Limits of the concepts of organisational learning and learning organisation for government-owned international development agencies

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Abstract: The concepts of organisational learning and the learning organisation (LO) emerged to cope with a rapidly changing global environment. Yet, little has been discussed about the benefits of the concepts for governmental organisations. This article focuses on a unique type of organisation, namely government-owned international development agencies (GIDAs) and discusses the utility of the concepts for them. First, the article reviews the existing literature on the two concepts and the characteristics of GIDAs. It then argues that the concepts are of limited utility for GIDAs because of the contexts in which GIDAs are embedded. The concepts encourage organisations to take risks, experiment, and perform double-loop learning; however, factors facing GIDAs such as tightly regulated mandates, strict accountability requirements, strong political and bureaucratic pressures, ambiguous goals, and cultural values in overseas offices in non-Western countries discourage the GIDAs from living up to the potential the concepts offer.

Keywords: organisational learning; learning organisation; governmental agencies; goal ambiguity; accountability; bureaucracy; cultural values; public sector organisations; international development agencies.

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1   Introduction

As a result of advanced technology, fast communication via the internet, and rapid transportation of people and goods since the mid of the 20th century, our society has been experiencing unprecedented complexity, uncertainty, and transformation. Rapid adaptability to the dynamic environment became a decisive advantage for organisations (Chan and Scott-Ladd, 2004). Organisations came to recognise the value of internal learning to cope with this fluid environment (Gardiner et al., 2001) and so the concepts of organisational learning (e.g., Argyris and Schön, 1978) and the LO (e.g., Senge, 1990) emerged. Simply put, organisational learning is a learning process that enables positive changes in an organisation through 'creating, retaining, and transferring knowledge' [Argote, (2011), p.441], while an LO is the entity that performs this process (Chan and Scott-Ladd, 2004). These concepts soon became popular in both practice (Calhoun et al., 2011) and research (Crossan and Guatto, 1996).

Nonetheless, the concepts of organisational learning and the LO are not a panacea (Calhoun et al., 2011; Örtenblad, 2015, 2019). The usefulness of these concepts for all types of organisations is questionable as organisations vary in their sectors (i.e., private or public), aims, the number of employees, industries, geographic locations, the year they were established, budget size, memberships, and many other respects (Örtenblad, 2015, 2017, 2019). Organisations can, for example, be global business firms, international financial institutions, educational institutions, the military, religious groups, charitable organisations, think-tanks, family-owned grocery stores, or non-national chain restaurants. Due to the diversity of organisations, the concepts of organisational learning and the LO can be detrimental (Grieves, 2008). For instance, in the Army and Navy, a strict hierarchical structure with a clear ranking order (Cavallaro and Nault, 2021; Snyder, 2016) is indispensable because an established chain of command determines the success or failure of a mission and can be a matter of 'life or death' [Snyder, (2016), p.16]. In a structure such as this, team learning may not be accepted.

Within the public sector, little has been discussed about the benefits of the concepts of organisational learning and the LO for a distinctive type of organisation, namely GIDAs. As GIDAs implement bilateral assistance to developing countries on behalf of their governments, their proximity to politics is considerably higher than other organisations. Their organisation structure is also distinctive among public sector organisations. While they are headquartered in the home country, GIDAs establish overseas offices to manage their activities in developing countries. International development projects are often considered extremely complex (Ika and Hodgson, 2014). Due to these factors, the utility of organisational learning and the LO concepts may be limited for GIDAs.

The purpose of the current article is to discuss the limited utility of the concepts of organisational learning and the LO for GIDAs. The article first reviews the existing literature on both concepts and explores the characteristics of GIDAs. Drawing on the literature review and the author's 30 years of experience as a GIDA practitioner, the article then discusses the usefulness of the concepts for GIDAs. Based on the discussion, it also provides implications for GIDA practitioners who pursue the concepts of organisational learning and the LO in their workplace. The article contributes to the scarce discussion on this theme by refuting the universal utility of the concepts for all types of organisations.

2   Organisational learning and learning organisation

The concepts of organisational learning and the LO arose from the necessity for organisations to adapt to a fluid environment. Unlike knowledge management that handles knowledge as a hard resource, both concepts deal with soft human resources. The terms organisational learning and LO look similar. Nonetheless, each has a distinctive meaning.

According to Argyris and Schön (1978), organisational learning is 'a process in which members of an organisation detect error or anomaly and correct it by restructuring organisational theory of action, imbedding the results of their inquiry in organisational maps and images' (p.2). They argue that members of organisations possess a unique mental map that determines how to recognise and solve problems, and the organisation can only achieve higher levels of learning by challenging the existing mental map. Organisational learning necessitates 'double-loop learning' that asks 'why things are done' rather than 'single-loop learning' that questions 'how the same things can be done better' [Common, (2004), p.38]. This article utilises Argyris and Schön's (1978) organisational learning concept as the basis for the discussions hereafter.

The concept of an LO refers to an organisation that enables organisational learning. Scholars have developed various theoretical models (Boccia, 2016; Snyder, 2016). They are:

1   Senge's (1990) five disciplines model

2   Garvin's (1993) building blocks of a LO model

3   Marquardt's (1996) systems-linked LO model

4   Marsick and Watkins's (1999) action imperatives model

5   Pedler et al.'s (1996) learning company model

6   DiBella and Nevis's (1998) LO capability model

7   Örtenblad's (2013) contingency model.

While Senge's (1990) model is considered the most popular (Boccia, 2016; Calhoun et al., 2011; Griego et al., 2000), it has been criticised as idealistic, utopic, and vague (Garvin, 1993; Örtenblad, 2007). Yet, many scholars, including the aforementioned critics, have constructed their theoretical models based on his work The Fifth Discipline, which created an LO mainstream (Boccia, 2016; Snyder, 2016). Senge's model consists of five disciplines: 'systems thinking', 'personal mastery', 'mental models', 'building shared visions', and 'team learning' [Senge, (1990), pp.9–13]. It claims that organisations need to improve the characteristics of the five disciplines harmoniously in order to become an LO (Senge, 1990) (see Table 1).

The model emphasises that if all members of a team learn and think systemically, the team will be able to manage complex situations. When the team learns, it gains insights that lead to actions and the development of skills that extend to other teams (Senge, 1990). Senge defines an LO as an organisation "where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (p.8). Unless otherwise specified, the LO mentioned in this article refers to Senge's five disciplines model.

Table 1   Five disciplines of the Senge's model

	Disciplines	*Essences*
1	System thinking	An ability to analyse an entire organisational system by focusing on the inter-connection and inter-dependence of constituents rather than viewing merely the isolated parts of the system.
2	Personal mastery	An ability to consistently attain personal goals that matter most for the person, to deepen personal vision, to develop patience, and to view reality objectively.
3	Mental models	An ability to identify and recognise deeply entrenched ways of seeing and understanding things and to make fundamental shifts away from them.
4	Building shared vision	The condition where a coherent vision is shared and committed by all members of an organisation not because they are told to do so but because they want to do so.
5	Team learning	An ability to attain collective development through dialogue among members. The development process involves the identification of prejudices and the conquest of personal defensiveness and embarrassment.

Source: Developed by the author referring Senge (1990)

3   Characteristics of GIDAs

There are two types of international development organisations: multilateral and bilateral. Multilateral organisations include the World Bank, the United Nations (UN), and specialised agencies within it. GIDAs are bilateral organisations that provide financial and/or technical assistance to developing countries on behalf of their governments. All member countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee (DAC) provide Official Development Assistance (ODA) to developing countries (OECD, nd-a). Some GIDAs are independent agencies, while others are the units of government bodies, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (OECD, nd-b). Table 2 gives examples of GIDAs from OECD DAC member countries. Recently, many emerging countries (e.g., China, Mexico, and Turkey) have established GIDAs to help the underdeveloped global south.

     GIDAs are unique organisations. Comparing GIDAs with private sector organisations exposes this uniqueness. Political authority is an influential force for the former, while market incentive is a decisive force for the latter (see Perry and Rainey, 1988). Additionally, the nature of goals differs between the two types of organisations. Although private sector organisations work for explicit goals such as sales, profits, and revenues, GIDAs work for the unmeasurable goals of economic and social development in aid-recipient countries. The ambiguity of these goals enhances uncertainty within GIDAs, which makes them more concerned about legitimacy and accountability than private sector organisations (see Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004).

     GIDAs differ not only from private sector organisations but also from typical public sector organisations. While most headquarters remain in the home country, GIDAs primary field of activities is in developing countries where they establish overseas office; this operational structure is uncommon in the public sector, but is common in the private sector where a sizable number of multinational corporations (MNCs) have headquarters

and foreign subsidiaries. However, with the exceptions of diplomatic missions (e.g., embassies and consulates), cultural centres (e.g., the British Council and the Japan Foundation) and offices of trade representatives, few public sector organisations have this structure.

Table 2   Examples of GIDAs

	Country	Name of GIDA
1	Austria	Austrian Development Agency (ADA)
2	Czech Republic	Czech Development Agency (CzechAid)
3	France	Agence Française de Développement (AFD)
4	Germany	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ) Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW)
5	Italy	Italian Agency for Development Cooperation (AICS)
6	Japan	Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)
7	Korea	Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) Export-Import Bank of Korea (Korea Eximbank)
8	Luxembourg	Lux-Development (LuxDev)
9	Norway	The Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad)
10	Portugal	Instituto da Cooperação e da Língua, I.P. (Camões, I.P.)
		Sociedade para o Financiamento do Desenvolvimento (SOFID)
11	Slovak Republic	Slovak Agency for International Development Cooperation (SAIDC)
		Export-Import Bank of the Slovak Republic (EXIMBANKA SR)
12	Sweden	The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)
13	Switzerland	The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)
14	USA	The US Agency for International Development (USAID)

Notes: Some of the listed agencies are not independent agencies but operating units of ministries or governmental organisations.

Source: Created by the author using data from the OECD (nd-b)

The nature of the international development projects within the responsibility of GIDAs make them even more distinctive among public sector organisations. The projects are primarily aimed at capacity development for public sector employees in developing countries. To this end, GIDAs dispatch experts and/or organise trainings in home, host, or the third countries. International development projects are never easy and have been described as an 'extreme case of socio-political complexity' [Ika and Hodgson, (2014), p.1186]. Ika (2012, p.30) characterises the projects as follows:

> "[H]igh complexity and subtleness, strong front-end activity, the relative intangibility of their ultimate objective of poverty reduction, a large array of heterogeneous stakeholders, divergent perspectives among these stakeholders, the need for compromise, project appeal in the eyes of politicians, the profound cultural and geographical gap between project designers and their beneficiaries, the asymmetrical distribution of power between the world's richest countries, institutions and people and its poorest, and the prevalence of rather bureaucratic rules and procedures."

The complexity of the projects, coupled with the ambiguity of their goals, means GIDAs are likely to face serious uncertainty. This uncertainty makes them highly vulnerable to

accountability and transparency pressures (see Boxenbaum and Jonsson, 2017) and creates what Ika (2012, p.33) calls an 'accountability for results' culture within the organisations.

The proximity of GIDAs to politics also sets them apart from other public sector organisations. Development assistance is a convenient and effective diplomatic tool for the governments of donor countries (Lancaster, 2008; Yasutomo, 1989). If governments have a limited capacity, they will entrust GIDAs to provide assistance to aid-recipient countries on their behalf. This brings GIDAs closer to politics but puts strong political pressure on them as they must fulfil political and diplomatic commitments. At the same time, because GIDAs act on behalf of governments, their mandates are tightly regulated and their performance is closely monitored by supervising ministries.

4   Limits of the organisational learning and LO Concepts in GIDAs

4.1   *Reasons for the limited utility of the concepts*

GIDAs' characteristics suggest that the concepts of organisational learning and the LO are less meaningful in them than for private sector organisations and typical public sector organisations. First, the role that GIDAs play is explicitly defined in law. The tightly regulated mandates discourage double-loop learning that questions the fundamental objectives and strategies of the organisation (see Jarvie and Stewart, 2018; Örtenblad, 2015). In the case of Japan's GIDA (i.e., Japan International Cooperation Agency), the procedures and types of foreign assistance that the agency can provide are stipulated by the 'Act No. 136 of December 6, 2002' issued by the Government of Japan. The agency is allowed to provide technical assistance, grant aid, loans, and emergency relief to developing countries only when an international agreement has been concluded between the governments of Japan and the recipient country. The act imposes restrictions on the agency's operations, and anyone who acts beyond the act will be punished. Additionally, GIDAs are regularly monitored by supervising ministries to ensure that they are operating in accordance with the law. Under these circumstances, GIDA practitioners are likely to rely on single-loop learning that seeks alternative solutions without challenging existing norms, values, or practices (see Cuffa and Steil, 2019).

Second, the pressures of accountability described above discourage GIDAs from experimenting or taking risks. According to the concepts of organisational learning and the LO, organisations need to allow their members to increase risk exposure both individually and at the organisational level (Chan and Scott-Ladd, 2004). Some private firms are willing to take risks to expand businesses. Others must take risks to survive in competitive business environments. GIDAs, on the other hand, tend to take a risk-avoidance attitude due in part to the scrutiny they face (see Cuffa and Steil, 2019). As GIDAs' budgets rely on taxpayer contributions, they are inspected periodically by the Board of Audit. The scrutiny of these audits generates an accountability-driven mindset among GIDA practitioners (Ika, 2012) and hinders them from fundamentally changing their operations through experimentation and risk-taking in the workplace.

Third, GIDAs are so deeply embedded in the political environment that they have limited space in which to freely realise the concepts of organisational learning and the LO. The heads of GIDAs are often politically appointed. Pursuing politically-initiated actions, therefore, becomes their top priority (see Common, 2004). Political commitments

(e.g., financial and technical assistance) made by state leaders to aid-recipient countries override the assistance strategies developed by the GIDAs themselves. Furthermore, politically-initiated actions are often inconsistent, as governments change based on election results. Ironically, this is more likely to happen in democratic countries than in authoritarian ones. Changes in government further undermine the realisation of the concepts within GIDAs because sudden policy changes invalidate consistent efforts toward improvement through organisational learning and the LO concepts.

Fourth, the difficulty of measuring performance discourages GIDA practitioners from maintaining the concepts of organisational learning and the LO. Both concepts should contribute to the achievement of organisational strategic goals. Private sector organisations have clear targets (e.g., sales and profits), and they can assess the improvements brought about by the concepts. However, GIDAs work for ambiguous goals (see Chun and Rainey, 2005; Rainey and Bozeman, 2000), therefore the improvements brought about by the concepts cannot be easily evaluated. This discourages GIDA practitioners from continuing to implement the concepts.

Finally, the applicability of organisational learning and the LO concepts to GIDAs' overseas offices in non-Western countries is questionable (see Gomez, 2004; Khadra and Rawabdeh, 2006; Nafukho, 2008). The concepts have been 'extensively researched in developed Western economies' [Walczak, (2008), p.486] and are referred to as 'Euro/American-centric' ideas [Eijkman, (2011), p.164]. Prior cross-cultural studies (e.g., Coldwell and Fried, 2012; Retna and Jones, 2013) support this view, claiming that the concepts are 'neither culturally neutral nor universally appropriate' [Coldwell and Fried, (2012), p.110]. The inconsistency between the cultural values of non-Western countries and the behaviours desired by the Western concepts is a primary reason why the concepts cannot be easily applied in these contexts. For example, the authoritative management style, which is culturally acceptable in Southeast Asian countries, is not appreciated within either of the concepts (see Retna and Jones, 2013). Overseas staff members in this region are likely to experience tensions when management introduces the concepts into their organisations. Imbalanced power relation between the management and the non-management staff members further exacerbates these tensions (see Cox, 2007; Järvensivu and Koski, 2012). Management and administration within the overseas GIDA offices are usually undertaken by expatriates dispatched from the home countries. Meanwhile, those hired in host countries follow their instructions. If the former forced the latter to engage in culturally unacceptable behaviour, their relationships would be severely damaged.

4.2 *Applicability of each of Senge's five disciplines*

The previous sub-section broadly discussed the limited utility of the concepts of organisational learning and the LO for GIDAs. However, it is important to examine which specific parts of the concepts actually cause these limitations. This sub-section examines each of the disciplines within the Senge's (1990) model and their applicability to GIDAs.

Curiously, when the author examines the applicability of each discipline individually, with the exception of mental models, all seem to be relevant to the context of GIDAs. For example, analysing the whole organisational system by focusing on the inter-connection and inter-dependence of constituents (i.e., system thinking) can help GIDAs to improve their operations. Moreover, consistently achieving personal goals, deepening personal

vision, developing patience, viewing reality objectively (i.e., personal mastery), sharing a coherent vision among all members (i.e., building shared visions), and achieving collective development through members dialogues (i.e., team learning) all seem to be pertinent, if not to GIDAs' overseas offices in non-Western countries, at least to their headquarters in advanced economies. In fact, many GIDAs already try to promote these efforts.

Nevertheless, the focus of efforts is on the improvement of existing operations without questioning why they do them. This reflects the difficulty of changing mental models (or maps). A radical shift in the mental models can be dangerous for GIDAs, as it may require them to go beyond their legal obligations and resist political commitments. Since altering the existing mental model is the essential core of organisational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978) and the LO (Senge, 1990) concepts, deeply entrenched mental models fundamentally restrict the utility of the concepts for GIDAs (see Yusoff, 2005).

5   Implications for GIDA practitioners

Given the diversity of GIDAs and the range in the types of activities they carry out, it is hard to offer a single unified implication for GIDA practitioners seeking to harness the concepts of organisational learning and the LO. Some GIDAs outsource assistance activities to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and/or consulting firms. Their primary tasks are to monitor and evaluate the performances of the contracted organisations. In these cases, the concepts of organisational learning and the LO are used to improve their oversight ability. Meanwhile, where GIDAs carry out the assistance activities on their own, the concepts are used to enhance their operational ability in developing countries. The size of GIDAs also influences the feasibility of organisational learning and the LO concepts. Feasibility is generally considered to be higher for large organisations than for small ones (Wyer et al., 2000). One reason for this is that, as the size increases, the formality in management structures and practices also increases (Marlow et al., 2010). In other words, the smaller the organisation size, the higher the informality. Learning in organisations can be hampered by this informality (Wyer et al., 2000).

Nonetheless, there are clear implications for GIDAs where the concepts of organisational learning and the LO are pursued. GIDA practitioners must understand that the thoughtless adoption of the concepts can be detrimental to their organisations. GIDAs are governmental organisations, and their operations are framed by laws. They routinely face strict accountability requirements and political controls (see Cuffa and Steil, 2019; Mulgan, 2000). Hence, the key elements of organisational learning, such as experimentation, risk-taking, and double-loop learning, can damage the basic functions of GIDAs and even threaten their existence. GIDA practitioners must carefully examine how they can incorporate the concepts in their workplace contexts, especially in overseas offices in non-Western countries.

6 Conclusions and future research

6.1 Conclusions

The concepts of organisational learning and the LO are not ubiquitously helpful to all kinds of organisations and appear to have a limited utility in the contexts of GIDAs. This is exacerbated by the fact that the roles and mandates of GIDAs are regulated by laws, which they cannot act beyond. This poses a significant challenge to the performance of double-loop learning. GIDAs face routine scrutiny of their budget spending by supervising ministries and taxpayers alike. This makes them accountability-driven organisations (Ika, 2012). The proximity of GIDAs to the political environment further strengthens their accountability-driven behaviour and makes them reluctant to experiment and take risks. Moreover, due to the ambiguity of the goals under which GIDAs operate, the improvements brought by the concepts are hard to measure. This discourages GIDA practitioners from maintaining the concepts in the workplace. Finally, the applicability of the concepts to overseas offices in non-Western countries is questionable. Gaps between the cultural values of non-Western countries and the behaviour desired by the 'Euro/American-centric' concepts of organisational learning and the LO may cause conflicts [Eijkman, (2011), p.164]. GIDAs vary in size (e.g., budget and employees) and mandate; therefore, GIDA practitioners should be self-reflective about the characteristics of their own organisations and what types of learnings are the most practically beneficial in their contexts.

6.2 Future research

This article discussed the conceivable reasons for the limited usefulness of organisational learning and the LO concepts for GIDAs, an under-researched type of organisation. Nevertheless, the discussions are conceptual rather than empirical. Each GIDA differs in size and mandate, with some implementing large-scale infrastructure projects lending millions of dollars to developing countries, while others offer only small-scale technical assistance in selected countries (e.g., post conflict and war-torn countries) via NGOs. Hence, the degree of the limitation of the concepts of organisational learning and the LO is not necessarily the same among GIDAs. Explanatory case studies with in-depth investigations into a single organisation are desired in the future to elucidate the precise utility of the concepts for a specific GIDA.

At the same time, research must go beyond arguments on the limitations of the concepts. Örtenblad (2019) calls for the development of LO contingency models that fit to organisations in distinctive contexts, with reference to the sector, industry, and national culture within which they operate. He believes these models should help those who work in a specific type of organisation to realise the concepts of organisational learning and the LO. Based on the limitations identified in this article, the author tentatively suggests that a realistic model for GIDAs is the one that:

1 actively promotes single-loop learning

2 encourages small and iterative experimentations

3 guarantees consistency with government policies and regulations

4 respects non-Western country contexts.

Exploratory case studies that investigate multiple GIDAs in depth, or meta-analysis of multiple independent studies on the utility of organisational learning and the LO concepts for GIDAs is desired to create well-constructed contingency models.

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