Lessons Learned from the EEP/Shiree Scale Fund

CROSS-NGO LEARNING
The EEP Challenge Fund was designed as a strategic, joined up programme with a common vision, so it was important for the Scale Fund (SF) to operate as a community of practice rather than a series of standalone projects. SF evaluations and conversations with Partner NGO (PNGO) and EEP staff reveal significant cross-NGO learning in addition to within-project learning, suggesting that the SF can be seen as a community of practice to improve extreme poverty programming in Bangladesh.

Notwithstanding the different contexts in which projects were implemented, field visits and roadshows to EEP projects and lesson learning dissemination events were successful in generating a sense of shared purpose, and PNGOs described how they were able to find commonalities even amongst the points of difference. For example, DSK was implementing the only project in an urban context, but was nonetheless able to observe lessons around common themes when visiting other projects in rural areas – the group approach to poverty reduction, and how other PNGOs were strengthening groups into legal organisations; or the voice and rights approach of organisations like Uttaran, which coincided with DSK’s thinking around demanding access to government services.

Sharing technical innovations improves service delivery

The major area where cross-NGO learning occurred was in technical innovations that could be applied across projects, and further afield. Uttaran’s khas land processing model was very successful and was replicated by many different organisations. HSI’s floating garden model was adopted by Shushilan, and was also used as a demonstration site visit for agricultural university staff and students. Caritas replicated the VSLA model of Green Hill. NETZ facilitated technical livestock officer visits to the MJSKS project areas to see milking cow profitability. Sometimes, however, there were missed opportunities for learning, for example the MJSKS project which failed to enhance the fat content in their milk, but which could have taken lessons from CARE who were succeeding in that enhancement by introducing coconut oil into cattle feed.

Cross-NGO learning can strengthen key processes, and supplement within-project learning to accelerate the refinement of approaches

While there was widespread evidence of borrowing technical innovations from other projects, as well as providing a demonstration effect to non-EEP stakeholders (agricultural universities, government livestock officers), there was less evidence of lesson-sharing around some of the key project processes. Some organisations recognised the limits to their corporate experience – for example, Oxfam visited Green Hill to learn about how to implement the savings process, as they had no institutional experience of savings instruments- but by and large PNGOs tended to learn from their own mistakes around selection of income generating activities (IGAs), asset procurement, group formation, and beneficiary training, rather than look to other implementing partners who potentially could have accelerated the learning process.

EEP Programme Managers drive learning, but should not replace bottom up learning

EEP Programme Managers provided significant guidance and direction to SF projects, helping to pre-empt common delivery pitfalls or to promote early sharing of best practices, for example by encouraging IGA diversification where the focus was initially too narrow EEP Programme Managers described how PNGOs were initially resistant to what they saw as the policing or monitoring function of the EEP team, but quickly came to appreciate the added value that EEP staff provide in facilitating cross-programme linkages, supporting lesson sharing and improving delivery models. While Programme Manager support can help to identify and share best practices across NGOs, and troubleshoot design issues, this should not replace bottom-up learning and information sharing within and between PNGOs.
• Sharing of successful technical innovations provides valuable opportunities for NGOs to improve their services, and should be continued in future programming through lesson learning events and workshops, site field visits, and communications briefs.

• Making linkages between implementing organisations early in the project cycle ensures cross-learning refines and strengthens key processes, so that they are not routinely subject to the same pitfalls.

• Within-project learning can be accelerated or supplanted by cross-NGO learning where risks, issues and mitigation strategies are already available within the community of practice. This requires forward-looking, proactive and ongoing lesson learning (for example the regular regional coordination meetings under the SF), rather than concentrated at the mid and end line of projects.

• EEP Programme Managers play a key role in facilitating sharing. The regular visits of EEP programme managers helped to act as a conduit to raise awareness of innovations, share best practice, and provide direction. This should not be seen as a replacement for “bottom up learning”, where PNGOs take the initiative to do this themselves, thereby increasing their ownership.

Recommendations – Cross-NGO Learning
This summary of lessons learnt has been produced by Ecorys UK through the Economic Empowerment of the Poorest (EEP) programme. The views expressed in the report are entirely those of the author, and do not necessarily represent the views of the GoB, DFID, SDC, EEP staff nor of PNGO staff.