Action Research on Education Out Loud advocacy in challenging contexts:
Process Note

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Background and overview

In January – August 2023 the Institute of Development Studies (as one of Education Out Loud's Global Learning Partners), led an action research study on 'Exploring education advocacy in challenging contexts of conflict and closing civic space'. This involved a total of 19 Education Out Loud (EOL) grantees in all four regions.

We developed a customised methodology, drawing on a range of methods and facilitation approaches and guided by the broad principles of action research.

An action research approach was selected as best meeting the needs of an action-oriented network like EOL. An assumption underpinning the approach was that across EOL and also across the broader civil society communities operating in the Global South there are many advocacy actors who need to navigate political and governance contexts that pose various challenges for their work, and who may find this learning approach relevant and useful.

This Process Note responds to a request from Oxfam Denmark colleagues to produce a short document explaining the process of this research to Oxfam Denmark and EOL colleagues not involved in it, including elucidating the approach to learning and facilitation that were used.

Overview

- On page 2 we explain the principles behind our approach.

- Pages 3 – 8 set out and discuss the process we developed, in the approach to an in-person workshop (pictured below)

- On page 9 we briefly discuss the audio-visual products we produced

- Pages 10 and 11 conclude with some final considerations.

The principles

Our action research approach was derived from theories of action research, action learning, experiential learning, adult learning, popular education, reflective practice, and reflective learning. Key principles from these bodies of knowledge and practice informed our work:

- The sources of learning are largely the learners themselves. Practitioners have a continually evolving stock of 'tacit knowledge' or 'practitioner knowledge', which they generally draw on fairly unreflectively in their daily work. Particular learning and facilitation methods can give them access to this tacit knowledge as a source of learning. Thus, facilitation is a crucial aspect of the process, and the relevant facilitation skills and experience a crucial ingredient.

- Learners need to have a 'problem', a curiosity or a self-identified learning need that makes them want to explore their own practice in context. Their participation has to be driven by their interest. The focus is on learning for action.

- Engagement with other knowledge serves as a stimulus to compare, contrast and reflect deeply – for example engagement with relevant theoretical knowledge, and with each other's tacit knowledge on subjects where theory is scant, as was the case here.

- Activities such as recognising, questioning, surfacing, interrogating, sorting and categorising replace the typical approach, which is to provide content and expect learners to

absorb it (in what the Brazilian popular educator Paulo Freire called the 'banking method' of education).

- These activities are complemented by application of knowledge to the learner's own learning needs. In this process, our objective was to enable learning understood as changes in how education advocates see and do things: for participants to each learn in this respect and to co-produce a co-owned learning output that could enable others not directly involved to also learn from the process. The co-owned learning output in this case was a series of key messages that meet the needs of other learners beyond this immediate group.

- The power relations and incentives affecting the participants in an action research process need to be acknowledged and addressed. It can be surprisingly difficult to keep the focus on learning in the context of international aid relationships between grantees, funders and outsiders perceived as 'experts'. In such relationships as in all power relationships, there are incentives to behave in certain ways – for instance, for grantees the incentive may be to 'perform well', recite or reproduce what they feel is expected of them, rather than to critically interrogate what they are doing and why, and produce new ways of doing it. In this case this mattered particularly at the final workshop, the only point where EOL staff were present. It necessitated conversations with them about the roles they would and would not aim to play in the workshop setting.

The process

Phase 1

Our aim was to inform ourselves about existing theory on the topic and on existing relevant knowledge within the EOL network, and to figure out details of the action research design. We did this through the following activities:

Literature review

Covering academic and organizational literature, this revealed scant literature or theory on the topic, as expected.

Interviews

We held in-depth semi-structured interviews with relatively longstanding education advocates in EOL purposively sampled with help from the EOL secretariat. Analysis of these produced on the one hand a presentation on 'Exploring education advocacy in challenging contexts of conflict and closing civic space' delivered as part of the EOL panel at the 2023 conference of the Comparative and International Education Society in Washington DC, USA. On the other hand it produced insights for designing the next phase of the action research, in terms of who to engage with, how and with what learning objectives and expectations. The first phase built some credibility among participants for the relatively unfamiliar approach we were bringing and demonstrated that we could get sufficient voluntary engagement by enough participants, to make the continuation of the process worthwhile.

At the end of Phase 1, we agreed which of those interviewed in Phase 1 and which additional EOL grantees would be invited to take part in Phase 2. This was based on their apparent interest in exploring this theme and their engagement with the reflective, participatory approach we were using. It also reflected which EOL working contexts are particularly difficult, and took into account which of the contexts were so difficult as to make participation in the research just too challenging for grantees, for reasons such as insecurity, instability, disruption and connectivity.

Phase 2

Our aim was to engage grantees in an in-depth online and face-to-face learning process, to:

- forge relationships between them as education advocate peers and with us as facilitators

- develop their awareness of their own and each other's relevant expertise and bring this to the surface

- enable each participant to take some action to make their own education advocacy practice more strategic and effective

- facilitate the collective development of messages or lessons to share with others beyond this process.

Activities in Phase two consisted of a series of three facilitated online reflection sessions with tasks set in between each; and a three-day face-to-face workshop in Nairobi, Kenya. This phase was deliberately designed to unfold gradually over an extended time, avoiding onerous time burdens on the participants at a time of

considerable proposal-writing pressures and allowing the participants time for 'slow thinking' in between sessions. We worked with as many grantees as we could deal with well given available human and financial resources, a total of sixteen. Step by step, the process consisted of:

Participant identification

Through our own observations and direct questions to interviewees in Phase 1, we had ascertained which of them were interested in Phase 2 and would make suitable participants, in the sense of having questions or issues within the initiative's thematic range that they were keen to explore. The Phase 2 group included nine Phase 1 participants plus seven new participants.

Initial briefing

We briefed all participants in an hour-long session, using a short powerpoint presentation covering what action research is and how it works, what we hoped the process would achieve for them and for others' benefit, and details of the process we were inviting them to engage in. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions. A separate briefing was held in French for the four French-speaking participants.

Formation of Reflective Learning Groups

We formed five Reflective Learning Groups of 2 – 4 members each. Group composition was based on both pragmatic criteria (common time zones, language) and purposeful criteria (each group composed of education advocates working in a certain type of 'difficult context' so as to ensure some common experience alongside country-by-country specificity). One facilitator was assigned to each group throughout, as far as possible a facilitator with experience of the region and/or type of context in question. One Reflective Learning Group worked entirely in French.

Reflective Learning Sessions

We held three 90-minute online reflective learning sessions with each of the five groups over three months from May – July inclusive. We prepared and used facilitation guides, albeit less and less as the process went on, as participants got to know each other and individual groups' conversations diverged in accordance with participants' interests and experience. Pre-session preparation guidance emails were sent to each participant. Between sessions facilitators wrote notes about the session, shared them with each other (as well as with participants) and held in-depth debriefing sessions, based on sharing and reading of facilitators' notes on each session.

To give an example, the focus of the first Reflective Learning Session was 'Context'. As well as enabling participants to establish relationships with each other, our aim was to explore what we all mean by 'context' for advocacy activities; what things matter in different places for what education issues we advocate on and for who our advocacy is directed at. Participants were asked in advance to:

- Prepare a brief verbal introduction of themselves, their organization, their priority advocacy issues and experiences,

- reflect on the social, political, cultural or other characteristics of their country influences or shapes their education advocacy and its scope, and

- think about what they hope to learn from this process and what other participants might want to learn.

After the first session, groups began to diverge slightly, reflecting their different compositions. Second sessions all focused broadly speaking on the context-related problems or issues impeding their advocacy that participants had identified in the first session. Third sessions in some cases followed up on activities participants had offered to carry out between sessions (eg discussing specific challenges with colleagues or mentors; investigating further into aspects of context; etc) and in some cases included exploration of how advocacy context affects advocacy strategy and direction.

Our observations on how the groups worked include the following:

- Groups developed their own dynamics. An action research approach welcomes this as an asset brought in by participants that enriches the content, as well as a reassuring indication that participants are 'owning' the topic and increasing their commitment to researching it.

- Eliciting stories worked very well. Story-telling is entirely cross-cultural as a method. Stories told in participants' own words and frames help to establish trusting peer relationships quickly; convey a great deal about participants' priorities; and, especially if subject to prior identification, reflection and preparation, bring participants to critically analyse their own experience, rather than just describing it.

- Consistent participation was generally good but (unsurprisingly) not fully attainable. This was mainly due to difficulties of connectivity, but also to conflicting schedules, including participants' need to jump opportunistically at chances of meeting with their advocacy targets. The facilitators needed to do some 'catch-up' work with individual participants in between sessions to keep processes on track.

- Some groups and participants grasped the methodological approach more readily than others, shifting away quite quickly from all participants' starting assumption that facilitator would be providing lots of content and their role would be to absorb it.

- Everyone benefitted from peer-to-peer learning opportunities – learning about each other's contexts and challenges and ways of working generated high enthusiasm.

- Most undertook pre-session preparation seriously and committedly; many proposed their own learning-focused tasks in between sessions, undertook them and reported back reflectively on them.

- The prospect of a workshop in Kenya as the culmination of the learning process was no doubt a significant incentive, but our strong sense was that almost all participants attached an intrinsic value to the online process, even before the Kenya workshop.

Workshop

The process culminated in a three-day, face-to-face participatory workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, August 2024. Based on our experience of facilitating learning processes in organisations, we took a gamble: we aimed for depth and lasting transformative impact among relatively few learners including the co-production of an output to benefit a much larger number and range of learners, rather than sitting hundreds of learners down to deliver to them a large volume of content with considerable uncertainty over how much of it would 'stick' and get applied. It was an unaccustomed advantage for everyone involved to work with so few participants (14) and so many experienced facilitators (3) for such a concentrated period. Three participants were ultimately unable to join the workshop, due to a coup d'état and visa and travel difficulties.

We planned the workshop very carefully in order to create as conducive a learning environment and experience as we could. A key factor enabling us to do so was that we knew all the participants fairly well - through the online reflection sessions - before we met them in person in Nairobi.

Workshop programme

The workshop programme we shared with participants in advance set out overall objectives for the workshop and specific ones for each day but in terms of methods was fairly schematic and minimal, allowing us to work flexibly and intuitively, to some extent going with the energy in the room. Minds and activities were concentrated by the need to co-produce an output on the final day, a goal which we invited all participants to commit themselves to at the start of the workshop.

> **Workshop activity example 1: Poster display of 'Three 5s'**
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> Participants were asked before the workshop to produce a poster or graphic to explain 5 important things about the state of education in their context, 5 drivers of these, and 5 topics they advocate on. Each had 3 minutes to talk to their posters as participants did a 'gallery walk' between posters. The aim was partly to focus on prioritisation, but also to allow participants to quickly get to know others' contexts and give each person a short time early in the workshop to speak from their own place of knowledge and share any burning views or challenges, 'breaking the ice' on their later participation.

Facilitation approaches

We drew on a wide repertoire of tried-and-tested participatory workshop facilitation techniques and approaches which resonate closely with the learning theories we were informed by and the action orientation of the process. For instance:

- using a room big enough for physical movement, encouraging participants to form circles, stand and group together for some activities, rather than just sitting

- arranging the furniture in 'islands' so that 4-8 individuals had a 'home table' where they could get to know and dialogue with one another

- providing sequential interpretation so that the French-speaking and English-speaking participants could engage with each other as fully as possible

- devising exercises that produce things that can be displayed (cards, posters, visually appealing scales) so as to keep ourselves focused and give visual support to the learning process

- displaying the material we produced around the walls of the room as we went along, to generate a sense of progress and gradually 'envelop' us in our learning material

- 'handing over the baton' – sharing facilitation between facilitators so that different styles, fresh energy, etc, enlivened the process and modelled democratic, horizontal communication and co-construction rather than one-to-all delivery of content

- allowing some 'struggle' with the tasks we proposed, but also adjusting and designing as we went along; for example, we spontaneously adjusted our facilitation plans to re-use a method that participants really took to and did very well the first time round

- consolidating and summing up what we had learnt as we went along, particularly through a re-cap at the start of every day

- building up consciously towards the co-production of the final output on day three. We had proposed and participants had agreed that the final output of the project would be a co-produced video for which a videography team would join us halfway through the workshop and work with us intensely on day three.

Workshop activity example 2: Rationales

To stimulate discussion about how contextual conditions and advocacy strategies are linked, we asked participants to complete the 'blanks' in the sentence "Because A is like B, I do X and not Y". After time for individual reflection, each participant wrote a number of these statements on cards, and then explained them to members of a small group. This exercise was based on summoning and crystalising tacit knowledge, and sharing responsibility as a group for getting that well expressed.

Comfort zones and participatory dynamics

We put a lot of thought into the 'logic' of the workshop process in terms of respecting participants' 'comfort zones' while also maximising the opportunity to expose them to others' diverse experience. We started off with participants working within their 'comfort zones' – in their prior small (4-5-member) online reflection groups, on their own country contexts about which they had already shared with their online group – and moving to engaging in depth

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Workshop activity example 3: Advocacy spectrums

To try to disaggregate the topic of education advocacy and also understand specific barriers or difficulties, each participant identified which advocacy issues, which moments in time, which levels of government, and representation of which beneficiaries or communities made their advocacy easier or harder. They placed their responses on a spectrum (from easy to hard, see right), discussing each in turn on four tables, before collectively analysing the results.

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with participants from quite different groups whom they did not know, sometimes in pairs/small groups and sometimes in larger groups. This was to gradually build each participants' exposure to the wide range of experience in the room while recognising that for some advocates the political sensitivities of their contexts mean trust needs to be built gradually. One exercise made the most of what Robert Chambers has called 'the democracy of the ground'; it entailed participants circling around cards they all had written that lay on the floor and collectively clustering and sorting them in an exercise of co-analysis. In general, we built in a balance of exercises in individual reflection and analysis, group discussion/debate exercises, sharing of individual and collective outputs and views, etc.

Facilitation challenges

Certain tensions were present throughout the workshop, requiring attentive facilitation to manage them. One was the tendency for the focus to stray onto the general challenges of quality education provision faced in all countries where EOL works, and the need to continually bring attention back to the core question of doing *education advocacy* in these difficult contexts.

Another was the tendency to list the aspects that make a context generally difficult to live and work in, as distinct from the aspects that specifically make *education advocacy* difficult to carry out. Our ability to manage these tensions was aided by the fact in our planning, and informed by the previous online sessions, we had anticipated that they were likely to arise and had developed workshop exercises with a view to clearly demarcating our focus and helping participants hold onto these distinctions.

The products

We worked towards co-generating key messages which could form the basis of a short video for advocacy practitioners working in similar contexts.

Of the five messages we co-generated, some of them were known to some participants explicitly beforehand; some were known tacitly but not explicitly; some they came to know through this process and workshop. All were formulated and prioritised collectively, in a way that privileged these practitioners' experience over other forms of knowledge but benefitted from such other forms of relevant knowledge as are available. This process of experientially-based, collective co-generation often changes the way adult learners see and do their work.

Throughout Day two the videographers floated around the workshop room filming certain participatory activities, engaging with and gaining the trust of the participants. On Day three we set up a filming room where groups of participants went in succession to each record input for the video, mainly focusing on one or more of the key messages. To help video appearances come across as natural and conversational, group members 'interviewed' each other informally from behind the camera on jointly agreed questions. The EOL staff present were also filmed responding to a short series of questions about this process, as one way of distilling what we could learn about the process itself as a learning approach.

The decision to produce a video rather than a report was based on asking ourselves and the participants what other people like the participants were more able and likely to engage with and remember – a written report, or a short video? Undoubtedly, it has been a more expensive output than a written report would have been. However, we think the collective nature of this product and the way its cumulative production gave every participant a focus and an outlet into which to condense their learning, has made it a much more learning-rich output than a written report authored by us as the two GLP staff members, in relative isolation from these participants.

We also anticipate that a short, engaging video, with them 'starring' in it, will be an easier and more conducive channel through which they can 'cascade' the learning on to their NEC member organisations and other constituents in their working contexts, than would a written report. As the video is about to be finalised it remains to be seen how well it will be taken up.

Final considerations

Safety concerns

These would have needed managing in any case given some of the countries in which participants work, but needed special management given the visual nature of the output. In a video participants can be readily identified, and it will end up available online. We foresaw safety concerns and sought to managed them by several measures: consulting participants beforehand as to whether a video was a good idea and inviting them to raise any concerns; inviting participants on day one to read a project information sheet and sign a consent form or raise any concerns; and making the opportunity for participants from particularly politically sensitive contexts to share their insights and experiences through third parties rather than in ways that made them personally or organizationally identifiable.

A video as the key output

It was a challenge and also a risk to generate the video output partly 'in real time' at the workshop itself. Two factors made this risk manageable: firstly, that we had engaged considerably with the learners before the workshop and knew who we were dealing with; and secondly, that we were able to engage a good, tried-and-tested, videographer, and give him good briefing; and subsequently to work with good editor at our own Institute to produce the final output from his footage. Ultimately the production of the video has been slower than we had hoped because of factors such as staff changes, and the gradual realisation that we could increase accessibility of the video's messages by adding in voiceover and subtitles, and then subtitles in three non-English languages in which EOL works.

Cost – benefit analysis

A face-to-face workshop in Nairobi made this otherwise online process a relatively expensive one. However, we can safely say we represent the views of everyone who participated, as well as the on-the-spot appreciative feedback from grantees and EOL staff and the written evaluation forms, when we sum up by saying that the way learning happened in this purpose-designed, carefully-facilitated in-person workshop was of an entirely different order to how it could have happened had we limited the process to sporadic online engagements. The learning was also much broader than the project's specific topic: participants very evidently benefitted from getting to know and learning from their EOL peers more generally.

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Evaluative feedback

We close this process note by reproducing select illustrative highlights from participants' workshop evaluation forms:

The whole action research process:

> "... was a refreshing mix of approaches and did not get boring or demanding. I liked that there was minimal pre-prep required for each segment because it gives us the chance to be ourselves and talk candidly about our contexts."

The online Reflective Learning Sessions:

> "… gave me the opportunity to reflect on my work after each session. I started using the strategies since May. It also helped in developing our EOL proposal".

The workshop:

> "… was incredibly impressive [in] how you managed to go from descriptions, statistics and contexts to concise and relevant key messages. Great exercises that seemed to prompt well engagement and new reflections. Thank you for not having any powerpoints."

> "…focused on real-life stories. The strategies and reflection were practical. It promoted interaction, learning and sharing. Created safe space for the participants."

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