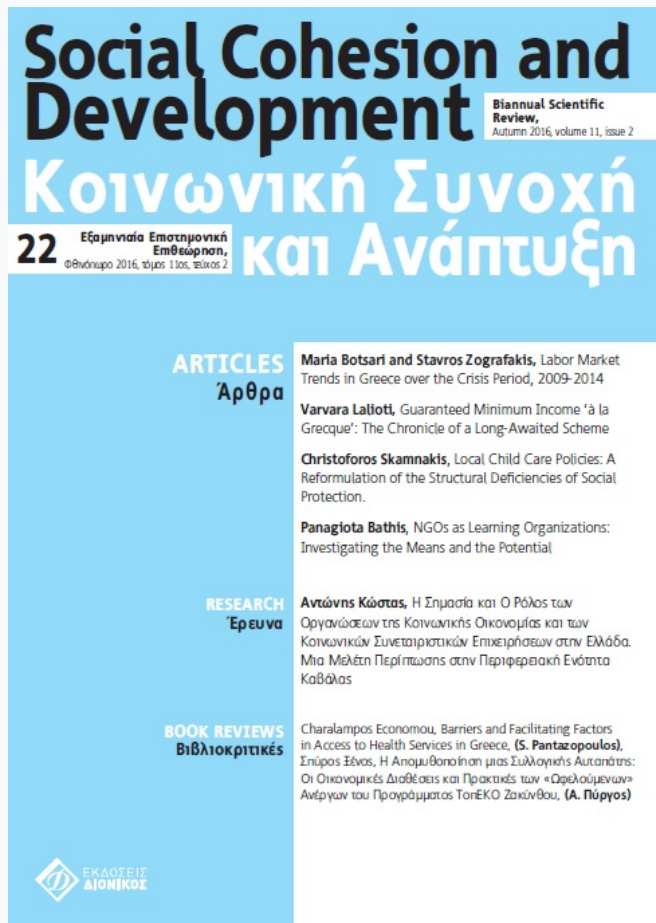


## Social Cohesion and Development

Vol 11, No 2 (2016)



### NGOs as learning organizations: Investigating the means and the potential

Panagiota Vathis

doi: [10.12681/scad.14133](https://doi.org/10.12681/scad.14133)

Copyright © 2017, Panagiota Vathis



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

#### To cite this article:

Vathis, P. (2017). NGOs as learning organizations: Investigating the means and the potential. *Social Cohesion and Development*, 11(2), 155–170. <https://doi.org/10.12681/scad.14133>

# NGOs as Learning Organizations: Investigating the Means and the Potential

Panagiota Vathis, *Technological Institute of Western Greece*

## Οι ΜΚΟ ως Οργανισμοί Μάθησης: Διερευνώντας τα Μέσα και τις Δυνατότητες

Παναγιώτα Βάθη, *ΤΕΙ Δυτικής Ελλάδας*

### ABSTRACT

The work of NGOs, especially in the present times, faces growing competition and shrinking budgets. They have to demonstrate that they make good use of the resources, while being obliged to learn from their actions and experiences and try new methods and practices, in order to be competitive and effective.

This article, explores the role of NGOs in providing incentives, means and opportunities for organizational learning. Our main aim is to present basic methods and good practices for their efficient function.

### ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το έργο των ΜΚΟ χαρακτηρίζεται από ένα απαιτητικό περιβάλλον με αυξανόμενο ανταγωνισμό και συρρικνούμενο προϋπολογισμό. Πρέπει συνεχώς να αποδεικνύουν ότι αξιοποιούν τα χρήματα που εισπράττουν και να επιδεικνύουν έργο με άμεσα ορατά αποτελέσματα ως μέτρο επιτυχίας ενώ ταυτόχρονα πρέπει να μαθαίνουν από την εμπειρία τους, να επικαιροποιούν τις μεθόδους και πρακτικές τους στο πεδίο, ώστε να παραμένουν αποτελεσματικές.

Στην παρούσα εργασία μελετάμε το ρόλο των ΜΚΟ στην παροχή κινήτρων, μέσων και ευκαιριών για οργανωσιακή μάθηση, επιδιώκουμε να παρουσιάσουμε βασικές μεθόδους και καλές πρακτικές και να προτείνουμε τρόπους επιτυχημένης εφαρμογής τους.

**KEY WORDS:** NGOs, organizational learning, tools for learning, evaluation of organizational learning

**ΛΕΞΕΙΣ-ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ:** ΜΚΟ, οργανωσιακή μάθηση, εργαλεία μάθησης, αξιολόγηση οργανωσιακής μάθησης

## 1. Introduction

While NGOs are undoubtedly forces of social change, their educative potential should also not be ignored. What NGOs seek to achieve through their actions and the tools they employ is important for learning and potentially for educational reasons. Moreover, organizational learning can co-exist with commitment to each NGO's objective but it needs to thrive in the context of openness and the ability to find out how knowledge is retained for future use (Britton:2005: 7). Since organizational learning is a site of adult learning, NGOs are "schools of learning" (Kane:2001) which involve an educative process of politicization, through

their actions, debate, explanations and justifications for socio-economic or environmental risks. In that sense NGOs can be seen as “vehicles of learning” and sites of educational engagement (Sutherland et al: 2006:172).

The root of the issue is the openness of NGOs to learn from their cognitive and political praxis (i.e. the knowledge they create and the action they pursue) and their intention to improve their organizational memory (Britton:2005: 7).

There are several tools and techniques promoting organizational learning in NGOs reflecting conceptual models for learning and knowledge, most of which are simple and trying them only requires the desire to try something new and appropriate motivation levels.

Moreover, there are tools for assessing learning capacity, such as The Learning NGO Questionnaire, which is a good starting point for developing a customized tool to assess the NGOs strengths and weaknesses (Britton:1998:22).

## 2. Methodology and Definitions

**D**rawing on a body of literature that has been written mostly with implementation of adult education in business organizations in mind, tools and learning processes are explored keeping in mind that NGOs have to overcome several barriers to learning.

However, in order to strengthen their skill for effective organizational learning at all levels-individual, sector, organization- NGOs should systematically assess their current learning capacity. Using an assessment tool like The Learning NGO Questionnaire can be rather helpful in this process.

In the present article, Habermasian theoretical terms are used to provide a theoretical grounding to organizational learning.

Organizational learning is perceived as the processes or activities that an organization involves to develop insights, knowledge, and lessons from past experiences so as to improve current and future performance (Britton:2005:5). It refers to a learning process within organizations that involves the interaction of individual and collective (group, organizational, and inter-organizational) levels of analysis and leads to achieving the goals of organizations (Popova-Nowak and Cseh:2010:299). Organizational learning indicates how individuals, teams, and organizations learn and transform through actions, experiences and cooperation.

## 3. Organizational Learning Through Habermasian Lens

**H**abermas has developed an interdisciplinary theory of communicative action based on the following two motifs: the increasing dominance of purposive rationality in society and the need to develop a communicatively-based rational challenge to this (Habermas:1991). According to Habermas, as society has evolved and become increasingly complex, economic and political-administrative institutions split off from the lifeworld to form a more purposive- rationally oriented systems world. These institutions are no longer primarily steered by communicative considerations but by instrumental considerations of money and power (Holford et al:1998:93).

Habermas' approach of the communicative potential of the institutions and traditions of the lifeworld provides theorists of organizational learning and of adult education in general with

descriptive and normative interpretations of the role of adult education (Holford et al:1998:95). These particularly concern the necessity and value of organizational knowledge especially in NGOs.

Organizational learning can be seen as a form of social learning since both involve participation in communities of practice through which people acquire experience, knowledge and identities by coming together in a variety of enterprises (Sutherland et al: 2006:172). In this view, organizational learning is more than an intellectual activity as it involves the negotiation of competences and cooperation amongst participants in a community of practice, such as NGOs. Furthermore, organizational learning as a form of social learning also contributes to the exploration and redefinition of the organizational responsibility of the stakeholders involved (Wildemeersch and Jansen:1997:465). However, NGOs are distinct "communities of practice" in which actors involved learn to enhance their collective agency, through action and reaction, collaborative and cooperative patterns of interaction. In organizational learning, as in the learning process in general, unlearning is a starting point of change.

Habermas suggests the connection between civil society, democracy and adult education while he defines civil society as "...composed of more or less spontaneously emergent associations, organizations and movements that, attuned to how societal problems resonate in the private public sphere, distil and transmit such reactions in amplified form to the public" (Habermas:1996:367). Key to Habermas' definition of civil society is the role of NGOs. NGOs in civil society are comprised of citizens who seek acceptable interpretations for their social interests and experiences. NGOs, by actively sustaining a public sphere discourse, can "insert moments" of democratic accountability into system world.

Adult education can foster the creation of spaces where citizens have the opportunity to debate publicly and critical learning can take place. NGOs are such prime locations for learning that is free from dependence on the state or economy.

According to Welton (1995), in order for the field of adult education to fulfill such a role in civil society, adult learning must involve both social reproduction (enculturation) and social revolutionary learning (system-bursting and socially critical learning). As the world of power and money is a constant threat to civil society, the forces of technical control must be made subject to the consensus of acting citizens who redeem the power of reflection (Sutherland et al:2006:52). NGOs are important pedagogical sites for democratic learning, where democracy as a social movement is embedded in an ongoing effort of individuals to produce a social discourse and to ponder the implications of such discourse for social or political action.

Organizational learning at organizational level depends on the NGO's identity (its self-definition), the adversary it seeks to challenge (that is its principal "enemy") and its vision (what goals it seeks) since defining what an organization stands for and what it stands against are clearly educational activities (Sutherland et al:2006:174). However, as an organization consists of sectors, groups and individuals, organizational learning at oorganizational level reflects the knowledge and human interests according to Habermas analysis as seen in Table 1:

**Table 1: Knowledge and human interests**

Type of human Interest	Kind of knowledge	Process	Research methods
Technical (prediction)	Instrumental (casual explanation)	Empirical-analytic methods	Positivistic sciences
Practical (interpretation and understanding)	Practical (understanding)	Hermeneutic methods	Interpretive research
Emancipatory (criticism and liberation)	Emancipation (reflection)	Critical theory methods	Critical Social Sciences

Source: E. Karatzia-Stavlioti et al., 2011

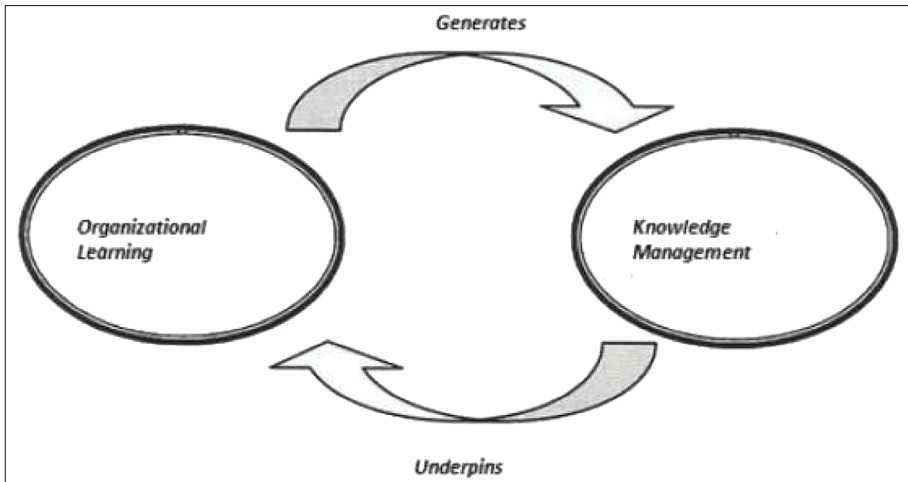
Undoubtedly, Habermas provides the theoretical support for organizational learning in NGOs who hope and work for a more rational and democratic society.

## 4. Knowledge and Learning in NGOs Context

Since the mid 1990s the NGO world became aware of the fact that NGOs have to invest in their most valuable resources i.e. knowledge and learning and adopt the practical framework from the corporate world (Britton:2005: 7). So, NGOs adopted the fields of organizational learning and learning organization realizing that these have not just theoretical significance but they also provide advantages which are necessary for responding to the evolving role of NGOs. Unfortunately, many NGOs suffer from lack of organizational memory, that is their information systems are difficult to access and incomplete which makes knowledge difficult to be retained for future use (Britton:2005:7). However, using the advances in technology and communications, organizational leadership no longer needs multiple layers of intermediaries to pass information up and down the organizational structure. This leveling of the organization pushes responsibility and control lower in the organization, which, in turn requires a particular kind of membership: those who are willing to learn, adapt quickly, communicate and cooperate effectively.

By the end of the 1990s, NGOs turned to another idea from the corporate world: "knowledge management", i.e. the process of organizing and managing information and recovering the collective memory (see Figure 1 and Table 2). NGOs managers hoped that the promising power of ICT would help them turn information into manageable knowledge and wisdom. Unfortunately, reality did not live up to expectations.

**Figure 1: Linking organizational learning and knowledge management**



Source: Britton (2005). p. 8

**Table 2: Linking organizational learning and knowledge management**

Organizational Learning	Knowledge Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It is the intentional use of collective and individual learning in order to transform organizational behavior according to its target</li> <li>• Provides purposes for the utilization of knowledge</li> <li>• It is context-specific i.e. knowledge is selected in order to address specific challenges</li> <li>• It is usually demand led</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It refers to the systematic processes by which the individual or collective knowledge is acquired, distilled, shared, stored, retrieved and used</li> <li>• It enables organizational learning</li> <li>• Can be context-independent</li> <li>• It is usually supply driven i.e. the process is adapted to the offered information</li> </ul>

Source: Britton (2005). p. 8

Knowledge management has made an important contribution as far as organizational learning is concerned because it has helped NGOs to take a “second generation” approach taking into account not only the technology but also the human resources in order to achieve its aim. Perfection becomes the standard and change is the normal way of organizational life (Gee et al.:1996).

## 5. The Learning Organization

**T**he concept of Learning Organization first appeared in MIT, mainly due to P. Senge and it seems that it influenced organizations in almost every country in western world.

In that sense, a learning organization is an organization that acquires knowledge and innovates quickly enough to survive and thrive in a rapidly changing environment. Learning

organizations create a culture that encourages and supports continuous employee learning, critical thinking and risk taking that involves new ideas, allowing mistakes and valuing employee contribution, learning from experience and experiment, and disseminating new knowledge throughout the organization for incorporation into its plan of action (Britton:1998, Popova-Nowalk and Cseh: 2015).

In a NGO,-as in any organization-, there are learning needs that may not be observable or apparent to the other parts of the organization or to the managers. For this reason it is important that learning needs,-as well as other needs-, are regularly investigated and gaps are addressed on a collective basis. Identification of learning needs is helped by answering specific questions like "is the provision of learning activities determined from a consideration of organizational objectives?", "does the group/department/organization operate effectively as a team or just as a collection of individuals?", "is there a clear induction process for members of the organization?". Data may be collected from a number of internal or external sources and may provide different insights depending on what is gathered. Therefore, it is rather important to investigate the most appropriate information that will guide the learning needs analysis (e.g.: sufficient data is collected, information of data are recognized, opinions are carefully investigated to see if they are justified). Collecting information for the purpose of identifying learning needs can be conducted in a number of ways (i.e. internal sources, external sources) and the type of data gathered influences the manner in which it can be applied.

The learning organization literature,-even when referring to NGOs,- includes references to intuition and telling-a- story, the need to understand connecting patterns and relationships as well as system archetypes, the involvement of staff at all levels as active producers of knowledge, the collective nature of thought, which generates learning, creative tension and critical reflection (Watkins and Marsick:1993).

Corporate discourse on learning organization places great emphasis on the role of the individual in the learning process ( Schied et al.in Holford et al.:1998:281). Given the turmoil and constant change experienced by organizations, learning purportedly supports incrementally improved performance and seeks to shape NGOs at every level (individual, group, sector, organization) so that it is flexible and adaptable in response to uncertainty. A central assumption undergirding the conceptual basis of learning NGOs includes viewing learning as a means to improve future organizational performance. Another key assumption is seeing learning as a way to keep organizations in alignment with their environment as a mechanism for survival, growth and success. Dilworth (1995) takes this one step further when he compares the learning organization to DNA: much like a genetic code, learning is not an external activity but is rather embedded in everyday work activity through the internalized values and beliefs that govern team and individual behaviour.

Brooks (1992) points out that the nature of the relationship between individual learning and organizational transformation is unknown. He concludes that individuals, not teams, work to transform organizations. Similarly, he sees positive response to change as an advantage and a way to exploit a situation and, thus, transform oneself in order to face the new demands. In this way, opportunity-oriented NGOs tend to be focused, pliable, self-assured, and risk-taking, proactively delving into change and developing structures to manage ambiguity.

## 6. Conceptual Models and Methods for Organizational Learning

Conceptual models for organizational learning help the stakeholders understand the way in which individual and collective learning works in the context of an organization. A particularly interesting point of organizational learning is that conceptual frameworks can be found almost in every scientific field, based, mainly in the western cultural perspective. The most commonly used models comes from Behavioural Psychology (experiential learning cycle, single-double and triple loop learning) - (Kolb:1984, Argyris and Schon:1996, Britton:2005), Organizational Learning and Organizational Development (Senge’s Five Disciplines, Levels of Learning, The Learning Organization, Eight Function Model)- (Watkins and Marsick:1993), Strategy Development (Planned and Emergent Strategies)- (Rose and Murphy:2014:181, Knowledge Management (The Knowledge Hierarchy, Tacit and Explicit Knowledge, People-Process and Technology Model, Three Generations of Knowledge Management, Gartner’s Enterprise Matrix, Knowledge Creation Spiral) - (Hicks, Dattero and Galup:2006:19-31, Prusak:2000, Shenk, Gartner and Fichtner:1999, Nonaka, Ikujiro, Toyama and Ryoko:2003:2-10).

Since the mid 1990s, in order to bridge the gap between theoretical models and practice, many NGOs have experimented with several methods of organizational learning, adopting, once again, concepts from the corporate world (see **Table 3**).

**Table 3: Methods of organizational learning**

Method	Approach
Learning Before, During and After (LBDA) (Carrillo:2005:236-250)	The LBDA method aims at avoiding the reinvention of existing knowledge by creating knowledge “assets” that can be assessed by everyone in the NGO. Learning <i>before</i> refers to learning which benefits people who are experienced or knowledgeable. Learning <i>during</i> refersto learning that takes place after action reviews. Learning <i>after</i> is captured by learning reviews leading to specific recommendations for future actions. The LBDA model suggests a process which focuses on interpersonal relationships supported with ICT.
Learning workshops(Enfield et al.:2007))	The method is based on the “Learning after” part of the LBDA method and is used as an alternative to formal lessons. This includes video interviews with the individuals and groups concerned with the goal to capture learning from cross-functional teams.
Communities of Practice (Wegner:2009)	Communities of practice refer to groups of individuals (either within organizations or across several organizations) who share know-how, improve their competence, share and develop good practices, foster creativity, and collaborate towards achieving a common objective. These networks may meet face-to-face but they usually keep in regular contact virtually using ICT methods.
Action Learning(Marsick and O’Neil:2003)	The method refers to action learning approach. Action learning sets are small groups who discuss emerging issues or problems that each member experiences at work. At their meetings, they share perceptions about such issues/problems, they support each other, they question and review progress whereas they are discouraged from giving advice.



## 7. Tools for Organizational Learning

A common practice among NGOs is to search for tools that will contribute to embracing methods or work-related approaches and translating innovative, extraordinary concepts into practical organizational reality. When choosing or developing such tools, NGOs have to maintain a balance between oversimplifying learning and the need to revolutionise it. There is also a need to develop the capacity to adapt the tools that better fit the NGO's objectives and culture. In Table 4 a range of more often used tools are introduced:

**Table 4: Tools for organizational learning**

Tool	Application
Advice Network Maps (Informal networks: the company behind the chart (Krackhardt and Hanson:1993:104-111)	Advice Network Maps identify the members whom staff turn to most often for help or advice despite the fact that their expertise may be unrecognized but who play a crucial role in the organization's memory. It is what we call: "the company behind the chart".
Case studies (Wynn-Williams et al:2008:113-128)	The process involves selecting a situation from the NGO's experience that illustrates a series of issues for further discussion. A case study describes events in the form of a story enabling readers to reflect on the dilemmas or problems faced by the persons in the story.
Individual Performance Indicators (Braskamp and Ory:1994)	Individual Performance Indicators are used to establish an individual's performance concerning knowledge management. These link organizational learning with individual job responsibilities. They are often used as part of the organization's individual performance appraisal system.
Organizational Performance Indicators (Popova and Sharpanskykh:2010)	Such indicators measure progress in knowledge management and organizational learning in relation to NGOs' strategic plan.
Learning Maps (Britton:2005)	Learning maps enable organizations to visually represent the internal creation and flow of knowledge and learning. Mapping learning involves brainstorming and recording onto cards every single stage of the process and thus creating a flowchart. The flow of information and lessons learned is added to the diagram by using connecting lines. Such maps can be used to identify potential connections and mechanisms for ensuring that the NGO can benefit more from its own knowledge and experience.
Information and Communication Technology (ICT) (Robey, Boudreau and Rose:2000:125-155)	Many NGOs use a wide range of ICT tools to identify "who knows what" in the organization, as well as try to improve organizational memory, making use of searchable databases, documents management systems, partners databases etc

## 8. Developing a Strategy for Organizational Learning

Having discussed the importance of organizational learning in NGOs it is clear that developing a strategic approach to learning is the key for encouraging learning-both collective and individual- in an organization. However, an instrumental approach where learning is seen just as

a means to organizational effectiveness does not stimulate creativity nor generate new insights and innovative practices. On the other hand, a more speculative, opportunistic approach that focuses more on the values, vision and culture of the organization develops staff learning skills, creates opportunities for sharing experiences and develops a culture of learning (Britton:2005:36).

Planned and emergent approaches to organizational learning are not mutually exclusive and the challenge for each NGO is to develop and implement its own strategy which finds a workable balance between the two approaches and provides its members with the necessary motive, means, and opportunities creating therefore a learning environment. Table 5 summarises motives, means and opportunities NGOs can provide to their staff in order either to develop a planned learning strategy or create conditions for emergent learning (Britton:2005:37)

**Table 5: Developing strategy for organizational learning**

Develop a planned learning	Create conditions for emergent learning
Motive	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear out NGO’s objectives and the contribution of organizational learning to achieving them</li> <li>• Identify barriers to learning and suggest ways of overcoming them</li> <li>• Create learning goals and strategic at individual, group, section and organizational level</li> <li>• Monitor and evaluate the outcomes and impact of organizational learning initiatives</li> <li>• Encourage and reward learning</li> <li>• Establish collective responsibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Share individual/team experiences and knowledge</li> <li>• Share and celebrate successful initiatives</li> <li>• Develop mechanisms for familiarizing members with useful conceptual models</li> <li>• Point out the importance even of small scale learning</li> </ul>
Means	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use Advice Network Maps to find out where expertise lies in the organization</li> <li>• Encourage team working</li> <li>• Introduce learning methods such as mentoring, coaching, action learning and communities of practice</li> <li>• Create a knowledge management infrastructure</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop individual skills</li> <li>• Take into account cultural context when developing methods and tools</li> <li>• Strengthen interpersonal and interorganizational relationships</li> </ul>
Opportunity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create the space for learning</li> <li>• Make use of existing systems and procedures</li> <li>• Consider evaluation as part of learning</li> <li>• Make use of evaluations in order to improve learning</li> <li>• Build time and resources for reflection and learning</li> <li>• Involve staff in review and evaluation teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage networking and the development of communities of practice within each NGO as well as between NGOs</li> <li>• Create the space for learning</li> </ul>

As a matter of fact, organizational learning is both deeply personal and strongly influenced by certain socio-cultural factors. In addition, globalisation has lead to widespread interaction

between agents from different cultures and contexts. Cultural differences impact on the design and operation of performance measurement systems. In addition, the choice of performance measures will be determined by a range of cultural and contextual factors. Not only is there a need for greater understanding of the impact of different cultures on the choice and use of performance measures, but we need to recognize how cultural values impact on the application of different assessment processes. It is easily assumed that western conceptual models are universally applicable. However, a number of recent studies

(Jackson:2003, Alvarado:2004, Guoquan Chen : 2008) demonstrate the need to challenge the assumption that western models of management and organization are equally applicable to NGOs no matter where they are located culturally or geographically, seeing as even neighbouring European countries seem to have differing approaches (Sorgenfrei:2004). Cultural and contextual differences may also limit our ability to compare the performance of similar organisations working in different cultures and settings, and hence undermine any comparative analysis .

The potential for organizational learning to have an equal effect on organizational transformation has yet to be fully explored and there is a need for translating theory into practice. Moreover, models and practices must be transformed in order to meet the needs of learning in different cultures and contexts. On the other hand, much of the success of such systems is determined by the human factor. The successful application of organizational learning and knowledge management systems depends on the intentions of those who commission it, as well as the resources, commitment and approach of those who design and operate it. The principal reasons why learning initiatives fail are poor design of the strategies themselves and difficulties related to the way the overall system is implemented.

## 9. Evaluating Organizational Learning

**W**ithout an evaluation of learning programmes it is impossible to identify the successful or unsuccessful elements and therefore improve future provision. Questions about evaluating organizational learning involve how NGOs are developed, how they are managed and how they can be measured. For example, has the metamorphosis into a learning organization taken place once individuals at all levels have been transformed? Does learning among individuals, teams, processes and the total system occur concurrently? How does this learning occur? Is it based on experiential or adaptive learning or is it anticipatory and innovative? If the process is concurrent, how is work distinguished from learning?- when does one end and the other begin? And how is learning measured? Is it measured by quantitative methods? Does a learning NGO exist- in its learning capacity- if the whole organization has not mastered team learning, shared visions, mental models, personal mastery and systems thinking? (Shied et al., in Holford et al.: 1998:283).

Evaluation can be conducted at a number of levels (see Table 6, below) (Phillips:2003):

**Table 6: Levels of the Learning NGOs evaluation**

Level of evaluation	Method	Tools	Impact of evaluation
Reaction	Find out the initial response to the action-learning program	Feedback sheets, reports	Find out what the participants think about the learning interventions, what the stakeholders think about the training interventions, what their thoughts are about the venues facilities
Learning	Find out what was actually learned from the action-learning program	Reports of new knowledge and experience	Find out the main areas of new knowledge and experience
Behavior	Find out the changes in the participants behavior in the desired manner	Observation of the way they use ICT	Find out which elements of new knowledge and experience have been applied in the workplace and why the participants apply some of the elements and not others
Outcomes	Find out if there is any improvement in achieving their targets	Reports of the strengthens and weaknesses of the organization compared with actions before the learning interventions	Find out the level of improvement in achieving their targets
Return of investment	Find out how the investment in learning compare to the results	Comparing reports of actions before and after the learning interventions	Find out the level of improvement in achieving their targets

In order to strengthen their capacity for effective learning, NGOs should first systematically and honestly assess their current learning capacity. An assessment tool such as The Learning NGO Questionnaire (Britton:1998:22) can be helpful in this process, particularly if it can be adapted to reflect the specific circumstances of the organization and its working environment. The Learning NGO Questionnaire consists of forty questions and uses the eight functions of a learning organization (gathering internal experience, accessing external learning, integrating learning into strategy and policy, apply the learning, developing organizational memory, communication systems, drawing conclusions, creating a supportive culture: all of them correlate to each other) as a basis for assessing the NGOs strengths and weaknesses. It can be used at individual, group, sector or organization level.

Interpreting the responses requires the organization to examine not only the overall scores of each of the functions but also each individual's assessment of specific questions. The following questions may help clarify the significance of the responses:

- What functions can the NGO acknowledge as its strengths?
- What functions require most attention? What needs to be done to strengthen the organization's capacity in those areas?
- Is there a wide disagreement between individuals' scores for a particular function? What is the significance of this?

- What are the main barriers to strengthening the learning capacity of the organization? How can these barriers be overcome? (Britton:1998:25).

Exposing the NGO to the scrutiny of evaluation may be a rather risky activity as examining areas of the organization's practice will inevitably lead to discussions about how the organization operates in general and how individuals, teams and sections work together for achieving their goals. However, this must not be threatening as it can turn out to be a chance even in NGOs where there are internal tensions. Indeed, discussing about a neutral topic such as organizational learning, knowledge management or organizational memory, may act as an unthreatening way to identify underlying organizational problems which may require attention. For this process to succeed, the organization has to set up basic rules for the discussion and perhaps involve "the right" facilitator, that is an interested person who is familiar with the issues (Ford:2001).

With the increased intensity of humanitarian and environmental action since the late 1980s, it became clear that monitoring and evaluation approaches which were created for development purposes needed some adjustment in order to be applied in relief and emergency situations. As most emergency situations are characterised by extreme urgency and a multitude of actors, many of the operational challenges mentioned previously are accentuated. For instance, circumstances tend to change rapidly, and this creates a need for continuous monitoring which is often difficult to satisfy, as most field practitioners are tied up in operations and do not perceive monitoring as a priority. Many evaluations are conducted after the interventions have taken place, such as After Action Review (AAR). AAR focuses on a few key questions in order to obtain a quick picture of the process and outcome of the intervention (Guoquan Chen:2008).

Managers tend to make fundamental mistakes when choosing what to measure, and selecting performance indicators. Some performance measures are inappropriate and impractical in an organizational setting, especially as far as organizational learning is concerned. Furthermore, the way measures are implemented often alienates staff and volunteers who feel threatened by the indicators used or the processes initiated. In addition, the overall process is time consuming, frustrating, and deflects staff from their primary tasks. Consequently, it is understandable that staff and volunteers often do their best to derail and subvert such effects (Hailey and Sorgenfrei:2004).

## 10. Learning Organizations in a Learning Society

**M**any metaphors have been employed to describe contemporary society as the "information society", "knowledge society", "learning society". One of the fundamental issues in the concept of the learning society is the concept of "learning" which is often confused with the issue of "education". Yet the idea of a society undertaking an individual to "educate" them is rather strange since society is more than the sum of its individual members. It is quite necessary to make a clear distinction between the concepts of "education" and "learning": by education we mean a public situation that provides learning through certain structures established by the state. Learning, however, is broader than education and it is in fact private. It is the process by which individuals transform their experiences into knowledge, skills, values, attitude, emotions, beliefs, senses etc. It is universal and to some extent lifelong. In other words, learning is a human ability possessed by everybody but it is a private activity (Holford et al.:1998:59). However, in the modern reflexive society the knowledge that people acquire is no longer certain and established for ever- its value lies in that it enables people to adapt to the ever-changing social requirements.

In one sense, learning society is about creating a pseudo-public sphere from a private process. Learning remains the driving force of human beings, something that is individual and individuating and it can only be applied to society because society is fragmenting and individuating, it is, by its nature, undergoing change (Jarvis in Holford: 1998:67).

As each organization reflects society, a learning organization is a model of the learning society and a reflection of it, it is "nothing more than an island of relatively stabilized relational orders in a sea of ceaseless change, the society"(Chia:2003:131). In modern times, alike society, NGOs are increasingly affected by the "knowledge-thick" global environment characterized by growing complexity, uncertainty, non-linearity and rapid change. They are becoming "more fluid, ever shifting in size, shape and arrangements" and are promoting the removal of hierarchies and de-centering of knowledge creation (Popova-Nowak and Cheh:2010 :299).

However, sometimes it seems that knowledge is frightening. In fact, as learning is a process of transformation and, therefore of freedom, freedom is frightening (Jarvis in Holford: 1998: 55). In other words, the fear of freedom is a fear of learning. Consequently, there may be a reaction to the organizational learning- as there may be a social reaction to the learning society- a non-learning society. Some people are seeking to recreate structures, to re-enact traditions and to create "safe" social milieus for every day life as to them the learning society is a risky place.

## 11. Conclusion

**T**his article has offered an overview of some of the issues in the area of organizational learning and its evaluation based on Habermas' ground theory.

Currently, there is an artificial division between formal learning viewed as knowledge acquisition and informal learning viewed as a social process (Elkjaer: 1999:419-434). Although current research recognizes that organizational learning is more than a cumulative result of individual learning, NGOs' most common approaches include planned learning through formal training programs hoping that individual learning will aggregate at the organizational level (Eddie Blass: 2005). A growing number of NGOs realize the limitations of individual learning and recognize the power of employee interaction in learning within the NGO or between members of other organizations, thus fostering viable and dynamic environments, while valuing creativity and diversity (Popova-Nowak and Cheh:2010:320).

As far as evaluating of organizational learning is concerned, there are a number of operational challenges and crucial issues that need to be addressed to ensure the successful application of measurement systems, notably around how best to promote learning and performance improvement while preserving a degree of accountability and transparency. In addition, issues related to how best to factor in power and control, culture and context, as well as complexity and change, must be considered. There is ongoing concern about the cost of implementing such systems; whether or not they are cost-effective and deliver what they purport to. Many of these issues can be addressed through greater stakeholder participation in the development of objectives and performance indicators; in their analysis as well as the dissemination of findings. While such participation is time-consuming and expensive, stakeholder involvement is crucial, if the ultimate purpose of performance measurement, namely performance improvement, is to be achieved. It is therefore apparent that dedicated resources in terms of time and money are needed to make such stakeholder involvement possible (Tsoukas and Chia:2002).

Organizational learning in NGOs, as a dimension of adult education, is influenced by Habermasian theory on communicative action and on civil society.

## Bibliographical References

- Argyris, C., Schon, A. (1996), *Organizational learning II: Theory, method and practice* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Blass, E., (2005), 'The rise and rise of the corporate university', *Journal of European Industrial Training*, vol. 29 (1).
- Braskamp, L., Ory, J. (1994), *Assessing Faculty Work: Enhancing Individual and Institutional Performance*, Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Britton, B., (2005), *Organisational Learning in NGO's: Creating the Motive, Means and Opportunity*.
- Brooks, A., (1992), 'Building Learning Organizations: the Individual-culture interaction' in: *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 3,(4):323-335.
- Carrillo, P., (2005), 'Lessons learned practices in the engineering, procurement and construction sector', *Engineering, Construction and Architectural Management*, Vol. 12(3):236-250.
- Chen, G. (2008), 'An organizational learning model based on western and Chinese management thoughts and practices', *Journal of Operations Management*, 26(1): 45-64.
- Dilworth, S., (1995), 'The DNA of learning organization', in: S. Chawla and J. Renesch (eds) *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for tomorrow's workplace*, Portland: Productivity Press, OR: 243-256.
- Elkjaer, M., (1999), 'Organizational Learning: the third way', *Management Learning*, vol. 35, pp.419-434.
- Enfield, R., Schmitt-McQuitty, L., M. Smith (2007), 'The Development and Evaluation of Experiential Learning Workshops for 4-H Volunteers', *Journal of Extension*, vol. 45(1), [www.joe.org](http://www.joe.org).
- Fahey, L., Prusak, L., (1998), 'The eleven deadliest sins of knowledge management', in: *California Management Review*, 40 (3), at <http://www.comp.dit.ie/dgordon/courses/researchmethods/Countdown/11DeadliestSins.pdf>
- Ford, M.W., Evans, J.R., (2001), *Baldrige Assessment and Organizational Learning: The Need for Change Management* at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc>
- Gee, J., Hul, G., C. Lankshear, (1996), *The new work order: behind the language of the new capitalism*, Boulder: Westview Press.
- Habermas, J. (1991), *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: the MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1996), *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge: MA:MIT.
- Hailey, J., M. Sorgenfrei, (2004), *Measuring Success Issues in Performance Measurement*, Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: International Training and Research Centre INTRAC

- Hicks, R., Dattero, R., S. Galup, (2006), 'The five-tier knowledge management hierarchy', in: *Journal of Knowledge Management*, vol. 10(1), pp.19-31.
- Holford, J., Jarvis, P., C. Griffin, (1998), *International Perspectives on lifelong learning*, London: Kogan Page.
- Jansen, T., Wildemeersch, D. (1998), 'Beyond the myth of self-actualisation: Reinventing the community dimension of adult education', in: *Adult Education Quarterly*, vol. 48, pp.216-226.
- Kane, J., (2001), *The Politics of Moral Capital*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Karatzia- Stavlioti, E., Kamarianos, J., Vathi, P., (2011), 'Will Cinderella go to the dance?', in *Proceedings of 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on Educational Management and Intercultural Reality*, Patras, Greece, November 2011, pp.351-366. (In Greek)
- Krackhardt, D., Hanson, J.R., (1993), 'Informal networks: the company behind the chart', *Harvard Business Review*, 71(4):104-111.
- Kolb, D.A., (1984), 'Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development', at <http://www.learningfromexperience.com/images/uploads/process-of-experiential-learning.pdf>.
- Marsick, V., J. O'Neil, (2014), 'The Many Faces of Action Learning', *Journal of Management Inquiry*, vol. 23, pp. 421-432.
- Nonaka, Ikujiro, Ryoko Toyama, (2003), 'The knowledge-creating theory revisited: knowledge creation as a synthesizing process', *Knowledge Management Research & Practice*, vol. 1 (1): 2-10.
- Pee, L.G., Kankanhalli, A. (2009), 'A model of organisational knowledge management maturity based on people, process, and technology', in: *Journal of Information and Knowledge Management* at <http://www.scholarbank.nus.edu.sg/handle/10635/77802>
- Popova-Nowak, I.V., Cheh, M., (2015), 'The meaning of organizational learning: a meta-paradigm perspective', in: *Foundations and Philosophy of HRD Review*, 14(3):299-331.
- Robey, D., Boudreau, M.C., G.M. Rose, (2000), 'Information technology and organizational learning: a review and assessment of research', *Accounting, Management and Information Technologies*, 10(2):125-155.
- Rose, S.,Murphy, R., (2014), 'Planned and emergent strategy', at [ink.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4939-2178-2\\_11M](http://ink.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-4939-2178-2_11M)
- Smith, E. (2001), 'The role of tacit and explicit knowledge in the workplace', in: *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 5(4):311-321.
- Sutherland, P., Crowther, J. (2006), *Lifelong Learning: concepts and contexts*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Tsoukas, H., Chia, R. (2002), 'On organizational becoming: rethinking organizational change', at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1287/orsc.13.5.567.7810>: 567-582
- Watkins, K., Marsick, V.J. (1993), Dimensions of learning organization questionnaire :introduction, at <http://www.partnersforlearning.com/instructions.html>
- Watkins, K., Marsick, V.J. (1993), *Sculpting the learning organization: lessons in the art and science of systemic change*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.



Wenger, E., (2009), 'Communities of practice-a brief introduction', at <http://neillthew.typepad.com/files/communities-of-practice.pdf>

Welton, M.R., (1995), *In defense of lifeworld*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Wynn-Williams, K., Whiting, R., R. Adler, (2008), 'The influence of business case studies of learning styles: an empirical investigation', *Accounting Education: an international journal*, 17(2):113-128.

## Biographical Note

Dr **Panagiota Vathi** is Mathematician- Researcher on Applied Social Sciences and Education. Her thesis is "University students' creativity evaluation and approach in an interdisciplinary and multidimensional way-Emphasis on Statistical Analysis". Currently she is a research assistant at Patras University and at Technological Institute of Western Greece. Her scientific interests include the evaluation of social-politic-collective actions and their social consequences, using methods of descriptive and inductive statistics etc. She is an active member in social unions and NGOs. Contact: pvathi8@gmail.com