

Taking a Different Approach:

The Social Accountability Learning-in-Action Cycle

Learning Brief



Since 2008, the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability in East Asia and the Pacific (ANSA-EAP) has been working to build a network of competent and empowered social accountability practitioners, advocates and champions in the region. It is their hope that by teaching communities how to engage constructively in government affairs (through checking and monitoring the conduct and performance of public officials and service providers in their use of public resources), the region may take one step closer towards good governance and ethical public leadership. This means a step closer to a society where people's basic needs are met sufficiently, where caring communities are nurtured, and where relationships between its members are anchored on justice and equality.

This learning brief introduces the learning-in-action (LIA) approach, the process ANSA-EAP uses in teaching social accountability to citizen groups. It will explain how the learning-in-action cycle has been applied and what lessons were learned during the process.

The ANSA-EAP Learning Brief summarizes the key learning outcomes and findings of ANSA-EAP and its partner organizations from joint learning and capacity building programs to promote social accountability in East Asia and the Pacific.

LIA IS ALL ABOUT EXPERIENCE

In the learning-in-action approach, the learning process begins by exploring a person's experiences. Where does he come from? What has he lived through? What does he already know about social accountability? From there, ANSA-EAP introduces strategies that will allow him to learn more effective ways of applying social accountability tools, determine governance issues that can be addressed by social accountability mechanisms, and look for possible solutions. The learning process continues as he applies what he has learned to his community.



ANSA-EAP SAS Learning-in-Action Cycle

This, in a nutshell, is learning-in-action. It is ANSA-EAP's belief that true learning can only happen if one can marry his past experiences to new lessons, then use that amalgamation in the application of new experiences.

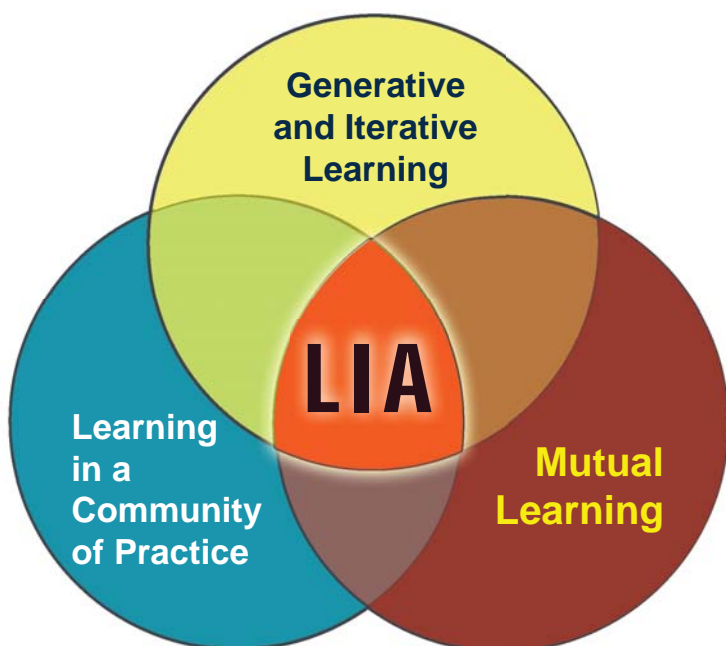


LIA HAS THREE ELEMENTS

ANSA EAP'S learning-in-action approach builds on three symbiotic elements:

Generative and iterative learning

Learning-in-action is both generative and iterative. It is generative because it recognizes that every action results in learning. Social accountability learners are encouraged to actively use emerging ideas and link them to their existing experiences and practice. It is iterative because each of these action-reflection-action cycles broadens and deepens the learner's understanding and application of social accountability.



Mutual learning

Learning-in-action encourages networks and partnerships where mentors and learners both delve deeper into social accountability. It is a two-way process of deep dialogue. It allows learners to develop technical skills and competence while enriching mentors' perspectives and knowledge.



Learning in a community of practice

Social accountability learning-in-action also entails learning within a community of practice. The basic idea is that learning in social accountability does not only happen by doing it, but also by sharing knowledge and participating in conversations with other social accountability practitioners and stakeholders. By networking in the region, ANSA-EAP has brought together citizen groups, government champions and individual advocates engaged in social accountability. ANSA-EAP's learning strategies include developing effective platforms and programs for the active exchange of social accountability tales, tools and techniques among its' network and learning partners.

LIA BEGINS BY BLENDING

Blended learning that is. Whether partners come from the government, media groups, volunteer organizations or donor organizations, no one learning program of ANSA-EAP is exactly the same. Each program is tailor-fitted to the needs of partners. This coincides with the learning-in-action principle of building knowledge from past experience. The aim is to come up with an effective combination of different learning modalities to ensure internalization of lessons and sustained learning.

Before implementing programs, an initial online discussion is done with the partner organization in order to map the existing knowledge and competencies of participants.

In the discussion, ANSA-EAP tries to delve deeper into what is enabling or hindering the participant from applying social accountability in their local context. This will be the determinant for the content and methods used in face-to-face workshops. During most workshops, participants develop a social accountability project which they will implement when they return to their respective organizations or communities. The ANSA-EAP team closely monitors the progress of the participants through online mentoring and coaching. Sometimes, field visits are also done. Later, the participants' organizations are linked into the ANSA-EAP network so that exchange and learning can continue.

LIA IN ACTION

ANSA EAP applies the learning-in-action framework and blended learning approach through combinations of face-to-face workshops, online courses, mentoring and coaching activities, and the implementation of social accountability projects.

Customized Country Learning Programs on Social Accountability

Perhaps no other learning strategy demonstrates learning-in-action better than ANSA-EAP's customized country learning programs on social accountability. Usually in these programs, ANSA-EAP is tapped by governments or donor agencies to help their country partners in learning social accountability skills. Participants are usually members of government, non-government organizations and media groups.

For example, in 2008 the World Bank chose ANSA-EAP to provide technical assistance for its' Program to Enhance Capacity for Social Accountability (PECSA) in Cambodia. PECSA was a capacity building program run by ANSA-EAP and partners like SILAKA from Cambodia and PRIA from India. The idea in Cambodia was to focus on how the social accountability framework and tools could be grounded and applied in government reforms based on Cambodia's Strategic Framework for Decentralization and Deconcentration. The program in Cambodia was called Social Accountability School or SAS.

Customized Country Learning Programs on Social Accountability

Similarly, the World Bank Mongolia Country Office and the Partnership for Social Accountability Network (PfsAN) in Mongolia tapped ANSA-EAP to conduct a similar customized country program in 2010. This program was called Social Accountability Learning in Action Program (SAcLAP). It was aimed at building the knowledge and skills of specific Mongolian citizen groups and government officials in using social accountability approaches toward good governance.

For both programs, a mix of learning strategies (online learning, exposure visits, mentoring and coaching) were employed, culminating in a formal symposium to learn the basics of social accountability. The symposium is an ideal setting for new and experienced social accountability practitioners to learn from internationally renowned experts in the field. At the same time, it allows participants to get both cross-cultural and cross-discipline insights from their colleagues. It marries both classroom type sessions and workshop groups for a minimum of 5 days to a maximum of two weeks.

A basic module is usually divided into three - Good Governance and SAC, Public Financial Management (PFM) cycle, and SAC tools (participatory planning, budget monitoring and analysis, public expenditure tracking, procurement monitoring, and participatory performance monitoring). Depending on what local experiences are existing on the ground, more advanced, in-depth modules could also be provided.

True to form, the Customized Country Learning Program on Social Accountability applies the learning-in-action approach to the letter. From the get-go, participants are asked to reflect on their knowledge and experiences. This becomes the building block for all future learning in the program. This is usually done prior to the formal symposium, usually through online learning strategies. Mutual learning is applied as participants grow from their co-participants experiences and use that knowledge to build on their own. And finally, together participants and mentors create a community of practice. At the end of the formal symposium, they are no longer individuals in the fight for good governance but a part of a regional network of advocates. As part of the new network, learning continues through mentoring, exposure visits, online learning, coaching and other social accountability activities.

The Boy Scouts Jamboree

While “social accountability” and “learning-in-action” seem like big words intended for grown-ups only, the truth is that children can also be social accountability practitioners. This was clearly demonstrated in the 26th Asia Pacific Regional Scout Jamboree held in Los Banos, Laguna, Philippines.



The Boy Scouts Jamboree

ANSA-EAP, together with the Boy Scouts of the Philippines through the volunteer organization Ten Outstanding Boy Scouts of the Philippines Association (TOBSPA) created a three-day social accountability module for young adults. Its' aim was to expose the scouts to actual social accountability techniques and to start creating a community for social accountability among the scout organization in the Asia Pacific region.

Different techniques were used in the modules to inspire learning in young adults. In the discovery walk, participating scouts viewed banners displaying cartoon characters that depicted young citizens as social accountability champions. In the community immersion activity, scouts assessed the condition of an assigned public service (such as a school building, a road or health clinic) using a checklist.

They interviewed citizens or community leaders to get their own assessment of the same service. Word puzzles were used to summarize experiences and reveal insights on the importance of constructive engagement between citizens and government. An exhibit called the Hall of Practice was the final social accountability activity. The Hall of Practice featured actual monitoring initiatives by social accountability practitioners.

Definitely, mutual learning was exhibited in the Jamboree. The scouts and their mentors took lessons from each other. Through the activity, they both realized that no matter how young, one can be involved in the pursuit for good governance. They created a community of practice in the scout organization. And generative-iterative learning was applied because they were able to harness learning from every action, in every activity during the Jamboree.

The Oxfam Great Britain learning program

In 2009, Oxfam Great Britain (OGB) an international development organization partnered with ANSA-EAP to improve its' efforts in developing accountable and effective governments. In particular, the partnership was aimed at integrating social accountability into Oxfam Great Britain's change strategies and governance programs in country organizations in East Asia. The result today is a dynamic community of practice in five countries- Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Vietnam.

The Oxfam Great Britain-ANSA EAP learning program had four parts:

1. A month-long introductory online course
2. A face-to-face workshop in Hanoi where the process of integrating social accountability approaches to Oxfam Great Britain's regional governance strategy was discussed.
3. A two-month online mentoring and coaching process designed to guide participants through their Social accountability initiatives.
4. A workshop in Phnom Penh to deepen the Oxfam Great Britain learning teams' appreciation for different social accountability tools and draw out lessons from their pilot experiences.

Participating Oxfam Great Britain country teams have already begun integrating Social accountability approaches into their programs.

For example, in Indonesia, the Raise Her Voice (RHV) Program is currently being implemented. RHV aims to ensure that public policy, decision making, and spending reflect the interests of poor and marginalized women, especially those excluded from political, social, and economic life. On the other hand, in Vietnam, the Right to be Heard (RTBH) Team is currently implementing two Social accountability programs(1) Promoting social accountability at the grassroots Level in Bac Ai District, Ninh Thuan Province; and, (2) enhancing the representative role of the Peoples Council in Ninh Thuan Province. Both initiatives involve developing citizen groups and government officials' capabilities in formulating pro-poor and transparent development policies particularly at the community level. Both also focus on creating policies and a legal environment that will allow a productive citizen-government engagement.

According to Truong Thu Huyen, Programme Coordinator for the Right to be Heard Programme in Vietnam, the social accountability learning-in-action approach has motivated her group. "We have applied what we learned to design a new project on strengthening social accountability at the grassroots level. In addition, we have mainstreamed the social accountability framework into our current projects to support planning reforms, elected bodies etc."

Not only that, but to boost their knowledge, the Vietnam team also organized a follow-up training on social accountability tools for staff and partners last March, 2011. Also, each team member continues to read and learn more about social accountability and good governance during their spare time.



MOVING FORWARD WITH LIA

Because learning-in-action would not be true without the action-reflection-action cycle and constant growth, three years of applying the LIA approach has provided ANSA-EAP with a wealth of additional lessons for the future. Undeniably, learning-in-action continues to grow with every new action.

Some lessons learned are as follows:

- It is important to get partners to commit to the whole learning process. Handholding in social accountability is often limited by both time and resource constraints on the part of the ANSA EAP operations team and its' learning partners. Because of this, the learning partners' organizations should be able to provide support to continuing learning, and ensure sustained application and adaptation of social accountability tools.
- Each activity is unique to the target audience. For example, a module on social accountability for the Boy Scouts which targets young citizens requires a different process, in terms of both the intensity and length of time involved, than that with an organization like Oxfam Great Britain which already has its' own perspectives and strategies on governance work, and whose staff and partners requires more technical information on adapting social accountability tools to their development contexts.
- There is a need to cross check understanding. Because participatory learning is such an important part of the learning-in-action approach wherein each peer mentor brings in his own context or knowledge, it is vital to ensure that each participant has a shared understanding of terms and that no mixed messages occur.



About ANSA-EAP

Launched in February 2008, ANSA-EAP is a regional network promoting the practice of social accountability by providing a common platform for exchange of information and experience and by providing capacity building opportunities and technical assistance to citizen groups and governments.

The Ateneo School of Government (ASoG), a unit of the Ateneo de Manila University, operationalizes and oversees the development of ANSA-EAP, which has start-up support from the World Bank.

For more information, visit <http://www.ansa-eap.net> or email Randeec Cabaces, ANSA-EAP Learning and Capacity Building Coordinator, at randeecab@yahoo.com.

Photos:

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