

Climate Change Social Learning Sandbox

The climate change discourse is one that is disruptive of existing development sector categorisations. It has been recognised as a problem that is particularly complex, uncertain, ever-evolving, and complicated by a multiplicity of stakeholders and perspectives. This kind of disruption has been seen before with other cross-cutting discourses such as gender, transparency and governance. As they evolve these discourses interact with knowledge in established sectors, creating new collaborations and conjunctions of knowledge. Examples from climate change and development include climate diplomacy, climate-smart agriculture, and disaster preparedness in a changing climate. Responding to the challenges of climate change as a cross-cutting and disruptive discourse in development requires similarly fresh combinations or conjunctions of learning and knowledge-sharing practice.

The CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS)¹ through its theme on Decision Making has since 2010 been exploring what communication and learning approaches might be appropriate in this new and constantly changing context. CCAFS collaborated with the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and other partners to hold two workshops on Communications and Social Learning in Climate Change in May and November 2012. These workshops highlighted that for problems like climate change and development it is not sufficient to direct experts to evaluate the issue and advise policymakers or affected people how to respond. Instead, we need ongoing, flexible, consultative processes that

develop a collective understanding and response.²

One of the outcomes of the workshop was the establishment of a Sandbox as a mechanism to sustain work on the ideas and activities around Climate Change Social Learning (CCSL) that had surfaced during the workshop.³ Another outcome was the initiation of a series of working papers, journal articles and briefs that continue to capture the new thinking coming out of the CCSL initiative: <https://cgspace.cgiar.org/handle/10568/32729>

The Sandbox opened in September 2012 and was designed for the use of CCAFS and partners to enthuse and catalyse interaction, innovation and concrete collaboration using social learning to inform decision making. The vision was that the Sandbox could evolve into a self-governing community of practice and be a genuine reflection of how social learning may work in practice.

The Sandbox currently consists of:

- A public wiki where CCAFS and related projects' CCSL experience is documented
- A private social network (on Yammer) to seek feedback on ideas and projects, to share resources and to learn socially. A place where practical challenges and issues encountered could be reflected upon and supported by the collective wisdom of other Sandbox members
- A modest funding mechanism to encourage interesting ideas around social learning in climate change agriculture and food security to be developed and rolled out.

For more information see <http://ccsl.wikispaces.com/Sandbox>

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About Us ••

The CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) brings together the world's best researchers in agricultural science, development research, climate science and Earth System science, to identify and address the most important interactions, synergies and tradeoffs between climate change, agriculture and food security. CCAFS is a strategic partnership of CGIAR and Future Earth, led by the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT). www.ccafs.cgiar.org





This brief is a reflection of progress to date in the Sandbox, exploring its role in supporting an organisational change process in the context of Climate Change, Agriculture, Food Security, Scientific Research and Social Learning (the knowledge sub-domain). We focus particularly on the challenge of enabling and supporting the emergence of a network of people exploring this new conjunction. Some of the issues we aim to explore include:

- The process of helping define and navigate a new knowledge sub-domain, involving validating and boundary setting through collaborative activities and identification of a relevant research base⁴
- The bringing together and working with a new group of people, many of whom had only met once at a formative workshop, in this new domain. And then working to integrate new members into the network
- The state of play in 2012/13 in relation to the use of online tools with a representative group of research scientists and development specialists.

Progress

In its first 20 months of operation, through facilitation, convening, research, synthesis, documentation, editing onboarding and advice, the CCSL Sandbox has supported:

- The CCSL Framework and Toolkit
- Three international workshops: Evidence Gathering for the Climate Change and Social Learning community, June 2014; CCAFS Science Meeting, April 2013; Acting on What We Know and How We Learn for Climate and Development Policy, IDS March 2013
- Four innovation grants (to Makerere University, ILEIA, IIED and IDS)
- 108 people who joined the CCSL group (on Yammer) from 27 different organisations
- 381 CCSL Yammer group conversations, 118 associated files, 17 collaborative notes and over 48 topics
- 92 CCSL wiki pages and 228 associated files (covering strategy, events,

projects, resources, glossary, funding opportunities, etc)

- Three face-to-face and two virtual CCSL Core Team meetings in June 2013, December 2013, February 2014, May 2014 and June 2014
- The CCSL narrative explaining how social learning for climate change, agriculture and food security should be brought about among scientists and climate change-focused practitioners
- The CGIAR stocktaking paper: 'A new relevance and better prospects for wider uptake of social learning within CGIAR — Findings from a stocktaking exercise within CGIAR'
- The whiteboard video 'Transformative partnerships for a food-secure world'.

Growth in the number of people in the CCSL Yammer group has intentionally been kept at a slow pace to allow time for familiarity and trust to grow. All participants from the first CCSL workshop were invited to join. Each new member was asked to suggest further people to invite and invitations have also been sent to participants at subsequent CCAFS events. Periodically members are requested to confirm their wish to remain in the group. In the first round 90 per cent reconfirmed their membership.

Feedback

In July 2013 twelve members of the CCSL group offered feedback on the Sandbox's activities and their future needs in response to a survey. Feedback suggested that:

- Resources about CCSL practice are valued most
- More practitioner members were needed
- Experience of CCSL implementation, tools, indigenous knowledge and innovation needs to be shared
- Facilitation should promote active involvement in discussions
- Solution-focused rather than more open-ended learning processes are preferred
- Email alerts on online group activity prompt most engagement

- More time is needed to generate concrete benefits from membership of the Sandbox, given it is relatively new and the time constraints users face with this kind of collaborative knowledge sharing.

In response the Sandbox facilitators have been prioritising membership invitations to practitioners, connecting members with shared interests and focusing on content and discussions that reflect on practice. Peer assist problem solving sessions are also being trialled online.

Approach

The approach to running the Sandbox reflects its goal to sustain, enthuse and catalyse action and the practice of social learning itself. There is little top down management of content, with most effort focused on holding open a space for members collaboration. In terms of process, a facilitation approach is taken that aims to help the Sandbox group as a whole to:

- make sense of the diverse conversations and resources that members share
- convene and document face-to-face events
- access knowledge resources held in diverse locations that can support action
- work with social media
- welcome new members and help them make the most of the Sandbox.

In terms of output, a capacity development approach is taken that aims to support individuals in the Sandbox looking to deepen their understanding of and comfort with key aspects of social learning that help in linking research to action. These include plurality, equity, reflexivity, transparency, co-creation and transformation.

Most of the members of the Sandbox are highly skilled and bring years of practical experience with participation, innovation, communication and uptake in scientific research. So in seeking to bring these elements together under social learning, the Sandbox's potential lies in its members coming to see themselves as peers with a shared learning agenda who critically reflect on their values and assumptions. Because of this ambition and



the opportunity for the Sandbox to over time become a self-governing community of practice, light touch facilitation and capacity development is called for. Not all groups become communities of practice in this sense and the Sandbox might not either, but a sure way to cut off that chance would be to force the pace of collaboration and growth.

Experience

Just over a year isn't a long enough time to draw very certain lessons from the Sandbox. A summary of experience so far is worth sharing with the hope of inviting further feedback and promoting our own social learning as facilitators of the Sandbox.

Online participation in the Sandbox so far is pretty typical for an emerging peer group. The majority of members, though not posting content or commenting, say when directly asked that they gain value from reading and observing interactions ('lurking') and wish to remain in the Sandbox group. The minority, engaged in commenting and sharing resources, have had several face to face meetings as a subset of the larger group and have wider professional roles in bridging, brokering, communicating and shaping knowledge and relationships.

The choice and management of technology for the Sandbox has been driven by higher level commitments at the host CGIAR centre. This enabled the Sandbox to build on experience and ongoing technical support for Yammer and Wikispaces with benefits for rapid deployment and stability of the technology. This is likely to mean though that future adjustments of the technology will be outside the control of the Sandbox. It also means that some of features of the platforms, such as usage statistics and enhanced profiles in Yammer, are not available as the current corporate licence is for the free version.

We have argued elsewhere⁵ that climate change as a knowledge domain within international development is both atypical and complex and put forward the seven capacities this requires of networks, organisations and initiatives aiming to manage knowledge successfully in this context (see Table 1 below). So far the

I find this an extremely refreshing platform and group as it is bringing together different organisations and allowing them to look at what others do. The diversity — although even like minded — was very enriching. Facilitation (especially) of the group over the last two years (and I only followed this from an outsider perspective) was and is excellent.

Tonya Schuetz, independent consultant/CPWF

Table 1. An evaluation framework for managing knowledge in the international development and climate change context

Capacity	Indicator	Sandbox action needed
Facilitates decentralised action and self-organisation	Flat governance with principles for action rather than rules and centralised management	
Builds space for interventions to be flexible to emerging lessons	Encourages systematic reflection on experience for learning and iterative and creative implementation rather than linear delivery modes and trying to completely fix the shape of policy responses in advance	
Allows for negotiation between and synthesis of multiple perspectives	Democratic views on whose knowledge and values count and awareness of issues of power and exclusion in communicative processes rather than expert/ outsider dominated knowledge production	Increasing the multiplicity of perspectives shared
They are open fault tolerant systems so that if any one institution, project or grant fails then the institution/network can adapt and find new ways to work and they do not artificially populate or bound membership	As they grow they scale out freely with more linkages creating more nodal hubs that easily spawn sub-groups or communities of practice rather than becoming more centralised	Growing membership through hubs
Provide options that are enabling for people in different circumstances	A bounded pluralism of methods and approaches dynamically selected over time rather than elimination of duplicates and narrow best practice approaches	Increasing the plurality of approaches used
Handle interdependent problems	Proactively seek diversity in stakeholders and assume the need to navigate nonlinear/unpredictable change processes	
Facilitate differing degrees of collaboration from a variety of actors	Create circles of participation that actors can occupy and move between informally as their circumstances demand/change	



Sandbox can be said to have most of these capacities. Three areas that may need more attention include: increasing the multiplicity of perspectives shared (particularly to include practitioner perspectives and more perspectives from actors from the global South); growing membership through hubs rather than one central group; and increasing the plurality of approaches used to run the Sandbox.

Direction

Over the course of 2014 the Sandbox will continue to support members in the CCSL group on Yammer, in building content on the wiki, at face-to-face events, through innovation grants and by co-creating knowledge. In particular activity is focusing on supporting:

- The Overall CCSL Phase 2 Activities
- Gathering feedback on and enhancing the CCSL Framework and Toolkit
- The 'Social learning and transformative change: Building the evidence together' project
- Bringing together communities of practice and advocating social learning methodologies

Through this work the CCSL Sandbox aims to demonstrate that a collaborative approach to knowledge creation, sharing and capacity building is an effective way to qualitatively scale up social learning practice in the particularly complex, uncertain, and ever-evolving area of climate change, agriculture and food security.

References

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CCSL Partners:

