality learning processes which enhance performance and outcomes. Process efficiency has often been very low and has resulted in a certain fatigue against processes has creeped in. LearningSystem attempts to address these flaws through

- **creating a strong vision / outcome / impact orientation** as a 'guiding star' for all the stakeholders involved in the initiatives (rather than focussing on narrow results and activities). The strong imagination and description of impact to be achieved serves as a reference frame for learning, reflecting and 'navigating' by implementing teams and stakeholders on their effectiveness

- **integrating planning and concept, approach and strategy development** together with stakeholders into a coherent 'joint learning' approach towards impact and effectiveness. Lessons from conventional, result focused development planning have demonstrated how big the gap between planning and conceptual-based strategy development often is. The LearningSystem brings the two worlds together and strengthens implementation teams in their strategy development and adaptation linked to the planning.

- **generating flexible conceptual frameworks** (LearningWheels) with stakeholders as a base for steering and monitoring of initiatives rather than through pre-defined results. Flexibility is at the heart of successful development, but if the boundaries are not clear, it can easily result in a loss of focus. The LearningWheel provides the flexible frame required to define the intervention.

- **integrating strategic monitoring, self-evaluation and knowledge management** together with stakeholders as central elements of process management and continuous improvement of performance. Building on the clear definition of impact and outcomes as the first steps in the process, monitoring of successes and failures are in-built in all the implementers / teams. LearningSystem entails a rigorous self-assessment and short feedback loops to re-strategise and improve performance as a way of doing business.

- **clarify, monitor and assess the quality of process inputs on a regular basis** (e.g. facilitation, vision building, conceptualisation, strategy development, communication, documentation etc.)

## LearningSystem is grounded on two theoretical foundations:

a) The first is **systems thinking** and **systemic intervention** which is reflected in the LearningWheel©.

b) The second foundation is action learning through iterative cycles of action and reflection in implementation. While the LearningWheel provides the systemic frame within which the intervention navigates (the map), action learning is the navigation instrument which enables to explore the system (the compass).

The major steps of the LearningSystem methodology are:

1. **Development of a vision of the outcomes in terms of the desired changes in behaviour of the main players** (ultimately it is the actors themselves who make the development process work and the outside intervention can only trigger changes in the behaviour within the system).

2. **Clarifying the strategy to create the behavioural changes and the products, which are required to influence, and achieving the desired outcomes** (e.g. new approaches, best practices, successful cases etc.) (see figure below).

3. **Development of conceptual frameworks (LearningWheels) for the main products / approaches including the main learning / research questions** for which one is looking for an answer.

4. **Setting up of consistent process documentation, monitoring and learning system,** which allows a quality systematisation and conceptualisation of the lessons and insights together with stakeholders and to assess impacts and outcomes.

5. **Organising the implementation through structures / teams following the functional, integration and capacity requirements** (rather than starting from institutional or political requirements).

6. **Systematisation, conceptualisation and utilising the lessons and knowledge to improve the intervention.**

In the specific reality there is a much finer division of sub-steps which depends on the type of intervention.
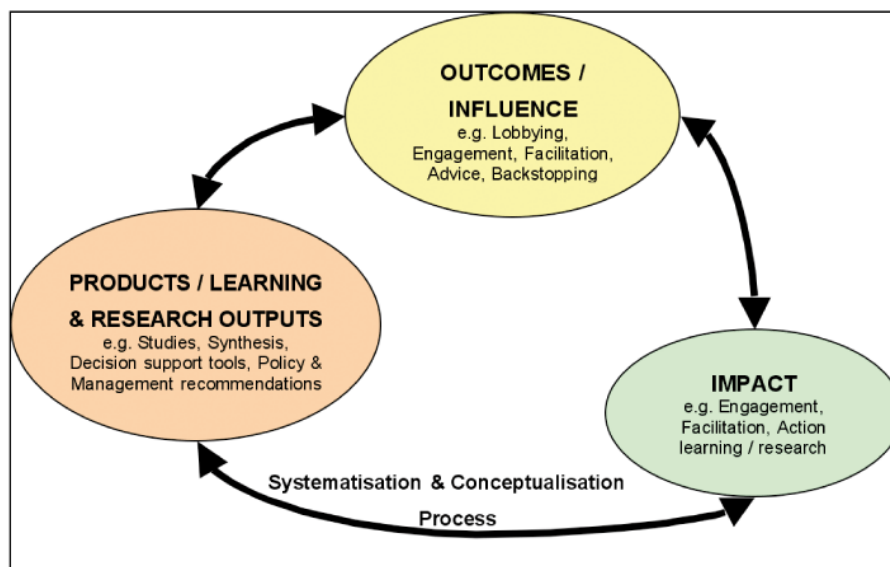
It is evident that this process management system is a tool to manage complex, knowledge-based interventions and innovation processes among stakeholders. It is not designed to plan and manage linear, hardware projects (e.g. like road construction, logistics etc).

LearningSystem has been applied in a range of development programmes and also in research projects. It has been facilitated in a flexible and adaptive way in order to take account of the specific requirements of different situations and contexts. Its major impact has been that programmes integrated more conceptual thinking in the way they steered their interventions towards impact and the quality of learning process implementation has increased. An important part of LearningSystem is commonly agreed quality criteria for assessing process-oriented projects in terms of inputs and outputs.

Some examples for the application of the LearningWheel methodology are: The rural livelihoods programme (RULIV) in Eastern Cape / South Africa and the African Highlands Initiative (AHI) in Eastern Africa and a range of other programs where the main components were applied.

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