**“When things go wrong” and experiential learning: an aide memoire**

# Guiding principles to keep in mind:

1. *Things will go wrong:* expect them to, don’t panic when they do.
2. *We learn most from mistakes*: recognise mistakes and problems as unique opportunities for helping communities to learn and thereby build their own capacities for the future.
3. *When a grant is wasted or misused or embezzled, it is not your resources (or the donor’s) that are lost - it is the community’s money and potential benefits that have been squandered (as soon as the grant is handed over, it belongs to the group on behalf of the community to whom they are accountable):* do not try to take responsibility for rectifying the problem, it is up to the community to find a solution, your job is to facilitate them to do so and provide any suggestions that you can. Facilitating a process of **experiential learning** (see practical guidelines overleaf) with the community in question should be central to your response. At the same time communities should of course see that you take such problems very seriously, but only because of the opportunity lost by the community to realise the benefits they had hoped for.
4. *The nature and scale of the problem will indicate the response.* At what level you need to facilitate the necessary experiential learning and action planning to take remedial action will depend on how serious is the problem. For smaller issues – poor project design, mistakes on implementation, wasteful expenditure it may be appropriate to work only with the Project Management Committee and Protection group – i.e. those directly involved in implementing the project. For bigger problems that involve significant embezzlement of funds or assets, coercion or fraud, it may be necessary to convene a meeting of the full village.
5. *If communities think they will be penalised when things go wrong, they will try to hide any mistakes or problems from you and often succeed in doing so; mistakes that remain hidden tend to be repeated and get worse:* do not provide any incentives to communities to cover up mistakes and problems. The first grant should be seen as essential a chance for grantees to learn: unless the first mistake clearly reveals the group as purposefully corrupt and self-serving, they should be allowed to apply for second cycle grants. Groups should not be penalised for making mistakes as long as they make every effort to rectify mistakes and put in place and measures to avoid mistakes being repeated.
6. *Much can be learned about how a group reacts to an incidence of misuse: if they are genuinely concerned and keen to put right any mistakes then it is likely they can be trusted to do better next time.* Butif not, then you proceed with more caution. You can with-hold chances for community groups to get second-cycle grants if they do not demonstrate how they learned from any failures and how they tried to resolve them.
7. *Embracing failures openly and sharing what went wrong and lesson learned is recognised as good practice*. Win respect by sharing what goes wrong with donors. Document openly and help others learn from what goes wrong as well as what goes right (have a look at the following initiatives to see examples of others doing this: <https://www.admittingfailure.org> and <http://www.whydev.org/why-ngos-need-to-admit-failure/>

**Guidelines for facilitating Experiential learning**

1. Learning from experience often requires facilitation; it does not always happen automatically. This is the key role of the fund manager: not to provide the solution (which often is unclear), but to facilitate the community group to develop their own solutions by analyzing what happened.
2. Again, the group need to trust the facilitator and not feel worried about being transparent. Make sure the rules are clear: groups need to know that they will not be penalized for mistakes, but only for trying to cover up mistakes and not learning from them.
3. Once you have their trust to be frank and honest, a helpful and simple guide for facilitating anyone to learn from their experiences is the “**What? ... So what? ... Now what? ... Action Plan**” model. This works as follows:

**What?**

First, facilitate the group to discuss **exactly what happened** related to the particular event that is being analysed. Be specific and really seek the facts rather the opinions. Ask people to be as objective as possible but recognise that different people may have different bits of the story: rarely does one single person have the full and accurate picture. People need to pool their different experiences to create the full picture. If there are very different or conflict thoughts perspectives as to what really did happen, facilitate a discussion that focuses on facts and not judgments. Record on a flip chart the key conclusions.

**So what?**

Next, ask the group to reflect on all they learned from what happened: what were the **reasons it happened?** Why did it happen like it did? Could it have happened differently? What are the key lessons, big or small, that we can take away? Record the conclusions on a flip chart. And also ask them to reflect on what were **consequences and implications** of this event? How significant are the impacts? While it may be seen largely as a failure or mistake, were they any positive consequences as well? Again, record the conclusions on the flip chart.

**Now what?**

Next, ask the group to read through in silence all that has been written on the flip charts and to reflect on what these lessons suggest to them on **what they should do now to try to rectify the problems caused** (if it is possible) caused and **what they should do next time to avoid similar mistakes** happening again. After 5 or 10 minutes, ask each person to share their ideas with the group and again write up the key points from each person. Facilitate a discussion that considers all these ideas and comes up with a set of conclusions as to what could be done now and, in the future, to minimize any damage done in the short term and to make sure that the same problems aren’t caused again in the future.

**Action plan?**

Finally, facilitate the group to make a concrete action plan, that clearly indicates **who will do what, when and where** to put their agreed steps into action.

**Possible scenarios**

1. You give a micro-grant of $1,000 to a trusted local CBO who are repairing a damaged school and providing teaching materials. When you get the final report, you see that the main receipt for cement looks suspicious and when you visit the school it does not look like the repairs have been done properly. You investigate and find out that one of the CBO management committee had tried to falsify the accounts, taken $300, and used it for treatment for his sick child. What do you do?
2. You give a grant of $3,000 to a group starting a chicken farm, fish farm and horticulture livelihood project for a large number of IDPs. But after a week you hear that one of the management committee members has run off with $1,000 and no one knows where he is. What do you do?
3. You give a grant of $700 to a youth group in an IDP camp to build a club and provide sports equipment. However, you soon learn that there are some youth in the camp who are not part of the group and they feels very upset not to be included and it leads to a serious rise in tension. What do you do?