Action Learning in the Service of Food Security and Poverty Alleviation in Mozambique

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Abstract

We report the use of action learning within a state-owned enterprise charged with delivering a large food security and poverty alleviation programme in Mozambique. Successful management of the programme requires the co-ordination of a wide variety of different stakeholders including both commercial and subsistence farmers, community leaders and international private investors. Organisational issues arose within the programme as efforts to foster cooperation were hindered by apparently intractable differences in the agendas of autonomous stakeholders. When the stakeholder conflicts could not be resolved with traditional project management techniques, an action learning practice was developed in order to more thoroughly explore the barriers to cooperation. In describing the challenges of adopting action learning in this context of social action, we draw attention to three particular elements of the practices developed: an unusually large and diverse action-learning set; fostering critical reflection within a culture that does not question seniors; and having a set facilitator who identifies as a scholar-practitioner.

Key words: food security, poverty alleviation, diversity, scholar-practitioner, action learning

Introduction

This paper reports on the use of action learning within a Mozambican State-owned

enterprise (RBL) with management responsibility for a food security and poverty

alleviation programme known as the "Baixo Limpopo Irrigation Scheme" (hereafter the

"Scheme"). RBL is the critical intermediary for a complex network of social action that

includes management responsibility for: (i) the Scheme's land use rights and license for

river water abstraction; (ii) acting as the intermediary for local farmers with investors, suppliers and service providers; (iii) the management of water and irrigation infrastructure; and (iv) assisting local farmers to improve their production and productivity. In short, the Scheme is constituted of the value chains of complex co-operation projects, involving private investors, local farmers, community leaders, agricultural service providers, and banks. Each of these stakeholders have their own concerns and interests within the Scheme which sees them trying to contribute to the whole whilst optimizing their own stake. In this article, we report on the action learning approach that has been adopted within RBL as a means of empowering its management to tackle the complex problems of co-ordinating the activities of a diverse array of autonomous stakeholders.

The Scheme started in 1951 during the colonial period, and continued operation for a number of years after Mozambican independence, only to be abandoned in 2000. A renewed impetus followed the completion of the Massingir Dam rehabilitation project (2003 to 2009) which brought important institutional and infrastructure development. During the same period (2007) a "Twining Agreement" between Governments of Hubei (China) and Gaza (Mozambique), allocated 300 hectares of arable land in the Baixo Limpopo to grow rice and other crops in partnership with Chinese Investors (Chichava et al., 2013). RBL was established in 2011 to rejuvenate the Scheme, attract further investment and coordinate stakeholders in the building of local value chains.   The objectives of the Scheme were redefined at this point as "to contribute to poverty reduction through increased value addition and provision of climate resilient

infrastructure for increased agricultural productivity" (Africa Development Bank Group, 2018).

In the early years (2011) of the RBL stewardship of the Scheme, multiple interests and expectations hindered efforts to co-ordinate the activities of different stakeholders. For instance, there was a perception in some local communities of a violation of their land use rights and this prompted them to resist the agricultural change agenda. These communities demanded access to the newly-developed land as a form of compensation after their grazing land had been allocated to the new investors. Granting such access meant the local people being trained by private investors in the new crop-growing practices. However, there was a high likelihood of production losses during the training period, which the private investors viewed as a significant financial risk. RBL are charged with resolving such apparently intractable issues and this involves their managers in a range of social action projects within the broad umbrella of the whole Scheme. These organizational challenges are complex and RBL's traditional project management approach was increasingly judged unequal to the task. Action Learning was introduced to RBL by its Chairman Armando Ussivane as an alternative way of making organisational improvements during his participation on the DBA Programme at the University of Liverpool. Paul Ellwood was Armando's DBA supervisor and their research collaboration continued following graduation (Ussivane and Ellwood, 2019). This paper is a product of an on-going conversation about action learning practices in this context. The paper is structured as follows. The next section explains the rationale for introducing action learning in this context. The way in which AL has been instituted is described along with

the difficulties encountered with its adoption. The following section then offers an illustration of the way in which action learning has come to be used in pursuit of RBL's social change agendas. A Discussion section reflects upon the adoption of AL in this challenging context.

Introducing action learning in this context

The established routine of project management at RBL involved 12 senior people (three board members, three area managers, six heads of departments) participating in weekly meetings facilitated by the chairman. Each area manager, accompanied by their heads of departments, would present a report to describe progress in implementing the annual work plan. The discussion at such meetings would revolve around problems that were perceived by the managers to be hindering the implementation of the plan. People in the meeting would ask questions of clarification and suggest corrective measures to improve the performance. There was a focus on potential solutions with limited exploration of the organisational problems themselves.

As RBL encountered resistance to the implementation of their strategic plan (alluded to in the introduction above) it become evident that the traditional project management discussions were failing to resolve the issues at the heart of objections to the plan. At this point RBL Chairman Armando Ussivane took the decision to place an action learning routine at the core of RBL's management of the Scheme. Initially the suggestion that the

traditional RBL project management meeting should be replaced by another approach was

met with skepticism. In an effort to minimise confusion the new process was introduced

without recourse to explanations about its origins, and initially, the very term "action

learning" was not used. Rather the new project review forum was simply described, and

the principle stated that no proposal for allocation of resources would appear on the RBL

Board agenda unless it has first gone through discussions at the forum.

Armando's approach was to make a virtue of diversity: in his own words "to treat diversity

as a resource, not as a way of categorising differences". The new forum included (apart

from the 12 senior managers involved in the previous project reviews) everybody in RBL

with a higher degree: this made for a total of 22 participants. Together the group covers

all functions in the company, has a wealth of experience both within the scheme and

within the agricultural sector more generally. In addition, some of the new participants

come from families in the local communities of the Scheme; and thereby have an

engagement with the aspirations of the Scheme that was not only professional. A meeting

of this forum lasts on average three hours and convenes every two weeks. The normal

routine is that a participant shares a problem with other members. Through a process of

questioning, the aim is to challenge and support the participant with the objective of

helping them to take action. By doing so they help the participant better understand the

problem faced, especially in situations where there were no clear answers. By these

means alternative framings of the problem and possible solutions are generated. The

normal procedure is for minutes to be taken and actions agreed. Such actions often

involve generating more information about the problem, and a further meeting held to reflect on progress. As appropriate a decision will be taken within this AL set to elevate decisions to the Board (e.g. in cases of significant investment).

Whilst conventional in many respects, the successful adoption of this action learning routine had to confront a number of obstacles in this context. Questioning your superiors is a behaviour not acceptable in Mozambican society. Participants in the action learning group (as the forum has become known within RBL) initially understood that they were there to suggest solutions to problems rather than questioning others about the nature of the issue itself. Participants also tended to avoid questioning more senior colleagues or a problem owner from the same department. Questioning others in the Mozambican culture in some circumstances is regarded as impolite and challenging someone higher up in the hierarchy is especially difficult. At first, the AL participants tended to avoid challenging or disagreeing with each other for fear of causing someone to 'lose face'. For some participants the whole process appeared unnecessary: why should managers not simply come to these meetings and present what they had achieved from planned activities? For these reasons, it became crucial to establish ground rules that were understood and agreed by all members. The following work rules were presented in the first action learning session: the participants needed to maintain confidentiality, respect others in the group, be open to ideas and listen, and feel free to challenge others' ideas. It was found through experience that refinements were required. For example, in regards to challenging others' ideas, the facilitation practices evolved to allow the facilitator

(Armando Ussivane) not to remain removed from the discussion, but to allow his own

(DBA) scholarly research to contribute to the AL meeting (the challenges of facilitation are

taken up in the Discussion section).

The wicked problem of ensuring RBL's sustainability through farmer payments

The following section includes an illustration of action learning being used at the RBL more

recently, and shows the contexts of social action in which they operate. The State

corporate sector in Mozambique is (since early 2019) undergoing a re-structuring exercise

that requires all State companies to become financially viable, and generate their own

revenues; thereby eliminating dependence on the State budget. This policy implies radical

changes in RBL's practices, and relationships with Scheme stakeholders, including

smallholder (subsistence) farmers. This problem was initially presented to the action

learning group by an area manager of the Works and Maintenance department of RBL,

and framed as one of farmers unwilling to pay for services provided by RBL. Traditional

practice in the smallholder farming systems required that RBL provided a full package of

equipment maintenance support at a subsidized price. When farmers could not pay even

such a cost, the Government would allocate funds for RBL to provide the full service. The

requirement for RBL to be self-financing put at risk its performance and legitimacy

amongst its poorest stakeholders. Finding a new way in which subsistence farmers could

continue to benefit from RBL's Scheme stewardship under the new public financing

constraints, appeared to be a 'wicked problem' (Churchman, 1967) with no immediately-

obvious solution.

The understanding of this problem was opened up by the action learning group through a process of questioning. In 45 minutes the set members offered several questions to the area manager: How was this problem manifest in the fields? How widespread was this unwillingness to pay? What has prevented the problem from being resolved up to that point? What efforts have previously been attempted? What was the position of the local Government regarding this problem? How could RBL preserve its current legitimacy and image in the region? What were the consequence of losing such legitimacy and image? Why is it so important to preserve such an image and legitimacy given the new restructuring change in the State corporate sector? To whom are RBL now accountable and what are its targets? What is your personal feeling on the situation? Were the farmers aware of the Government cuts to RBL's budget? In this manner the problem space was opened up by the diverse perspectives of the AL group.

The discussions in response to this questioning served to enrich the understanding of the problem by surfacing particular assumptions about the working relationship with farmers. In turn, this enabled the identification of new possibilities for action. The area manager in his response to the AL group realized that, to some extent, this problem was as much to do with the way his team had communicated with the farmers. Actions agreed for this first cycle included follow on meetings with the farmers, community leaders, and local government in order to share with them the actual resources limitations that RBL was experiencing; and to sensitise the farmers to contribute fuel for the machinery made available by RBL.

One of the first organized meetings with the farmers aimed to analyse the challenges of the smallholder farming system, particularly the maintenance of their irrigation and drainage infrastructure, and identify solutions to resolve them. It was facilitated by a public official, the administrator of Chongoene District. Such meetings are typically loud affairs with angry people shouting their objections, and arguments breaking out between participants. The meeting witnessed the participation of 51 people including the representatives of the smallholder farmers, local community leaders, district government officials and RBL managers. One notable outcome of the meeting was the agreement on the part of the 23 Farmers' Associations within the Scheme to collect money from farmers to contribute to the operation of equipment within their constituencies. RBL was tasked with the responsibility for helping in the assessment of the work and fuel requirements. A local commission was elected comprised of six representatives of the farmers and technicians from RBL who would be interacting and working on a continuous basis on the problem. It was also agreed that monthly meetings should be held to monitor the process.

A group of RBL people – comprising of the chairman, one RBL board member, the area manager and head of department of works and maintenance, and a technician for community mobilization - were present at the stakeholder meeting. Through this group, the experiences and outputs of the stakeholder meeting (including the work of the local government commission) were conveyed back to the AL group which then functioned as a forum for the evaluation of progress on the problem, and reflection on organizational learning for RBL. This on-going participation of the AL group and their experience of the wider Scheme allowed them to offer suggestions that the local commission might not

have otherwise considered. For example, rather than farmers bringing their own fuel to put into the machinery, arrangement could be made to allow them to make payment for fuel and oil at the local petrol station (this was subsequently agreed and adopted by the local commission).

In comparison with the form of meetings before the creation of the AL group then, whilst some questioning from Board members would have been normal, the extent of problem exploration and range of insights would have been less than that provided by the whole company AL group. Rather, RBL's new action learning practice is institutionalising the notion that good ideas do not only originate at Board level, and that solutions to wicked problems are best found by making use of experience throughout the organization. In its encouragement of delegation, adoption of less defensive attitudes and improved ability to take criticism, this AL practice has challenged assumptions within RBL about how decisions relating to wicked problems should be arrived at.

A couple of brief examples of other problems tackled by the action learning set are offered here in concluding this section. Firstly, a problem arose in a cooperation area involving the local farmers and Chinese private investors when the minimum acceptable rice yield was not achieved: one that had been agreed as part of a risk sharing agreement with RBL and Chinese investors. The farmers were contemplating zero income for that season, and wanted a revision to how risk was shared. Possible developments in the agreement were explored in the AL group, and tested in negotiation with farmers and investors. The subsequently revised agreement sees farmers having a guaranteed income

in poor seasons, with a commitment from them to share a proportion of their profits in bumper seasons with stakeholders who supported them through the difficult seasons. A second example concerns the on-going, highly-emotive issue of land use rights. A conflict arose over land allocated within the Scheme to cattle grazing. Smallholder farmers outside of the Scheme invaded this land and used it for their own subsistence rain-fed farming; thereby reducing the available land for cattle grazing. The AL group evaluated a proposal from the cattle farmers to build a fence. The conclusion was that such a fence would simply be knocked down, and proposed digging an irrigation and drainage canal instead. This approach would both provide a boundary that would be harder to breach, and enhance the subsistence farmers' infrastructure compared with their rain-fed watering techniques.

Discussion

This section offers reflections about how the new practices were introduced at RBL and the ways in which their operational context influences the approach to action learning. In many respects the classic approach (Revans 1998) to action learning is evident in this case: there was an inquiry orientation towards the problem under consideration; a rigorous evaluation of solutions through action and reflection; a quality of interaction between AL participants which enables individual critical reflection, and ultimately the learning. However, the complexity of the contexts in which RBL operates, allied to a complete absence of familiarity with this mode of learning required some adaptations of

classic models. Difficulties for the learning organization, according to Revans, happen

because there is lack of readiness, of willing participants with good problems and issues to

tackle, and of commitment from the top. The last two of these were actually present at

RBL, with the most significant adoption issue being one of lack of readiness, born of an

unease of questioning colleagues; particularly senior ones. In reflecting upon how this

potential barrier was addressed we would like to draw attention to three particular

aspects of the action learning practices developed at RBL: the wide diversity and size of

the learning set; the nature of critical reflection demanded of participants; and the

learning set facilitator consciousness.

A key concern with the traditional mode of project meeting at RBL was that they did not

allow sufficient space for problem exploration. Whilst having a range of expertise to

foster problem exploration in AL groups might be expected, having 22 participants in the

AL group is a departure from conventional practice which might advocate only 6-8 AL set

members (Marquardt and Waddill, 2004). The size of AL group at RBL ensured that the

diversity of the wider organisation was represented in terms of departmental function,

position in the organization, social background, age, and gender. It may also have

contributed to the diffusion of the very idea of learning through action. However, initially

at least, the size accentuated difficulties prompted through power dynamics (Ely and

Thomas, 2001) such as avoiding asking questions to more senior colleagues. Over time

inhibitions prompted by power differences within the set eased with the understanding

of how each participant could provide a unique contribution to the set; one that not only

helped to broaden the learning capacity of others, but also enabled the learning set to generate new insights on very complex workplace problems.

The statement "I am part of the problem, the problem is part of me" (Pedler, 2008, p. 11) is one of the fundamental premises for engagement in the AL set. It suggests people in a learning set must develop a capacity for critical reflection on their own practice and how this impinges upon the problem at hand. The facilitator's approach at RBL of encouraging participants to engage in a deeper questioning of their own taken-for-granted assumptions appeared initially ambiguous and confusing to the participants. They would have preferred more conventional sessions in which each department came to report progress against plan, rather than the more exploratory discussions that were encouraged through the new forum. Most Mozambican public sector workers have built their experience within a system that prizes humility, as employees look to their superior to see what he/she wants them to do instead of using their own good sense and critical thinking: to appear to question that behavioural norm and view senior colleagues as equals goes contrary to one's training and lived experience. However, according to Freire (1970), it is precisely this process of problematisation that such practitioners must engage in reaching critical consciousness.

The fact that the facilitator (AU) sought in his wider leadership of the company to act as a scholarly-practitioner (Ellwood, 2018) created personal tensions. On some occasions, he very often felt bound to follow Revans' principles that limit facilitators to the

encouragement of set members to share ideas and concerns with each other, and to develop the set as a learning system (Pedler, 2008). At other times, as an insider to the organization, the facilitator had experiential knowledge of the Scheme and its stakeholders, and had developed his own perspective on the organizational change. Indeed, he had findings generated through his own scholarly research undertaken with the Scheme's stakeholders. These additional perspectives held the potential to contribute to the AL group discussions, but created a personal conflict in relation to the traditional role of AL set facilitator. The resolution to this conflict was to adopt the approach of Torbert and Associates (2004) that combines inquiry with advocacy by placing in front of the learning set specific suggestions, inferences, and assumptions in order to subject them to critique and testing.

An example of how the facilitator managed to contribute more actively to the AL group in this way was evident in a discussion about the role of Chinese investors in the scheme. During the course of this particular AL group meeting he made use of his research findings to offer a counter-intuitive viewpoint. As he asked in a form of provocation during discussions in the learning set, "...*why are we seeing the Chinese investors of our scheme as a public partner like RBL and not as private entity whose concern is running a profitable business?*" This research finding (but expressed in the form of question) surfaced a general problem underlying the cooperation projects with China: the question of how to manage in these projects the combination of a profitable business (Chinese investors), with the transfer of farming technology and skills which by nature are an aid-to-development

motivated by Chinese solidarity to Africa. With this provocation, the facilitator did not intend to directly apply his research finding as a suggestion to address the problem in discussion. Rather the provocation aimed to create dissonances in the minds of the set participants (Ellwood, 2018), lead to a paradigmatic shift in understanding of the nature of the Chinese partner, and thereby prepare them for previously unconsidered avenues of change.

Concluding Remarks

In this article we have illustrated how the co-author AU institutionalized an action learning practice in his organisation, in order to improve their delivery of a food security and poverty alleviation Scheme. We have discussed how the action learning empowers participating managers take responsibility for and control of their own learning, and ultimately contribute to social action within the overarching Scheme. This action learning practice represented a significant departure in the established project management routines within the company, in which people were not used to challenges, and avoided exploring problems in the rush to propose solutions. Initially difficulties were experienced in adopting action learning because questioning senior managers, and thinking critically around ideas within an environment of open communication are not conventional in Mozambican organizational culture. As a result of adopting this action learning practice, RBL has enhanced its capacity for tackling the wicked problems associated with food security and poverty alleviation in an emerging nation.

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