



**BRIEFING
NOTE 22
ON:**

Online Mentoring LLL Style.

Observers of Linking Local Learners (LLL) often ask what mentoring online is all about. What do mentors do? How do mentors stimulate peer-to-peer exchanges over the internet? We always respond with pointing out that mentoring combines face-to-face as well as online exchanges. One will not work as well without the other. Most people know about how to facilitate action learning processes on the ground. What mentors do online is what we explain here.

Making a difference on the ground drives online exchange

1. Brokering new deals between farmer groups and big buyers like wholesalers and processors is an experience many service providers are interested in. The experience of a small group of service providers supported by the AMSDP programme in Muheza Tanzania brokering oranges sparked off successful deal making among other service provider groups. Songea maize farmers, Babati rice farmers, Muheza black pepper and Sumbawanga simsim growers all made successful deals with Mohamed Enterprises and Dodoma Transport in Tanzania following Muheza.

2. The practice of collaboration along a market chain started with Lissa's meat marketing experience in Limuru, Kenya and moved to Mbinga in Tanzania. There wheat producer groups collaborated with Green House Investments wholesalers, Mbinga Diocese Wheat Millers and Mpemba bakery. This more efficient market chain benefited all players.

3. Similarly, the concept of market spies moved quickly from Mufindi to be even more successfully reinvented in Babati, Tanzania. They combined market spies with village billboards and local market information centres.

4. The invention of higher level farmer associations for bulking and joint marketing emerged in Nyeri, Kenya and moved to Uganda and Tanzania. Soroti and Bushenyi now boast umbrella associations of honey, citrus, dairy, banana and sweet potato grower associations. In Mbeya, Tanzania, the Mbonzo Agricultural Marketing Cooperative Society has been set up for joint maize and bean sales. The innovators, Mount Kenya Producers Association, got sufficiently organized to successfully export snow peas to Europe.

5. Market access groups in Hai and Arumeru pioneered the introduction of new enterprises like mushrooms, flower seed and safflower. Such new enterprises spread not just to others in Tanzania but within the region as well. The Tujikomboe farmer group in Morogoro are following up with Hai service providers on mushrooms. The FFS network in Kakamega, Kenya started a new enterprise in Moringa oleifera, a medicinal plant, which Songea service providers want to learn about.

6. The successfully introduced Warehouse Receipt System of AMSDP in Mbeya and Babati districts has spread. Abuket sweet potato association in Soroti Uganda started exchanges to develop their own set up. They will not be identical systems. Indeed the groups are now in touch with a farmer initiated and owned system in Ruaha Mbuyuni, Tanzania.

Peer-to-Peer exchange does not happen automatically

All these 'successful' experiences tell us that local learners do not copy each others practices or solutions. Rather they pick up on an idea and make up their own practice to fit their own particular circumstances. Learning is not 'instructional' with a manual for others to follow. Rather, peers coach each other in a practice. Learners ask back questions and

make their own practice for their own situation.

Experience tells us that learners do not engage with 'top-down' outsider learning agendas. Rather they must decide what it is they want to learn today and be free to change it tomorrow. Learners will only put in the considerable efforts to learn and share if they are going to learn things that are crucially important to them. Even then some find it helpful to enter into a 'learning contract' with their peers to:

- Share any information that you find useful as others may also find it so
- Share plans for trying out new ideas
- Share information on achievements at each step of the way
- Respond to the questions from other groups when you can
- Aim for at least monthly exchange over the internet

Experience tells us that peer-to-peer exchange does not happen automatically. It needs both a trigger to get started and a mentor to keep it going. What learners read online, what they discuss at workshops, or what they talk to each other about on the phone can be triggers. Mentors keep the learning going. They pose questions and present challenges. They coax ideas out as many do not have the skills to convey the richness of their experience. One Swahili speaker observed that in their farmer group "we like English because it makes us think more clearly about our problems and ideas".

What mentors do

As we said earlier mentors work face-to-face and online. They do facilitate workshops where learners exchange ideas, practices and achievements. They do facilitate the emergence of a 'common' learning agenda. After such workshops mentors keep the learning agenda moving by prompting for ideas and experiences, refocusing the discussions and debates to move them forward: "where do we stand, what is the next question". In addition to keeping the exchanges dynamic mentors must also:

- pull discussion threads together and synthesize what has been learned
- clean up the threading of discussions for others to follow at a later date
- interview and coach learners to write up experiences and practices
- prompt learners to search and make contact with peers who have done interesting things
- connect learners with information and expertise outside their usual sources
- share news, stories, interviews, and practices through the 'linkinglearners' website
- update learners contact information keeping track of changing email addresses.

Mentors serve learners as coaches and networkers. Mentors use the Linking Local Learners methodology as it integrates learning-by-doing on the ground with online peer-to-peer exchange. They value the flexibility of being able to cope with rapidly changing learning topics. They value the transparency and open-access to the learning outcomes. Outcomes are shared through our website at www.linkinglearners.net. The methodology depends on organized exchanges of emails and pooling of knowledge online for which it uses the software called 'Instant Team'. Instant Team is 'open-source' software for online exchange developed by Ideso (www.ideso.ch). Both methodology and internet software are well supported by training resources and can be replicated freely by anyone.

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