



LANDCOLLABORATIVE

Information Note on multi-stakeholder social learning

Richard Lamboll and Valerie Nelson, Natural Resources Institute (NRI),
University of Greenwich



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Dialogue for Change

Developed by the Natural Resources Institute (NRI), this document forms part of a set of learning products for use by Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs), which emerged from a 'Learning Cycle on Engaging the Private Sector' commissioned by the LandCollaborative and facilitated by NRI. The LandCollaborative is a global community of practice that supports the role of national land coalitions, and other forms of multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) and alliances to help deliver system change for people-centred land governance by stimulating innovation, building capacities, providing tools and connecting practitioners and change makers with one another.

What is Social Learning and what is its relevance to Multi-Stakeholder Platforms?

Social learning can be defined as a process in which learning occurs *in a social context through interaction*. Drawing on insights from psychology about how people learn from observations of the behaviour of others in social interactions, multi-stakeholder social learning processes can be used to build trust and enable participants to better understand the perspectives and values of others.

Social learning can be employed by Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs) focused on land rights or other sustainable development initiatives. Learning can be facilitated at and between different scales – from local and subnational to national, regional, and global. The approach can be used to advance knowledge and skills but critically it also generates ownership of the process, leading to increased motivation and willingness to act. It can be used in challenging and controversial contexts, such as land rights disputes and conflicts. The aim is not necessarily to build consensus but **to build shared understanding of the values and perspectives of others through joint learning, as a precursor to action and finding of solutions.**

Learning cycles to structure social learning

Facilitating participatory structured learning cycles can provide an underlying ‘rhythm’ to the process of learning – a pattern that is easy to follow as it provides a guiding structure to the process. Each cycle involves joint reflection on learning priorities, planning of and implementation of creative learning activities, and reflection to inform action strategies. Over time, this builds cumulative knowledge and experience. The steps to follow in a learning cycle include:

- **Identify learning priorities:** Diagnose/ frame / conceptualise an issue
- **Plan learning activities:** Jointly discuss and decide on the nature of the learning activities and their timing, who will participate in different activities, any tools and methods that need to be used or developed, how the activities will be documented and by whom and anticipated outcomes.
- **Conduct learning activities:** Conduct the planned joint learning activities (field visits, studies, pilots, etc) and document progress.
- **Reflect** on the learning activities, using the Theory of Change (ToC) – What has been achieved and why? What has not been achieved and why? Which assumptions held true? See the ToC tool for more details.
- **Feed insights into strategic planning and move to next learning cycle**

Learning Cycle Methodologies can be used in any learning process

NRI have successfully used this approach in various recent projects: the UK AID SAIRLA programme, an EC Global Climate Change Alliance project in Malawi, and in a UK AID evaluation to support learning and adaptive management of DFID’s Partnerships for Forests programme.

Box 1: Social learning involving multiple stakeholders in Africa focusing on sustainable agriculture

In the UK Aid funded programme called Sustainable Agricultural Intensification Research and Learning in Africa (SAIRLA), social learning was facilitated in five countries, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia. Diverse stakeholders were brought together in National Learning Alliances (NLAs) to enable social learning to inform policy and investment decisions around the contested issue of Sustainable

Agricultural Intensification. A broader dialogue process allowed a flow of communication where the conversation can take many directions and concludes with diverse representation of voices and issues, building local ownership. Shorter learning cycles were more oriented to deliberative decision-making around SAI-related policy processes. In Malawi and Zambia, this included highly contested policies and legislation around customary land tenure.

We also employed this approach in the LandCollaborative Learning Cycle on engaging the private sector for responsible agricultural investment, which led to this InfoNote.

The topic of whether and how to engage the private sector is not straightforward – there are both pros and cons to engagement, and the challenges are significant. Further, the LandCollaborative partners have a wealth of experience and contextual knowledge on land rights and private sector impacts around the world. Hence a social learning process provided an opportunity to bring these specialists together to explore the pros and cons together.

Using Social Learning in a virtual learning cycle on engaging the private sector

In 2021–22, a Learning Cycle on engaging the private sector for responsible agricultural investment was undertaken with 27 participants from 12 multi-stakeholder platforms in 12 countries¹. Organised online due to the COVID 19 pandemic, the structured learning cycle included both interactive learning sessions covering some of the basics of land and responsible agricultural investment (RAI) alongside participatory structured learning cycles. Following early discussions to facilitate articulation of learning priorities by the participants, an open-ended list of possible themes was suggested, from which participants could choose and to which they could add. These were then ranked by participants in country groups². The highest ranked theme was “Exploring practical strategies for and experiences of engaging the private sector”. Based on participants’ interests and suggestions, NRI drafted an overall learning objective, plus 3 sub-themes and associated learning outcomes – see below.

The overall objective for Learning theme 1 was to explore practical strategies and experiences to inform the development of MSP private-sector engagement strategies through collective learning, which results in more equitable and sustainable private sector land investments.

Specific sub-themes (and their anticipated outcomes in italics):

1. Communication and learning to bridge differences in perceptions, build understanding and enhance trust amongst diverse civil society organisations (CSOs), the private sector and other actors. *Improved understanding and practical experience gained by participants of how to communicate and build trust with the private sector and amongst diverse MSP actors.*
2. Private-sector motivation and willingness to engage in responsible investment. *Improved understanding gained by participants of private-sector perspectives and drivers of decision making.*
3. Enabling environment for advancing responsible agri-investment by the private sector (company obligations, legislation, capacity, policies, regional processes). *Improved understanding gained by participants of the enabling environment and how it can be informed/ changed by MSP members.*

¹ Two main forms of learning were facilitated: a) interactive learning sessions which explored key fundamentals in responsible land investment and people-centred land governance and b) collective issue-based learning.

² Thirteen themes were suggested, ranging from general issues such as achieving greater transparency, exploring practical engagement strategies, and facilitating community dialogue and strengthening community rights for agribusiness investments, to addressing specific types of investments, for instance in forest crops or public-private partnerships. For full details see the [InfoNote on Learning Needs assessment](#) for the learning cycle.

Participants identified their learning priorities and then split into groups to take different themes to explore. Each group developed a plan – based on a table with columns for ‘reflect’, ‘plan learning’, ‘conduct learning’, etc. and agreed on dates. The process occurred over 12 months.

- Group 1 explored how to build understanding and enhance trust amongst diverse actors through two main activities. Firstly, participants consulted companies that they already have links with and /or felt could be approached to explore communication and trust issues and the results were shared with other group members. Secondly, participants shared their experiences of engaging with the private sector. Some of the documented experiences were further developed into case studies for wider sharing
- Group 2 explored private-sector incentives and motivation with respect to RAI. Participants devised a checklist of questions to guide interviews with investors, conducted a series of interviews by clarifying the purpose of the meeting, confirming confidentiality, and sharing questions in advance. The findings from the interviews, focused on private-sector perspectives, were shared with the group.
- Group 3 explored the enabling environment including its definitions, potential entry points for action in order to change conditions, and requirements for private-sector companies and investors in agricultural land investments.

The findings were shared with the wider Learning Cycle participants in a participatory workshop and fed into the co-generated document on Guidance, link [here](#).

Nested learning processes

An MSP can use social learning to underpin its overall approach, as well as to advance understanding and action on specific themes. Learning cycles can be facilitated at different scales, but they are interconnected, with have differing objectives. A broader process of joint learning and reflection (e.g. at MSP level) can focus on a major issue to support dialogue which leads to enhanced and shared understanding. Nested within this broader learning cycle, are mini-cycles which are deliberative in nature and involve joint learning and reflection on specific challenges or opportunities, ideally leading to solutions and decisions. For example, MSPs may engage in learning and reflection on people-centred land governance (dialogues involving multiple stakeholders), with smaller working groups exploring specific issues (e.g. how to engage the private sector, working with a small group of companies to develop new norms on RAI). In the LandCollaborative learning cycle, a similar nested approach to the learning cycles was adopted.

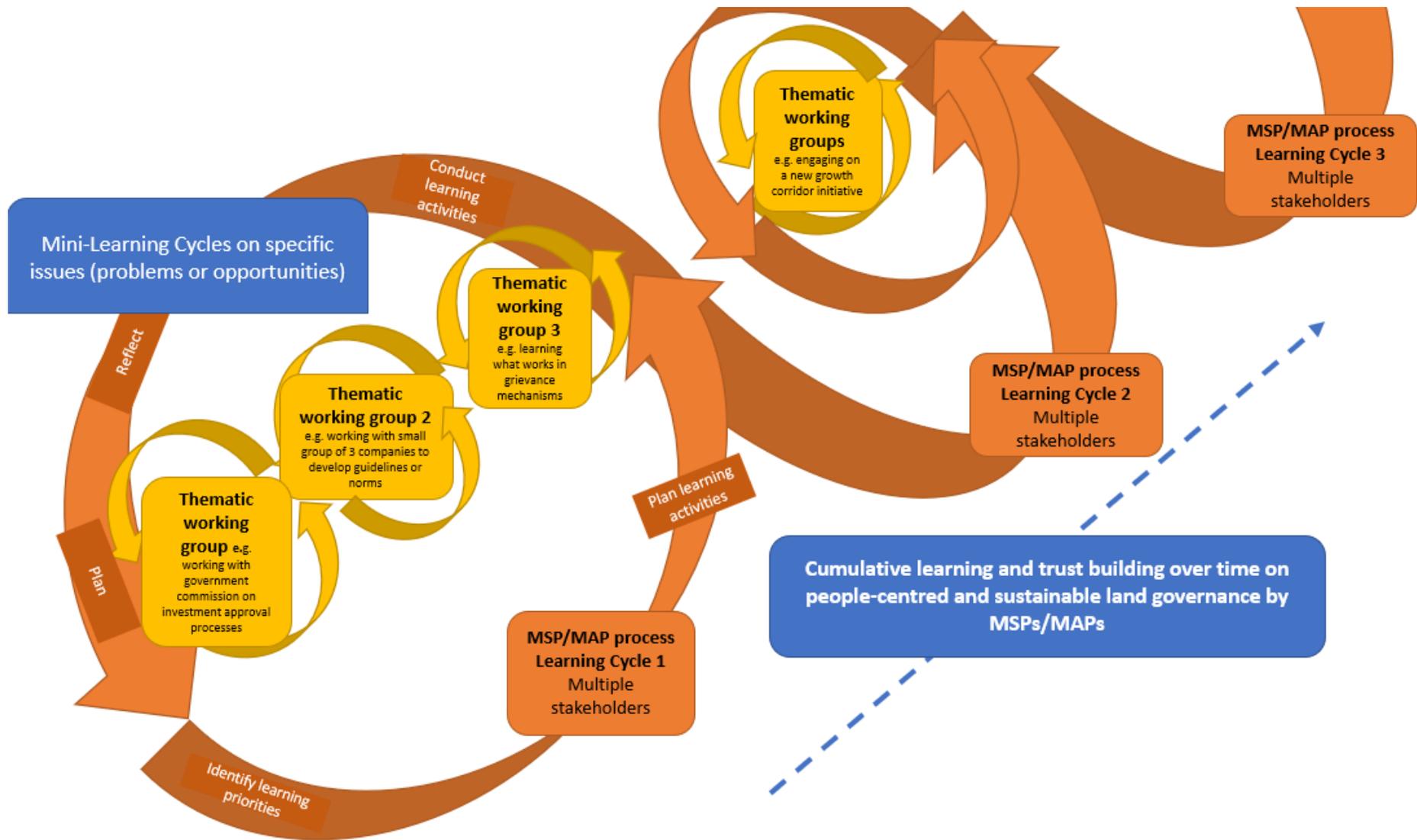


Figure 1: Social Learning - Learning Cycle Methodology

Using Theory of Change to guide learning and reflection

At the initial stage of identifying learning priorities, it is possible to consider how an issue is being framed, to gather further information to inform the conceptualisation of the issue, and to identify learning priorities and needs. To guide this process, Theory of Change (ToC) can be a useful tool. ToC is essentially a visualization of how planned interventions are anticipated to lead to change over time.

Using ToC can be helpful for participants to build a picture of what they are trying to achieve, and to gather evidence to know if their approach is successful or if they need to make adaptations. In this way, ToC can support strategic thinking, supported by evidence. Hence, if an MSP or a working group develops a ToC for what it seeks to achieve, for example strengthening direct engagement with the private sector to lead to RAI, or working to shift policies and laws, institutions, or narratives at national scale or beyond (enabling environment) to indirectly change corporate practice, it is then possible to return to this shared articulation of how interventions lead to outputs, outcomes, impacts and long-term goals. The ToC can be used to guide initial learning to inform strategic action plans and to guide ongoing learning and documentation of experiences and processes once the strategic action plan is implemented (e.g. documenting processes of engaging companies to see if their capacity and practices shift with concrete outcomes for communities and workers), to inform strategic reflection and adaptive management.

Deeper learning

Ideally, to have the greatest value, the social learning process should encourage deeper learning, rather than merely reinforcing existing perspectives. To do this requires particular attention. Organisational management theory points to 'triple loop learning', i.e. learning should not only focus on 'How can I / we do what I am already doing better?' (single loop learning), or 'Am I / we doing the right thing?' (double loop learning), but also 'Who should decide on what is the best approach?' 'And what are the more fundamental shifts required?' (triple loop learning). For example, with respect to people-centred land governance, an MSP may consider how to do what they are currently doing better (single loop learning), but this may ignore the potential to shift corporate practice (as well as the risks of legitimising private-sector concessions). They may also consider if there are different strategic actions they could undertake, such as seeking to work directly with reform-oriented private-sector companies or working on specific aspects of the enabling environment to create conditions for more diverse investment, with private-sector investment following international standards (VGGT and CFS-RAI etc) (double loop learning). Finally, they may also consider who should decide on appropriate approaches (e.g. do they have a broad spectrum of types of members) and what the approach should be (e.g. not only adversarial advocacy, but social learning) and if more fundamental shifts are required (e.g. changing national narratives on the value of smallholder farming and/or national measures of wellbeing rather than GDP as progress) (triple loop learning).