

## ACTION LEARNING PERSPECTIVES

### 3.1 ACTION LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN DMI'S

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Having expressed the intention to adopt 'action learning', DMI has evolved the following concepts and understanding of action learning. In striving to adopt these in its activities and policies DMI hopes to consolidate a learning system that is based on actions and leads to action. The collection of learning concepts is presented hereunder to put DMI activities in context:

#### Learning:

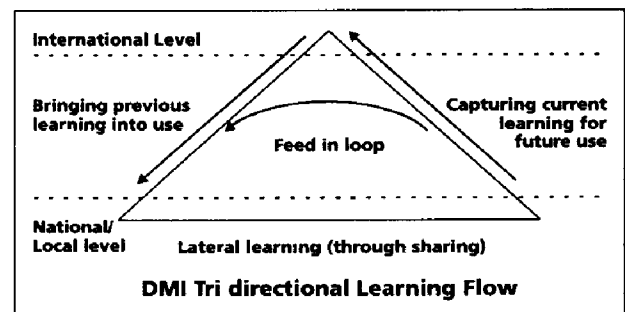
Learning is defined by DMI as an active and ongoing process of absorbing lessons and translating them into action. DMI's learning system consists of three action components:

- Learning In (from the humanitarian sector and practice)
- Learning Out (sharing learnings with other humanitarian actors)
- Lateral Learning (establishing a relationship of learning exchange

with partners—communities, NGOs, Universities, Governments—in disaster mitigation)

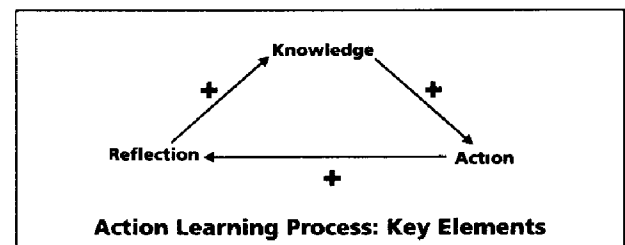
#### Learning Flow:

The aim of DMI's learning system is to ensure learning within and across disasters in the larger humanitarian sector, for sustainable disaster risk reduction. An association with learning networks like ALNAP (outside) and cultivating learning mechanisms (inside) has helped DMI develop and sustain its learning motive. The organisation ensures tri-directional learning flows to capture and utilize lessons for disaster risk mitigation.



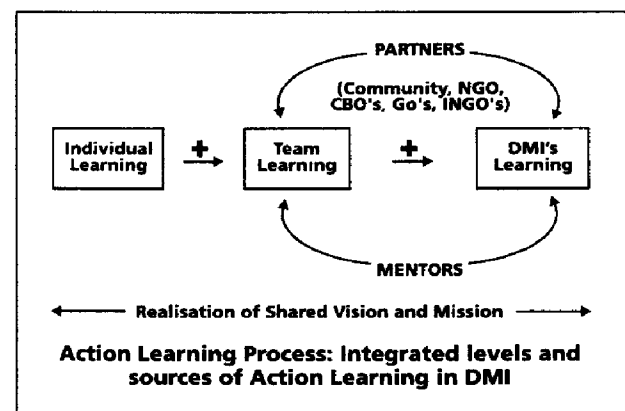
#### Action Learning:

DMI defines Action Learning (AL) as a multi-faceted process that involves both 'learning while doing,' and 'doing while learning.' AL is characterized by conscious indulgence in the supportive and learning processes of questioning, reflection, documentation, application and testing of knowledge. DMI's action-learning model attempts to achieve generation and integration of three essential components for learning (see figure).

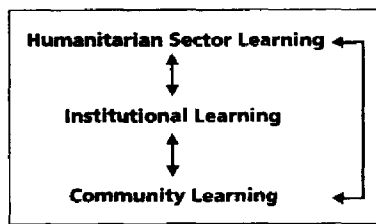


Action Learning=Knowledge+Action+Reflection

- Knowledge (gained from practical, (in) direct field experience, formal education and or trainings)
- Action (represents application of knowledge to work)
- Reflection (critical and constructive thinking about strength and weaknesses of action)



DMI's action learning approach attempts to link community learning to institutional and humanitarian sector learning. It generates best practices on what works and uses these in its work. It links the world of action to the world of learning through conscious processes. It integrates learning from experience with learning from new and innovative ideas.

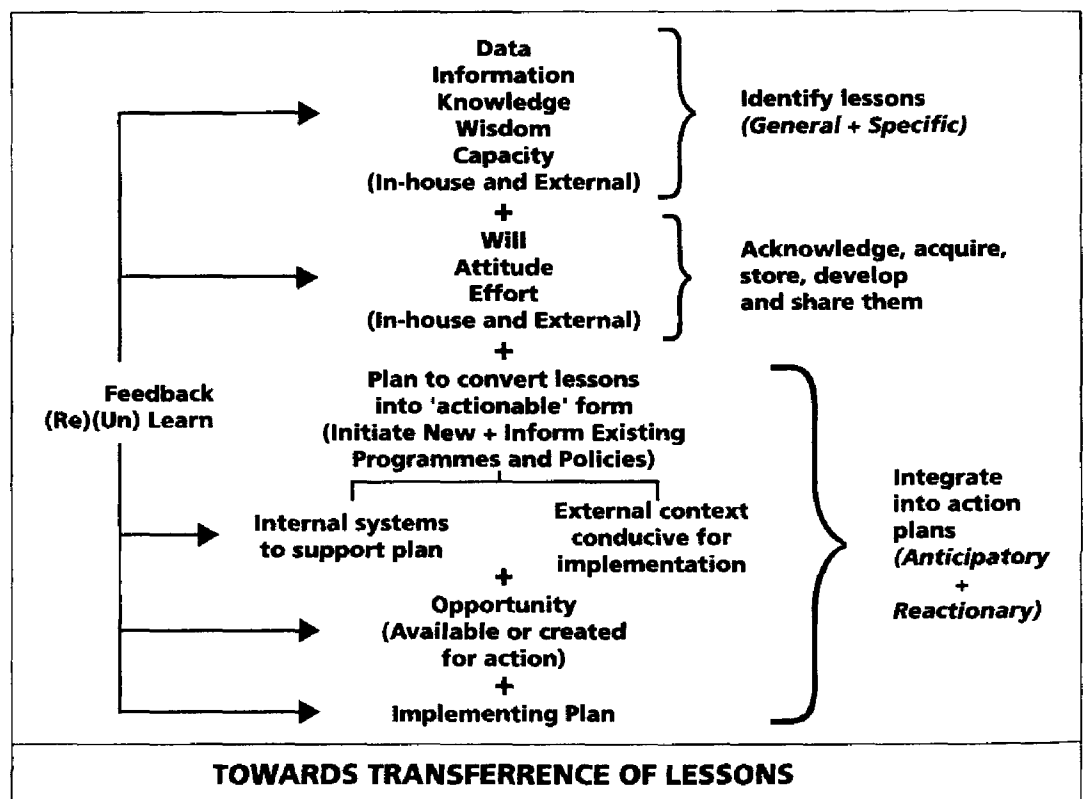


#### Action Learning Process:

This action-learning model is realized through a process of integrating levels and sources of Action Learning. This process of action learning is acknowledged as much a means as an end of learning. In fact it explains the need for action learning.

#### Action Learning Model for transference of Lessons:

DMI has also adopted an Action Learning Model with steps and elements involved in transference of lessons within and across disasters. This was developed after an MSc study on Do Organisations Learn? by a student of Cranfield University (UK). The action learning model sees



problems and crises as important opportunities for learning and development. Major crises are seen as growth points, while temporary setbacks and interruptions are seen as an event to be learnt from, rather than to be discouraged by.

To realise the objective of disaster risk reduction the model reiterates the need for three steps for transference of lessons: (i) Identification of lessons, (ii) Acknowledge, acquire, develop and share lessons and (iii) Integrate them into Action. The model acknowledges that action ought to

be not just reactionary (disaster response) but anticipatory (disaster preparedness). It also stresses that DMI's learning journey involves the simultaneous three activities of learning unlearning and relearning.

#### **Speed breakers towards an Action Learning System:**

While developing these concepts DMI confronted various questions related to action learning. It believes that every organisation needs to answer these to adopt and practice learning. This continually expanding list of questions includes:

- How to introduce and institutionalise action learning?
- How to make learning conscious yet not an additional task?
- What types of incentives can accelerate action learning?
- How to balance the 'means and end' approach of action learning?
- What kind of environment is needed to facilitate action learning?
- Who will support the cost incurred in promoting action learning?
- How to measure the benefits and implications of action learning?
- For whom are we learning?
- How does individual learning translate into Organisational Learning and vice versa?
- How to maintain a record/ memory of learning that can directly feed into action?

Answers to these will be sought by the DMI team in an effort to cultivate a learning system in DMI.

### **3.2 DMI'S COMMUNITY LEARNING APPROACH**

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"Learning from disaster response is important. But even more important is the question, who is learning? Otherwise organisations may end up heavily investing in increasing learning across the humanitarian sector workers at the cost of facilitating learning by and with victim communities," asked Mihir Bhatt at the Annual Day discussion.

#### **3.2.1 Concept and rationale for Community Learning:**

Much has been said and written about the need for humanitarian agencies to learn. However, not much has been written about facilitating learning at the local level, with and in the communities. While humanitarian interventions do not lack commitment to reduce community vulnerability through learning, practice calls for more efforts to fulfil this intention.

It is now widely acknowledged that community learning and capacity building needs to be considered as important as that of humanitarian workers. This lesson is based on DMI's long-lasting relationship with disaster-affected communities and experience of grassroots capacity building activities. Thus the most persistent questions for any organisation attempting to learn is "how do communities learn" and "in whose favour is community learning?"

In its efforts to reveal trends in community learning DMI reviewed its action learning activities of the past one year. Following is a brief narration

of principles of community learning that have emerged from mitigation-oriented practices in multihazard prone and disaster-affected areas.

### 3.2.2 Principles of Community Learning:

Mehul Pandya commenting on community learning said “Victim populations learn so well, so much, and with such modesty. They do not need incentives or special facilities for learning, they learn from living.” Field experience and community focus has led DMI to attempt a compilation of principles of Community Learning. DMI works towards building an enabling environment—both organisationally and in the wider humanitarian sector that demonstrates and furthers this commitment. This is an evolving list that guides the work of DMI.

- Learning is the key to disaster risk reduction successes.
- Learning is the shared responsibility of all humanitarian actors.
- Learning is effective when linked to plans and policies.
- Learning is valuable at every point in the risk reduction cycle.
- Learning is a part of a better decision-making process.
- Learning is empowering for communities.
- Learning is most effective when shared.
- Learning is relevant from one disaster to another.
- Learning is effective when responding to community needs.
- Learning is more effective with appropriate technology.
- Learning is action when supported with resources.
- Learning is effective when its impact is monitored.

### 3.2.3 Shift in Approach:

The year 2002–03 has been a period of renewal and restructuring of learning approach at DMI. Focus of learning has moved more and more where vulnerable communities matter. This is a major shift in DMI’s learning efforts. More emphasis is now put on field-based learning that focuses on enhancing the interface between communities and local, public and private institutions. More efforts are made in systematising lessons learned at community level and disseminating them widely for sector-wide shared learning and public policy change.

Further, more attention was paid on learning outputs and outcomes over learning efforts and initiatives. On-line and efficient use of lessons is matched with direct, one-to-one personalised and printed contacts. This shift in approach will continue in 2003–04.



Sphere Project team holding  
community consultation on water  
standards in slums of Bhuj.