Learning Product

Managing learning in a multi-stakeholder disability and mental health inclusion programme

Introduction and background

Ghana Somubi Dwumadie (Ghana Participation Programme) is a four-year disability programme in Ghana, with a specific focus on mental health. This programme is funded with UK Aid from the UK government. The programme is run by an Options-led consortium, which also consists of Basic Needs-Ghana, King's College London (KCL), Sightsavers and Tropical, and focuses on four key areas:

1. Promoting stronger policies and systems that respect the rights of people with disabilities, including people with mental health disabilities;
2. Scaling up high quality and accessible mental health services;
3. Reducing stigma and discrimination against people with disabilities, including mental health disabilities; and
4. Generating evidence to inform policy and practice on the effectiveness of disability and mental health programmes and interventions.

A grants mechanism to support civil society organisations (CSOs) has been one of the key implementation strategies of the Ghana Somubi Dwumadie.

This learning product distils the lessons learned from a review of the internal learning mechanisms and processes employed by Ghana Somubi Dwumadie.
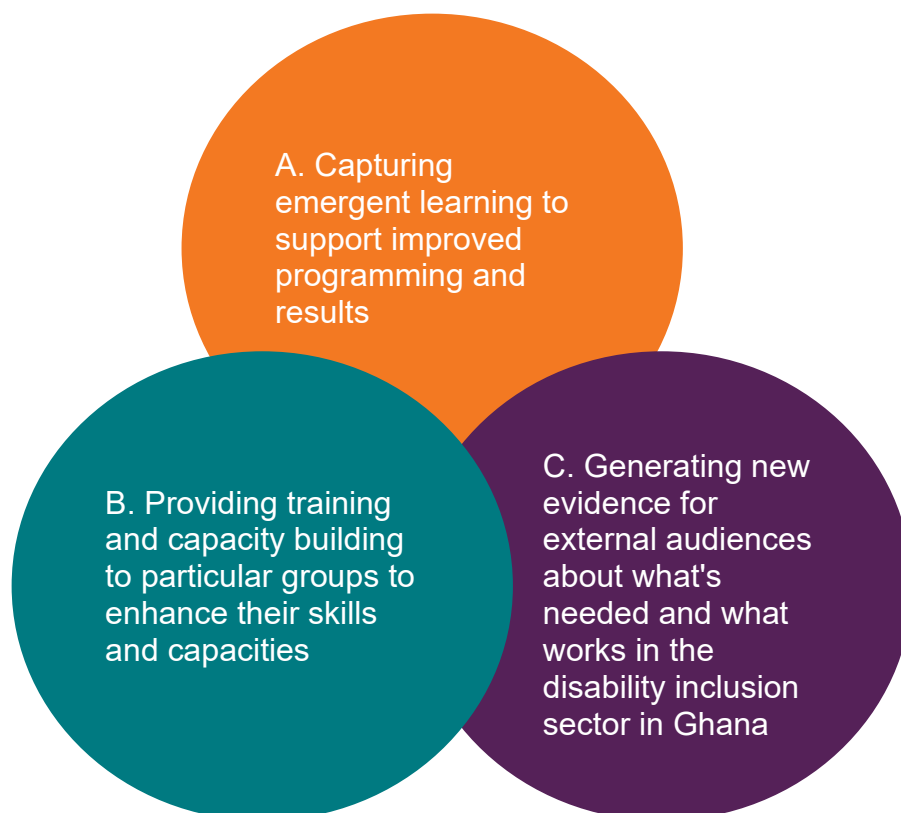
The intended audience for this learning product is Ghana Somubi Dwumadie consortium partners; Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; Leave No One Behind partners; programme grantees; non-governmental organisations or CSOs in the disability, mental health and wider sectors; and donors or foundations in mental health and disability.

This review will help to inform the final year of the programme and provide good practice examples for other programmes to follow. Key learning is identified and recommendations given in two areas:

Learning about key aspects of what worked well with the learning mechanisms employed and possible actions that can be taken to strengthen learning within the programme	Wider lessons which highlight and inform best practice in learning initiatives that could be considered for the design of future programmes

Learning has been a key facet of Ghana Somubi Dwumadie, and a learning plan was developed as a part of the overall programme Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Framework. **Learning is seen as a broad concept which is often defined as the acquisition of new understanding or knowledge from studying, information or experience, and it also generally includes the possible corresponding adjustments to behaviours, skills, values, attitudes, or preferences.** The programme has sought to foster interconnected areas of learning:

A. Capturing emergent learning to support improved programming and results

B. Providing training and capacity building to particular groups to enhance their skills and capacities

C. Generating new evidence for external audiences about what's needed and what works in the disability inclusion sector in Ghana

This learning product examines the first of these areas to review what has been learned from the implementation of various learning mechanisms and processes which have been utilised internally in the programme. It explores what has worked well, and not so well, and reasons for this, in regard to capturing sharing and acting on programmatic learning.

The methodology used was to review the mechanisms and any related documentation regarding their processes or examples of use. A set of semi-structured discussions with key informants from among the programme's consortium partners was also conducted. The sample of informants was selected from those staff who could comment across a wide number of different mechanisms, in order to make data collection as efficient as possible. A total of 13 informants were spoken to from all five consortium partners, to enquire about what worked well, what did not, and what practical improvements might be made in the context of a multi-stakeholder consortium programme. There are two sets of learning and recommendations identified: those about the specific mechanisms and recommendations for improvement, and cross-cutting learning which offers examples of what worked well for good practice, relevant for future programmes.

What We've Learned about Learning

The Learning Mechanisms

Ghana Somubi Dwumadie from the outset has embedded a learning function, which sits as a distinct entity within the MEL Framework as the learning plan. Based on this learning plan, the programme has specifically designed and embedded learning mechanisms and opportunities throughout the programme processes and right across all areas of programme work. Many of these are designed to link together and support each other to capture, share and make use of programmatic learning. The learning mechanisms developed and implemented in years 1-3 of the programme are summarised in table 1 below. Some of these mechanisms provide prompts and opportunities for capturing learning as it emerges within existing standard programme processes, while others are specifically designed learning sessions or events.

Table 1: Learning mechanisms employed within the programme and their intended main functions

Mechanism	Description	Mechanism designed or intended to facilitate:		
		Capturing learning	**Sharing learning**	**Acting on learning**
Learning Database	Specifically designed database for logging learning points, information on source, knowledge holder, and actions needed	Yes	Yes	Yes
Learning Champions	Nominated from each partner and the grants team to log teams' learning on a monthly basis into the Learning Database.	Yes		
Grantee monitoring visits	Quarterly face-to-face visits to grantees by grants team to review progress, challenges and learning	Yes		Yes
Grantee learning events	Annual event for grantees to meet and benefit from capacity building activities		Yes	Yes
Grantee learning exchange	One-off exchange event with two grantees to facilitate deeper exchange of practice and learning in the area of stigma reduction	Yes	Yes	Yes

Mechanism	Description	Mechanism designed or intended to facilitate:		
		Capturing learning	Sharing learning	Acting on learning
Grantee reporting (tailored templates)	Sections request information on unintended outcomes, challenges, effective strategies used, and lessons learned. Section for feedback or recommendations to the programme	Yes	Yes	Yes
Quarterly consortium partner reporting (tailored templates)	Sections request information on: challenges, adaptations, lessons learned. A section where partners can make recommendations to the programme	Yes	Yes	Yes
After action reviews	Structured format explores what worked well, what did not, what to do differently in future – to review a particular event or process	Yes		Yes
Quarterly consortium partner review meetings	Regular partner meetings to review progress, share and discuss success, challenges and learning, and present and discuss other thematic information or analysis	Yes	Yes	
Internal quarterly newsletter	Quarterly summary of partner progress, activities and reports for internal dissemination		Yes	
Production of learning products	A series of learning papers designed to examine and synthesise programme learning around specific identified themes	Yes	Yes	

It was found that some learning mechanisms have naturally had more engagement across partners than others. For instance, all informants are involved in partner reporting templates and programme review meetings, the learning database and the learning champions. The grants team are of course very closely engaged in all the grantee learning mechanisms. The newsletter has been accessed and read by many of the informants. Due to this variable engagement by partners and informants, it is possible to comment more extensively on some mechanisms than on others.

From the review of the learning mechanisms and the key informant discussions, a range of learning points about how the programme's learning mechanisms are being used, their strengths and weaknesses, and the value they have provided to the programme are detailed below.

Learning point: Developing a central repository for learning, in the form of a learning database, plays a significant role in capturing learning across a complex, multi-faceted, and multi-partner programme

The development of a detailed and accessible learning database at the outset of the programme has been a real asset in ensuring a one stop shop for learning and lessons emerging from the multi-faceted and diverse areas of the programme. It functions as a central repository of learning points and any necessary related actions required. The database was developed through an inclusive, collaborative process with inputs and feedback on its development from partners. Time was taken to ensure that the database was accessible to screen readers to facilitate greater inclusion of all staff members.

The database includes fields to record the knowledge holder, the origin of the learning plus any date or documentation relating to it, and action which may be needed as a result of the learning. It is therefore a repository which has great potential for analysis and synthesis of learning, and for monitoring and tracking related actions. The database currently contains 98 individual learning points generated over the 3 years of the programme to date.

It was noted that sometimes very similar learning points are initially logged in the database, indicating that a little more support may be needed on good articulation of learning and lessons. However, the learning manager reviews logged points within the database before they are made available to database users to avoid this sort of duplication.

Learning point: Establishing learning champions within each consortium partner team and grants team, prompts and promotes regular reflection on learning amongst teams

Establishing learning champions from each partner team and a requirement for them to log any learning or lessons identified by their teams on a monthly basis into the central database has meant that learning is captured soon after it occurs, which reduces the need for recall later on. It also helps to make sure that learning capture has a high profile across the programme, and that any actions needed in response to the learning are recorded in the database on a regular basis.

The creation of learning champions is a good way to encourage accountability for capturing learning across all partners. Informants indicated that the existence of learning champions means that within each team there is someone to check at staff meetings whether any learning has been observed, and to capture and log it. Without this specific person to flag learning, it was felt that there would be less focus on learning during meetings and regular programme management processes.

Learning champions are to some extent dependent on the rest of their team to identify learning points too, so engagement from the rest of the team is important.

One informant noted that it would be beneficial for learning champions to meet regularly to review the learning which was emerging. This would also be an opportunity to improve capacities to articulate learning points well.

> **Learning point: Programme review meetings have been essential mechanisms for sharing, learning from each other and identifying programme synergies**

Informants stated that the regular programme review meetings work very well, and some indicated that they felt that trust and capacities to identify and share learning have developed over time. A number of cited cases show the potential of cross-partner learning discussions at review meetings: liaison between Options work on government disability commitments and KCL work with regional and district health teams implementing mental health; and BasicNeeds-Ghana supporting KCL to identify key contacts in the districts for the District Mental Health Care planning. The cross-cutting thematic analyses and coaching sessions sometimes provided at programme review meetings, for instance on gender and mental health, run by partners, have also been very well received. A couple of informants also mentioned that the session reviewing the programme theory of change had been a valuable process and it resulted in the development of the programme's joint advocacy strategy in response to the learning captured.

To improve the learning component of these meetings further, informants consistently indicated that they would value more time for discussion to explore each other's challenges and learning points in more depth.

> **Learning point: Mechanisms for learning from grantees' work function well, but particular attention is needed to ensure that learning capture also flows back from the programme to grantees**

Part of the programme activities are implemented via grant funding mechanisms to in-country CSOs. These are managed by a grants team which consists of staff from four of the five consortium partners. To ensure that learning from the grants' activities flows into the wider programme, there have been a number of specific learning mechanisms designed to support and elicit learning from grantees' activities as listed in Table 1 above and discussed below. Emerging learning from the grantees and grants process has also been the topic of a **dedicated learning product**.

Feedback mechanisms in grantee report templates and monitoring visits mean that the grants team are made aware of challenges faced by grantees and are able to provide hands-on mentoring, especially during the face-to-face monitoring visits. The specific grantee learning events are also used as a forum for capacity building of grantees to improve their ability to identify and report new learning. In addition, learning event sessions are help to consolidate grantees' learning on what worked

well in their activities, for example, emphasising good practice in working with end-users, and external stakeholder engagement.

To some extent, the learning events have tended to confirm good practice rather than surfacing new learning. Some informants felt that the existing model of regular grantees learning events could be strengthened through a more interactive mode of delivery such as poster sessions at learning events or the one-off grantees' learning exchange event, where the two grantees working on social behaviour change met to share experiences. Introducing more interactive elements would further strengthen active learning at these events.

The mechanisms which focus on grantee work generally function well for the grants team. Learning emerging from grants activities flows to the wider programme through; the learning champion in their team logging key points into the database, learning event workshop reports, grants team inputs to quarterly consortium partner reports, and information sharing at programme review meetings. What is not so clear is how learning captured and consolidated within the wider programme flows back to grantees. Some informants indicated that quarterly consortium partner reports are not necessarily shared back with grantees, nor are the learning event workshop reports, despite their learning points contributing to these. Neither are grantees on the circulation list of the internal quarterly newsletter. Ensuring that consolidated learning systematically flows back to grantees helps create a two-way flow between grants activities and the wider programme.

Cross-cutting learning

This review also indicates a number of emerging cross-cutting learning points which provide more generic learning on what might be good practice in the area of learning from programme work.

> **Learning point: Having a dedicated full-time role which is truly devoted to learning within the programme allows learning to be consistently emphasised and highlighted across the programme, keeping the importance of learning high in everyone's minds**

Having a dedicated role, a learning manager in our programme, to raise the profile of learning has been highly beneficial in a number of ways:

- sending a message on the commitment to learning within the programme;
- building capacities around capturing, sharing and actioning learning;
- providing dedicated resource to support learning-related activities;
- promoting learning within the team in a consistent and persistent manner

Managing multiple complementary learning mechanisms needs the drive and coordination of a dedicated role. For example, this resourcing helped to ensure learning is regularly a component of programme reviews and other meetings, as well as initiating specific learning reviews such as the after action reviews. The presence of a staff member to ensure that a learning slot on meeting agendas, and to lead those sessions, has maintained a very high profile for learning within the programme.

A role with the sole focus on learning can therefore maximise and support learning processes and opportunities.

Sometimes a dedicated role has the risk that others do not see learning as their business anymore. However, the creation of the learning champions within each partner team, and requirements for learning capture by partner teams in reporting processes and events, alongside the dedicated role, has meant learning is seen as something for everyone to engage with.

> **Learning point: Being in a complex multi-stakeholder consortium programme with a granting mechanism can both facilitate and inhibit learning**

Almost all informants felt that the multi-partner structure of the programme strongly fostered the potential for learning because each organisation has its own approaches, skill sets and challenges, so the possibility for learning from each other is very high. The programme is multifaceted with a range of very diverse but related workstreams going on at the same time, according to the specialism of each partner. This means there is a lot for an individual partner to learn about the work of others. It was felt that in general the learning mechanisms have enabled partners to engage with others' learnings, and with how each organisation does things differently, and this builds a rich picture of a variety of ways of working and of organisational specialisms.

However, despite the embedded team model, sharing offices with mixed teams, and regular monthly staff meetings, a number of informants felt that the design and structure of the programme, with parallel but separate workstreams, may not fully lend itself to maximising the sharing of learning. Informants felt it was difficult to keep up closely with all other partners' activities, or with the learning which may be emerging from them, or to translate others' learning into their own working context.

The majority of informants expressed the opinion that there could be more time allocated for interaction and discussion of learning, and this reveals an underlying interest and desire for more information on each others' work areas. Active learning and incorporation of others' lessons into ways of working is probably not as strong as it might naturally be if partners' workstream activities were more similar in their focus due to the additional time needed for this, even though they are all working towards the same overall programme goal.

> **Learning point: Learning mechanisms which document required actions or programme adjustments are an excellent starting point in ensuring that lessons are applied. However, to be confident that learning is embedded in programming, monitoring and follow up is also required**

Translating learning into lessons and action is a key aspect of learning and one which has been built into some of the learning mechanisms. For instance, the database notes the knowledge holder of each learning point, as well as fields to capture any actions or programme adaptations needed as a result of the learning or

lesson identified, so that follow up on actions can be undertaken. Thus, information on actions can be captured, and in principle this allows implementation of lessons and actions to be tracked for completion. Indeed, 52 (53%) of the 98 learning points captured in the database have also captured an associated action or adaptation needed. The remaining 46 do not have an action or adaptation noted. In some cases this was because they were recording good practice which has been embedded in activities already, or wider learning which did not require an adaptation. In other cases the database indicates that action may be required but is still to be confirmed and logged. Monitoring by the learning manager indicates that many of the listed learning actions have indeed been completed.

The after action reviews are another mechanism which naturally includes identification of actions needed as a result of learning (see Table 1). A number of these have been conducted and the required actions captured as part of the exercise. Informants involved felt these to be very useful and there is a wish to undertake more of them. So, these after action reviews also contain the information needed to follow up on whether relevant actions are being implemented.

Analysis and follow up of both the 52 actions reported in the database, and the actions identified in the after action reviews which have been undertaken, would be a beneficial activity to see the extent to which lessons are being incorporated into programming. A more systematic analysis has been flagged as a priority for the final year of the programme if capacity allows.

All programme review meetings and events have a feedback survey conducted. This is effective in capturing participants' feedback on meeting purpose and process, and building this into planning and organisation of subsequent meetings, demonstrating the value of this sort of feedback loop for subsequent adaptation. However, this feedback process does not systematically capture learning actions coming out of the meeting sessions and discussion. Discussion sessions at these meetings would benefit from some dedicated facilitation at the end to ensure recording of actions needed, who would be responsible for implementation, and a relevant timeframe for completion. If this were introduced systematically, it would make sure that programmatic lessons and actions were being fully documented and provide a process for follow up and monitoring of their implementation.

Most informants agreed that in practice, ensuring that lessons are enacted is a weaker aspect of the way in which most of the learning mechanisms are utilised. The programme tends to rely on partners to implement their own actions on learning. Actions are often being taken forwards and embedded in workstream activities, but verification of this does not systematically come back to the central teams to guarantee the 'learning translated to lessons acted on' loop is closed.

Learning point: As well as designing and fully implementing learning mechanisms within a programme, specific efforts are needed to increase dissemination to intended audiences

All of those interviewed for this review confirmed that their teams were generators of learning through the various learning mechanisms across the programme. However, as audiences of the various mechanisms, all informants felt that this was more limited. The most commonly cited mechanisms to find out about what others are doing were the programme review meetings, partners' quarterly reports and the internal quarterly newsletter. The latter is seen as a good source of learning about other partners, having an attractive presentation, simple language and being easy to read. However, it was not universally mentioned as the 'go to' place to find out about the programme learning, so there may be scope for improved promotion or adjustments.

The learning database was not mentioned at all as a place to go to find out about the learning within the programme, even when asked specifically on how they would find out about learning. The database has not found itself an audience despite being a central repository of learning. More circulation of the link to the database might improve awareness of it as a shared source of programmatic learning and its value in facilitating the monitoring of actions implemented. This could be promoted in the newsletter for instance. Future considerations for a learning database mechanism could explore a more interactive function where users are encouraged to use and explore the findings and analysis.

The theme-based learning products series are designed for external as well as internal audiences and have the potential for sharing thematic learning across the programme. These are hosted on the programme website so are publicly available. Several informants mentioned these as good thematic learning mechanisms, and one or two had read them, but they were not widely mentioned by informants.

One idea coming from informants for increasing internal and external audiences for programme learning was to produce short practical guides such as;

- Guidance for facilitators – based on the programme's learning from the many inclusive events conducted, and
- Guidance for stakeholder engagement – based on the programme's many learning points captured in the database from working with a very wide range of external partners

This would build on the guidance notes series already available and which currently covers interviewing, storytelling, counting reach data and use of personal assistants. Devoting a little time to produce these sorts of guidance notes for both internal and external audiences could be valuable.

Recommendations for final year of programme

The following recommendations are proposed to the programme for consideration:

For greater identification and sharing of wider and deeper learning contributions from partners, plan more time for both structured and open discussion at programme review meetings.

Introduce more interactive elements to grantee learning events, such as facilitated poster presentations of work or inviting service-users as participants, to further strengthen active learning at these events.

For improved capture and tracking of actions arising from learning discussions, for example, at programme review meetings, always include a brief facilitated ending to each session where any learning actions, person responsible and timeframe are systematically recorded.

To maximise the value and use of the learning being captured in the learning database, ensure there is resourcing given to conducting a learning analysis of points captured, and to track implementation of related actions to see the extent to which lessons had been incorporated into programming.

To establish more of an internal audience for, and use of the database, increase circulation of the link to the database and the guidance notes on its use e.g., in the newsletter, or with a specific promotion of it as a place to go for information on programme learning.

To aid dissemination and use of learning, produce quick and simple guidance notes on a number of areas of learning which the programme has already captured, such as inclusive facilitation or stakeholder engagement for internal and external audiences.

Recommendations for future programme design

Programmes interested in having a strong learning component could consider having a dedicated learning role to send a message of commitment to learning, to build learning capacities, and to provide dedicated time for consistent and persistent promotion of learning across a programme.

In multi-partner programmes, build in mechanisms, processes and time for sharing, learning from each other and identifying programme synergies in order to maximise the potential for learning from each other.

Ensure that learning identified within a programme is translated into lessons learned and actions, where relevant, and give particular attention to mechanisms and processes which will monitor and track the implementation of such actions through systematic analysis in order to close the learning to actioned loop.

Summary

In summary, it is concluded that the programme has generated and captured a huge amount of tacit and explicit learning, in the form of both internally and externally targeted products, which is immensely useful for current and future programming, as well as for the wider disability and mental health sector. Overall, nearly all informants felt that there was good complementarity and self-reinforcement between the various learning mechanisms which have been set up within the programme, with little duplication of effort. Many informants cited the way that grantee monitoring visits, logging of learning points to the database, quarterly partner reporting requirements and programme review meetings all worked well together to emphasise and consolidate learning. In this manner, well-developed learning mechanisms can be mutually supporting and work to complement each other.

This learning product captures the key aspects of what has worked well in regard to the learning mechanisms and practices employed to support internal programme learning and suggests possible improvements or adjustments during the final year of the programme. It also highlights and informs best practice in learning initiatives more widely.

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