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Framework for Learning Network

This paper draws on lessons learnt from the activities of the partnership so far and outlines the results of a series of consultations and analyses¹ carried out at the request of the members of the GPFLR aimed at clarifying the conceptual framework for the Learning Network in order to facilitate moving forward in a more coordinated and structured – yet informal and organic – way.

The GPFLR Learning Network is a participant-driven resource that builds and shares best practice and accelerates on-the-ground action on forest landscape restoration.

The specific objectives of the network are to:

- ✍ Improve critical understanding of FLR
- ✍ Demonstrate the great variety of FLR initiatives that exist
- ✍ Strengthen scientific and policy skills and practice related to FLR
- ✍ Build cooperation among practitioners
- ✍ Foster new ideas and practical solutions

Interconnected Components of the Learning Network

LEARNING
COMMUNICATION Case studies – Telling stories Policy briefs Media outreach
INNOVATION Data collection, analysis Feedback Adaptation
INPUTS Technical assistance Dedicated learning capacity at sites Application of tools and training
STRUCTURED LEARNING Identification of learning needs by participants Progressive Participatory Exchange Visits Facilitated Workshops Expert groups and research
INFORMATION SHARING Website Newsletters Profiles of sites, tools, initiatives Global meetings of partners
NETWORK COORDINATION Learning Network Manager GPFLR Coordinator Operational group of partners Thematic/regional focal points

Background

While a range of ad hoc information sharing, learning and communications activities have taken place under the umbrella of the GPFLR during the past few years, partners have expressed a desire to undertake more coordinated learning. The concept for a Forest Landscape Restoration learning network originated at the FLR Implementation Workshop held in Petropolis, Brazil in April 2005 and the partnership identified this as a priority for its second phase of work (2006-2009). The discussions within the GPFLR have focused on the formation of a network that most closely aligns with the notion of a best practice or **knowledge for action** network. These involve learning aimed at doing something, i.e. aimed at doing FLR more effectively.

A learning framework provides strategies and channels for gathering information, providing insight into each individual's learning whilst working under the umbrella of the partnership, and providing opportunities for reflection at strategic times. It can help identify key patterns and impacts. From this process adaptive – both supportive and corrective – action can be identified and taken.

Putting a coordinated learning network into operation

In a nutshell, the proposed approach for getting this improved learning network started is:

- ✍ General information about the activities of the Learning Network (LN) and FLR more generally will be available to anyone who wants it, including profiles of sites, tools and initiatives, through the new website, new brochure and other means.
- ✍ Partners and collaborators will receive additional operational information in the form of updates from the GPFLR coordinator.
- ✍ We will continue to be opportunistic in the organization of PEVs (e.g. Brazil and China) and thematic workshops (e.g. planted forests) or other targeted learning (e.g. climate change)
- ✍ Lessons learned from meetings of partners, workshops, study tours and other events provide a basis for next steps.
- ✍ Events will be progressive: each workshop, study tour or other learning event bringing together partners and other collaborators working on FLR will build on the ones that came before and provide a basis for the ones to follow.
- ✍ Structured learning will be initiated by the first global meeting of sites (G-PEV) which will put forward and 'test' 3 initial possible questions or issues around which to structure learning. These will be proposed by the host.
- ✍ Additional structured learning topics will be identified by the people working at the site level through participatory exchange visits based on emerging shared interests.
- ✍ Specific inputs such as technical assistance or training will be organized as the need is identified.
- ✍ Where an issue is of broad and strategic interest, partners will be supported through targeted research and informal expert groups, (e.g. developing a common GPFLR message on climate change).
- ✍ A process should be agreed whereby the LN Manager and the GPFLR Coordinator (supported by the partners) share responsibility in identifying and passing on LN outputs to the wider GPFLR, especially on those 'cross-cutting' issues relevant to 'policy-active' partners.

Some specific next steps are:

- ✍ Update the list of potential sites and update the proponents of these sites on learning network plans and opportunities.
- ✍ Continue to prepare site profiles (using the headings developed in 2006 and tested in 2007) and support preparation of profiles of tools and initiatives to provide a basis for learning and content for communications materials.
- ✍ Secure resources for a learning network manager and identify the person/institution to fulfill this function. (IUCN and DGIS through the Livelihoods and Landscapes Strategy are providing support for a part time person beginning as soon as someone can be identified.)
- ✍ Build and launch a new website and produce an updated brochure building on the outcomes of the branding exercise.
- ✍ Build on what exists already to further develop indicators and integrate into workplans.

Summary of partner and collaborator views

- ✍ The partners are keen on "face to face" learning and want as much learning as possible to come from the sharing of experiences between partners (rather than just "inventing" new knowledge).
- ✍ This puts an emphasis on participatory exchange visits (PEV) and workshops, in which both hosts and guests are expected to bring things to the table, as part of an on-going process.
- ✍ Technical assistance, print materials, web communications will have supporting (but important) roles.
- ✍ The learning network should operate within a coordinated framework but be organic.
- ✍ The participants themselves should identify what they want to learn about.
- ✍ This needs to be balanced with the importance of accelerating the operation of the learning network.

- ☞ Participation should not be limited to existing partners but reach out to other collaborators who are prepared to commit to actively participate in shared learning.
- ☞ The learning network should not only to foster knowledge sharing/adaptation/creation relevant to implementation of FLR but also produce policy recommendations.

Key issues for a learning network

The section that follow consider specific aspects of operating the GPFLR learning network:

1. What to learn about
2. Who will join
3. Who will use the learning
4. PEVs, workshops and technical assistance
5. Monitoring and evaluation
6. Dissemination and policy change

1. What to learn about

Learning sites should identify the first issues/questions they want to learn about and the process and activities needed (e.g. identification of further sites, team meetings, tools, data sources, etc.) There is a need to balance more speedy agenda setting by a few partners with more time consuming agenda setting by the wider partnership and other collaborators. There is also a need to balance the need to accelerate operationalization of the learning network with the need for the learning network to grow organically and be responsive to the need of partners working at the site level.

To balance these needs, the process proposed is as follows:

- ☞ Prioritize the first global participatory exchange visit (G-PEV) of sites, which should put forward some questions or issues for learning (2 or 3) that are relevant to the site(s) being visited.
- ☞ These will be 'tested' by the participants.
- ☞ The questions or issues will either be confirmed as priorities for learning or recommendations for alternatives will be put forward to partners and collaborators.
- ☞ Structured learning around the agreed questions or issues.

Relevant considerations in making this proposal are:

- ☞ There is already interest on the part of the WBCSD to have one of its members host the G-PEV.
- ☞ Partners and collaborators have already put forward a critical mass of sites for the learning network.

Who will join

It will be important not to act as a closed 'club' concentrating only on strengthening the capacity and practice of the partners inside the network. A flexible system of interaction is required to encourage new understanding and relationships. As previously agreed by the partners, participants in the learning network should be committed to:

1. Balancing trade offs between and improving ecological integrity and peoples' livelihoods
2. FLR principles:
 - a. Restoration of a balanced package of forest functions
 - b. Active engagement, collaboration and negotiation among a mix of stakeholders
 - c. Working across a landscape
 - d. Learning and adapting
3. Sharing information, monitoring and learning through the learning network.

Sites would also need to demonstrate that:

4. Restoration activities are already underway.

The intent is to bring together sites that partners and other collaborators have "volunteered" then provide a framework for engaging them in a suite of learning activities as appropriate to their situation and interests. There should be a diversity and mix of site types in the network, in terms of: sample size, ownership mix, geographic balance, and range of sites at different stages of progression in FLR (planning, implementation, and sites that display some characteristics of a restored ecosystem.) On the other hand, some comparability is necessary to enable participants to learn from each other and this comparability will in the first instance flow from the commitments listed above. Some partners may wish to profile tools and/or major policy or programmatic initiatives instead and the learning network as a 'resource' should accommodate this.

Who will use the learning

Most partners see themselves as the direct recipients of the outputs of the LN. A focus on fellow professionals as the immediate beneficiaries of the LN is therefore the starting point for the framework. However, it is expected that the partners that directly interact with the LN represent the negotiated

needs and wishes of local actors at a site or sites, and, initiate the outputs of LN activities in participation with local actors. In some cases, it may be necessary to secure dedicated capacity at sites to reinforce participation in the LN.

PEVs, workshops and technical assistance

GPFLR partners and collaborators have prioritized 'face-to-face' and 'hands-on' interaction through study tours, short-term exchanges and workshops, supported by technical assistance. Web-based communication will initially be useful as an information dissemination tool but could become interactive if the need is identified and resources permit. Expert groups could provide on-going and off-site discussion of issues, particularly policy related. Activities such as exchange visits and workshops are part of an on-going learning process rather than an end-point. A summary of how this will work is provided on page 2 of this document.

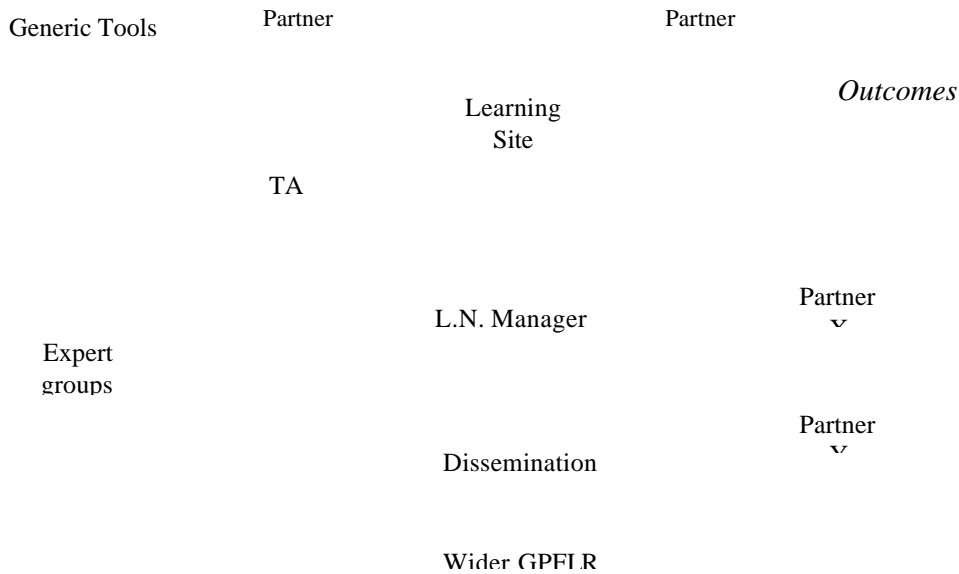
Participatory Exchange Visits (PEVs)

It is likely that PEVs that are thematically tightly focused will be particularly useful and productive because participants will be clear on the relevance to their needs and will be able to focus their preparation. However, PEVs involving participants who face similar challenges or represent FLR sites with shared biological, social and political characteristics, will also have a role, especially if the aim is to understand the context for FLR. Interest in organizing national FLR events with some international participation remains high and it will be important to integrate these events into the learning network. A likely output of PEVs is the identification of further technical assistance needs that will form part of the longer-term learning process that PEVs should aim to stimulate. (See section below.) The July 2007 UK/Brazil study tour highlighted some aspects of a PEV that increase effectiveness and usefulness. Among other things, adequate time needs to be given to presentations and discussion of the work of the visitors, not just the hosts. It was also noted that it would be beneficial for consistency and progressive learning to have at least one person from each PEV participate in the subsequent ones. Other useful models to learn from should be studied, for example, the series of 3 dialogues organized by The Forest Dialogue on intensively managed forests.

What will be important is to keep building and bringing forward the learning. This will include:

- ✍ Linking all of these different events into a coordinated series, rather a package of one-off events
- ✍ Each event taking on board something from the ones that came before and then setting the scene for others to follow
- ✍ More clearly separating technical from planning events

Figure 1. Participatory Exchange Visits



Workshops

Much of the above applies equally to workshops as it does to PEVs, except that more partners might be expected to be accommodated at a workshop than a PEV. In fact, ideally anyone with an interest in a theme could be present at a workshop, thus links to 'partner X' and 'partner Y' would disappear from figure 1 if the event in question were a workshop, as they are assumed to be within the shaded area. The need for workshops to be tightly themed and well facilitated is high. In practice, the difference between workshops and PEVs may be one of degree, and site visits could usefully be incorporated into workshops.

Technical Assistance and Expert Groups

In figure 1, technical assistance (TA) is integrated into other modes of interaction. Technical experts, whether members of partner organizations or not, should be considered possible participants in PEVs and workshops. They would provide inputs, assist in the identification of further learning needs, and offer a wider context for local issues. The precise nature of a particular TA input would be related to the theme of the event and would need to be carefully identified between the PEV/workshop participants and the L.N. manager. Expert groups would provide an obvious means for identifying and developing FLR tools that are relevant to multiple sites, and for formulating policy relevant outputs. They could also take up specific topics in depth for structured learning that are identified through the other learning activities. Ideally, much of this expertise would come from the very considerable capacity within the GPFLR, and the various methods of communication within the GPFLR will be vital in assisting the identification process.

Monitoring and Evaluation

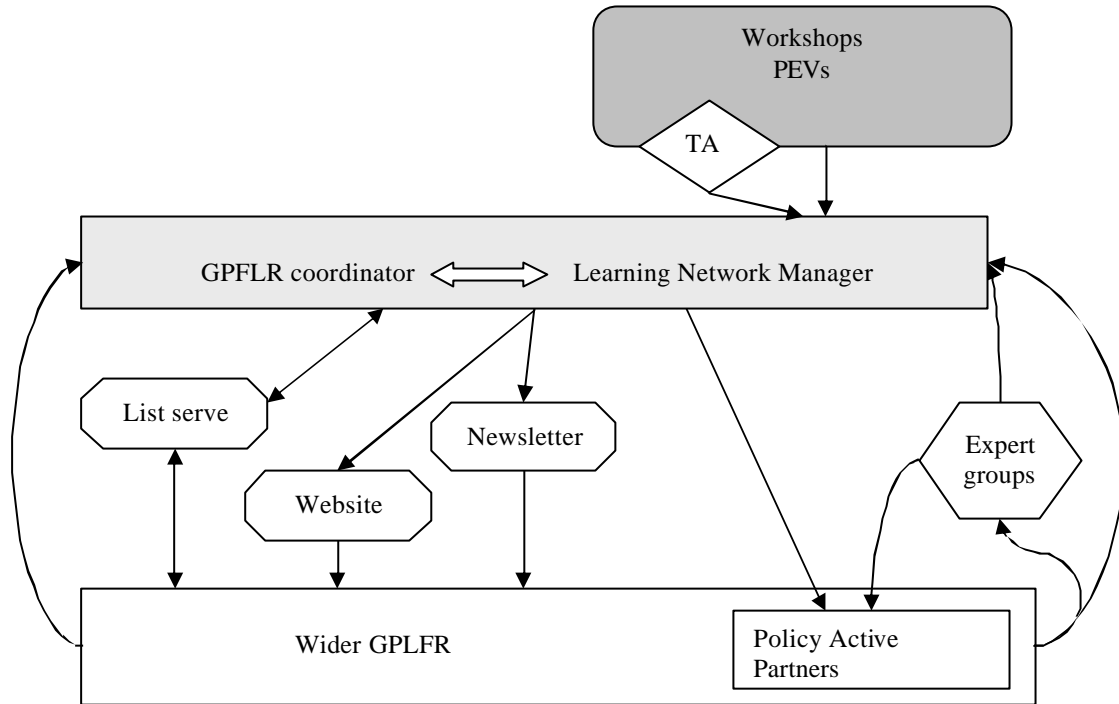
It will also be important, that in setting the learning agenda, partners take responsibility for overseeing the implementation of learning network outcomes, that these outcomes are monitored and that lessons learnt are circulated. With both workshops and PEVs, participants will need to accept that their involvement implies a responsibility to move the FLR process forward. The LN will require an M&E system that is capable of measuring the use and effectiveness of knowledge as it passes between partners and stakeholders and as it informs policy processes. Ideally a LN manager will need to keep a focus on the ultimate test of effectiveness of the network -- whether changes perceptibly stimulated by learning network activities have improved the practice of FLR or the policy environment in which it takes place. Early work of the partnership on the development of indicators will need to be updated and further developed in the context of the relevant work being done by individual partners and others.

Dissemination and policy change

Many of the members of the GPFLR are actively involved in policy formation. As long as these partners are kept informed of LN outputs, policy related outputs should follow. However, it is likely that

practitioners working at site level will tend to think of policy as something that 'happens to them' rather than something that they can directly influence, so it cannot always be assumed that they will recognize the policy relevance of their activities and of L.N. outputs. This puts the onus on policy active partners and the LN manager keeping up-to-date with LN activities to ensure lessons learnt translate into policy leverage.

Figure 2. Information flows between the L.N. and the wider GPFLR



Conclusions

The GPFLR learning network finds itself at a crossroad. Forest Landscape Restoration – by whatever name it may be known – is now an established management framework at various sites across the world and much interest has been generated amongst the partnership for exchanging experiences and sharing learning related to the practice and policy of FLR. However, the full potential of a Learning Network is yet to be realized, not least because at present it functions in a somewhat ad hoc manner depending upon which partners have resources available at any one time, the limited appreciation of FLR progress or problems between partners operating at different sites, and the lack of clear channels to link policy and practice.

These challenges cannot be met by the GPFLR without additional capacity. A full time dedicated Learning Network Manager, who could be a person in a partner institution, is needed to act as a focal point, facilitator, knowledge manager and monitor for FLR learning. Securing that capacity and initiating structured learning on at least one theme will be critical to the continued global expansion FLR. In the meantime, at least additional part time capacity is needed to help manage implementation of the next steps summarized on page 2 of this document.

ⁱ Among other things, Jennifer Conje from the USDA Forest Service undertook a thorough review of models for learning networks and carried out a series of interviews on this topic, and Katherine Warren from the WBCSD outlined a concept for a network of 'excellence'. Many partners and their knowledge management experts have been interviewed or have otherwise shared their views. Most recently, James Gordon was retained to prepare a detailed paper on a Framework for a proposed learning network of GPFLR, which is summarized in this document.