

# Executive Summary

There are more poor people and poverty reaches further into middle-income countries around the world than ever before. Adequate governmental capacity development is considered one of the critical missing factors in current efforts to reduce poverty and, by doing so, to meet the Millennium Development Goals. If the development of sustainable capacity is not given greater attention in the near future, development efforts in the poorest countries are expected to fail even if they are supported with substantially increased funding.

One effective way to improve the quality of democratic governments is by their learning from the past and from each other's experiences. But to what extent are governments capable of and/or willing to learn? And if they are, what are they supposed to learn—and how? Is the way they learn different from the way individuals or organizations learn? Under what conditions do they learn best, and to what extent can learning events enhance their capacities to improve the performance of their public sectors? These and many related questions are examined in *The Black Box of Governmental Learning*.

Facing poverty and ever-increasing local and global problems such as financial crises, climate change, and pandemics, democratic governments worldwide must find better ways to provide public goods and services to their citizens—and thus reduce poverty, accelerate economic growth, and improve sustainable development. There is a widely shared conviction among practitioners and scholars alike that governments in both developed and developing countries do have the capacity and are willing to learn from their pasts and/or from other countries' experiences. One means of doing this is in formal pre-arranged learning events like conferences, e-learning, study tours, roundtables, training, and workshops, which are an affordable and promising way to make governments more effective.

However, little is known about how governments learn best or what exactly makes them change their behavior in a deliberate and targeted way. Governments consist of thousands of state officials and numerous institutional units—the executive branch, parliaments, the judiciary, and the civil service—which

function under unique political conditions and environments. Experience has shown that they learn differently than individuals and/or organizations do. Governmental learning goes beyond individual and organizational learning approaches and is considered a complex and hard-to-conceptualize matter; it must address many cultural, economical, political, religious, and social particularities, psychological barriers, and practical constraints that might hinder or even prevent learning at all.

*The Black Box of Governmental Learning* introduces the Learning Spiral, a new concept for organizing efficient prearranged learning events for governments. The Learning Spiral—a heuristic and multidisciplinary concept—has been developed over the past decade for national and international governmental learning events. It was created through an ongoing dialectical process, where an original theory-based concept was applied in practice, reviewed, and subsequently reapplied in a forthcoming event. This process was repeated on an ongoing basis in numerous events held in developed and developing countries all over the world, with thousands of participants from all levels of governments and non-governmental organizations.

The Learning Spiral was conceptualized in a template consisting of eight consecutive stages: Conceptualization, Triangulation, Accommodation, Internalization, Externalization, Reconceptualization, Transformation, and Configuration. When these stages are performed, a didactical process is established that encourages behavioral change in governmental institutions, their members, and representatives from involved nongovernmental organizations and interest groups. The template serves as a practical guideline to organize governmental learning events. It offers general directions on designing a learning process and should therefore be applicable to any form and type of governmental learning activity.

The didactic concept of the Learning Spiral is based on an analysis of past and current experiences of how governments learn, the particular knowledge they learn, and how knowledge gets created and transferred to the learning actors. It further takes into account contemporary theories of political history, policy analysis, pedagogy, and sociology, as well as individual, organizational, and governmental learning concepts.

The practical application of the eight stages involves an elaborate process that includes the planning and designing of a particular learning event. The design is based on an analysis of the knowledge to be learned, usually state-of-the-art or evaluation-based knowledge regarding the issue at hand. The design also takes into account the political environment where the event is taking place, and it requires a deliberate selection of the individual learning actors and the governmental and nongovernmental institutions involved. This approach requires close attention to the interrelationship between the knowledge content of a learning event and the design of its process.

A major characteristic of this type of learning event is its facilitation by a learning broker who oversees all aspects of the event organization. This includes the logistics, the content preparation, the drafting and carrying through of the agenda, the moderation of the learning sessions, and the follow-up activities. Another important feature of the Learning Spiral is that there are no designated speakers. The distinction between knowledge holders and knowledge recipients becomes dispensable. Every participant is considered an active contributor who, whenever it appears appropriate, shares his or her experiences. With this kind of structure, every participant gets unlimited access to the collective wealth of the shared knowledge.

The effects of the applied Learning Spiral are threefold: The primary effect is that governments' access to the latest knowledge in democratic governance is enhanced and can be applied in concrete, practical action. A second effect is that—because of the iterative character of the learning process—the knowledge to be learned is always validated and updated in real time to include the latest existing experiences on the subject. And a third effect is that participation in the learning process evokes a sense of social belonging among the learning actors, which often leads to the creation of social networks, where governments continue to share their latest experiences and by doing so launch the next spin of the Learning Spiral.

To make the concept of the Learning Spiral accessible for practical use, *The Black Box of Governmental Learning* presents a number of case studies that show how the Learning Spiral has been successfully applied. The examples range from an international conference with several hun-

dred participants, among them numerous heads of state and government, to a small evaluation-based workshop for African policy makers from 10 different countries, to a multimedia training and e-learning initiative. Each case study is supplemented by a first-hand account from a high-level participant, such as a former president, a member of parliament, or a Supreme Court chief justice.

*The Black Box of Governmental Learning* is directed toward practitioners in governments, such as members of cabinets, parliaments, and courts; civil servants and politicians; civil society and private sector organizations; and international organizations. It provides a theory-guided and practice-approved comprehensive template for how to organize effective learning events for governments in the 21st century.

The concept of the Learning Spiral is a work in progress, and it has to be adapted to changes and new findings in practice and research in governmental learning. The Learning Spiral can be adapted to specific settings and government situations; it will evolve during use depending on changes and new findings in practice and research, and as governments continue to learn, it will adapt itself to those new situations. Practitioners and theoreticians are therefore invited to engage in the dialogue launched herein to further improve the learning capacities of governments, and by doing so, illuminate the black box of governmental learning.