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Pierce: Welcome to Episode 2 to the Leaders in Learning Podcast series. A product of the Collaborating, Learning and Adapting team at the United States Agency for International Development. Starting from a theory that effective learning organizations are more impactful development organizations leaders in learning is a seven part podcast series that explores promising practices in building learning organizations through interviews with a variety of knowledge management and organizational learning leaders in the international development sector. My name is Piers Bocock and I am the Chief of Party of USAID Knowledge Management and Learning contract also known as LEARN and I have the good fortune of being able to host this podcast with my colleague and friend Stacey Young a senior learning advisor in the office of learning, evaluation and research in USAID Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning.

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                      And team lead for USAID's Collaborating, Learning and Adapting team. If you listen to our first episode then you already know that this series is based on conversations and interviews that Stacey and I conducted with 10 thought leaders in knowledge, management and learning. Because it would be impossible to include all their wisdom in every episode each show will share selected audio clips from three to four of the interviews to review and discuss in response to a key question with which we have been grappling. The focus of this episode our second in our Leaders in Learning series is on the big question the raison detre so to speak of our professional existence Stacey you and I. So, I hope you're ready.

Stacey: Absolutely thanks it's great to be here.

Pierce: So Stacey, the question we're going to tackle today is why organizational learning matters in international development.

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                      And I know that you and I both have some strong opinions on this after all it's what we've choose to focus our professional careers on this. But I first wanted to remind ourselves and summarize for our listeners what some of those we have interviewed for this series have said in response to this big question. So today we're going to hear from three of our though leaders. The first is Karen Mokate, Chief of Knowledge Management of the Inter-American

Development Bank. IADB, the second is Gwen Hines who until recently was the director for international relations at the UK's Department for International Development. And the third is Duncan Green, Senior Strategic Advisor at Oxfam. So again the question on the table is why does organizational learning matter in international development? A big question right.

Stacey: It is a big question but I think it's one that we're getting better and better at answering and I know that the people we interviewed are as well so I'm really looking forward to getting to it.

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Pierce: Cool. So in reviewing transcripts and the interviews and my scribbled notes from these interviews all of which were fantastic, what emerged for me were three buckets of themes in response to this question. So the first one we're going to hear is that development is complex, it's a complex business. So that's one of the reasons why learning is so important to international development. So what we're going to do now is we're going to hear three clips. First you're going to hear from Karen Mokate. Then you're going to hear from Duncan Green and then the third will be from Gwen and then we'll talk a little bit about what we've heard. Okay?

Stacey: Sounds good.

Karen: The nature of development is one that is uncertain dynamic different for each context.

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So if you have a limited body of knowledge your path to success is going to be truncated. And I think to the degree that we can bring together different insights different perspective, learn from different contexts so that we can adapt to specific countries, adapt to the uncertainties that the future brings in general and of course now with so much uncertainty in the political and technological spheres I think this is only resonating more and more with persons. If development were, I don't know if we can talk about hard science anymore but if development were a hard science I don't think we'd be having this conversation.

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Just giving the nature of the beast really having that knowhow and being able to talk about what has worked in other contexts I think is an easy sell.

Duncan: My standard spiel talk on the book starts with a cake and says to make a cake you need ingredients, a recipe enough and it is a predictable process and you can predictably produce a cake and it's attributable. You can say I call it a cake because I followed the recipe that's the project. And real life doesn't apply that. That's not how you raise your child I hope. That's not how you drive, I hope. In real life you're constantly, learning, iterating, dropping some things, picking up new things and behaving like that to managers. So what instruments other than projects might lend themselves to this. And what I'm quite interested in at the moment is very old fashioned if you look at the units which kind of navigate through complex social and economic systems and keep popping up it's not projects it's actually individuals. And I actually think there's a complexity based argument for revisiting scholarships and sty pens and support -

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for individuals if we can do it in a way which doesn't sort of contaminate them in some way I think that could be a really interesting way to fund - put money into strengthening an eco system.

Gwen: So it does require us to keep finding the evidence of where it's made a difference but I think it's also showing people that we've done the easy bits of development if you'd like because of the international community. What we've got left with now are the really tough things and these aren't things that we necessarily already know the answer to apart from some. So for all of us if we're really serious about the last Mining countries, about fragile states, about some of these really tough challenges we've got to do something different. And so I think it's very much everyone I talk to in other organizations and people in the village everyone wants to see things improve. So I think it's putting it in that context is the key and making it as I say as easy and as simple as possible.

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Figure out what's getting in the way, what's stopping people do this?

Pierce:	So I picked Karen's quote because I liked the acknowledgement from a donor that development is complex, that's it's not necessarily a hard science. And yet there are lessons to be learned and things that can be gleaned from situations in one location that could be brought to another and perhaps shared as part of their work but the context matters. The second one is Duncan's acknowledgment that a recipe is easy, but life doesn't follow a recipe. Then his connection to the fact that it's about individuals and so that connects with some of our thoughts on the value of champions -

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and individuals and their change leading to organizational change. And the third bit is Gwen from DIFD talking about how again acknowledging from the donor perspective that there are complex elements to development we've done as she put the easy bits. But there are still a lot of challenges that we face.

Stacey:	Yeah Piers those are all really good points. I liked that Karen talked about not just complexity but uncertainty I think that is a big part of our context so even with what Gwen refers to as the easy parts of development where maybe Duncan's recipe can be applied. When uncertainty enters even those kinds of supposedly sure bets. Sure approaches sometimes fall apart. So acknowledging the contextual uncertainty and the need to continuously learn how to adapt as our context adapt.

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Even if we think we've got a development approach that's tired and true that seems really important. I also thought that you know what Duncan said about the importance of individuals is true and at the same time when I think about how individuals who are passionate and committed to development have to operate within a certain organizational context that's where sometimes we see some of these organizational norms that can create incentives for people to pretend if you will. The development is simpler than it is. That's where we see the incentives that work against people saying hey we still have a lot to learn here and the incentives to instead say okay we have greater certainty than we actually do.

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We will set about planning this development intervention as though there's only one possible path to achieving development outcomes and that path is fairly certain instead of really

acknowledging okay these are the gaps in our evidence these are the kinds of learning questions that we need in order to address those gaps. Maybe we need to design and intervention so we're testing a couple different approaches. Maybe we all need to acknowledge that there's a lot that we don't know about this and that means building in that learning piece and building in the pause and reflect and being much more committed to an adaptive approach and iterative approach and so on. And I think all of those reasons make it really important for us to focus on learning and development.

Pierce: I think that's very interesting Stacey and I want to push a little bit on what we think are those disincentives and where we've seen some of those disincentive broken.

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Where have we seen some examples of doing development as usual changed to doing development differently?

Stacey: Yeah good question Piers and I think probably as an implementing partner you have experienced being on the receiving end of a donors expectations that you'll lay out a plan at the beginning of an activity and just sort of stay on course. But I think where we see things being done differently is kind of everywhere. Really I think that this is a really exciting time in international development because globally there's much greater recognition than there has been before of the need to be adaptive, of the important of iterative approaches of the complexity of the context in which we're doing development work.

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And yet we still have some of these institutional practices around how we establish our strategies and designs. What kinds of things we are looking at and measuring in order to understand progress. How we incentivize our partners, what we expect from our partners in terms of complying with a plan as opposed to really surfacing sometimes difficult to receive information about what's happening and what's not happening.

Pierce: I think that's exactly right and before I move us on to our next set of clips I want to circle back to that piece about acknowledging the complexity and that last point you just made. What is so exciting I think to both of us in these conversations that we've had is wide spread acknowledgment by donors -

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that the traditional power dynamics have gotten in the way of development by not necessarily looking at their implementing partners as sources of knowledge and partnership as well as the eventual stakeholders and I think you and I have both seen examples, positive examples, of where an activity project will be designed in consultation with the partners, with the stakeholders and acknowledge that the donor and the activity only have so much control over the outcome. That there are so many uncertainties and that if there is going to be a path towards self reliance of the ultimate stake holders then we just have to build in that acknowledge that things will change.

Stacey: Yeah I think that's right.

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Pierce: Well we could talk about this one response all day but let's move on to the second set of clips. And these clips, first we're going to hear from Gwen and then we'll hear from Karen and then we'll hear from Duncan Green and the second grouping of responses to the question was does organizational learning matter in international development is because it helps improve how we do our work. So let's have a listen.

Gwen: We've started from the premise and the world bank and others I think similarly that staff want to do the best that they absolutely can. People are very, very motivated by the development mission and it comes across in our people surveys so we've started from the premise that people want to do that. So what's getting in the way?

Karen: One of the things that we've noticed that is different at the IDB then in other development organizations is that our knowledge management group -

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sits right in the same department with our learning group. So all of our training efforts are in the same department and that allows us to have great synergy between the two efforts and of course I think a lot of our mentality then is very focused on our staff as who knowledge assets. And where I know we can be much more proactive in promoting greater synergies there are many of my team members including myself that came to knowledge

Management through training. So we working on training and I think that does give a focus that's particular to our knowledge Management approach.

Duncan: Classically if you want to change an organization it's either got to be growing really fast or it's got to be on a burning platform and about to die. All that bit in the middle is really hard in terms of organizational change.

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I think the same probably happens with individuals too. I think there's some rhythm questions. The other thing I'm really interested in and massively neglected in the aide business is the whole question of social norms. So I had a really interesting discussion with the international budget partnership which is a great organization about what are your norms as an institution? So let me rewind the US marines when they go into combat reportedly don't go in with a massive manual which they consult every few yards. They go in with heuristics, rules of thumb, they say take the high ground, stay in communication, keep moving, improvise and presumably shoot people. One of the equivalents in other organizations it's not a conversation we ever have. I know there are strategic rules of thumb in Oxfam things like what are the gender implications and this, things which you always ask in any conversation not necessarily verbally but you just check it off. And it's really interesting to have those conversations about what are you rules of thumb?

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Do people in the organization have different rules of thumb? Is that a problem? Bring it out into the light and look at it I think might be probably useful. And then the question on norms more generally the aide business, activism, change agency prefers short term tangible targets because we want to know we're achieving something but if you stand back and think what's changed in the world over the last 30, 40 years you see this enormous normative tide going on which is on race, on sexuality, on inequality most recently, on different things. And we've only got the flimsiest idea of how those norms change. Lots of different explanations. Even less of an idea about how to deliberately influence those norm changes. I think a bit more focus on norm changes and behaviors and those underlying tectonics would be really a good investment for their business.

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Pierce: So three quite different angles on the same question but to me as I listen to them they were all talking about the improvement of internal operations in service of the ultimate mission of development. And I was really struck I think and I can recall us doing the interview with Gwen, how animated she got. When she was talking about her people and their commitment to the mission of DFID. Karen's was much more practical but was talking about the values of synergies and intentionally embedding learning with the same team that was also doing training and acknowledge the critical value of people as knowledge assets.

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And Duncan in his academic way was talking about a lot of different things but when it came down to the idea of norms, that's something that I think we look at a lot and I know we've talked about Stacey is how do you change an organization or support an organization to change such that there is a culture of learning. Where it is safe to acknowledge that we don't have all the answers. And it sort of circling back to our previous question that in a complex world we need a culture whose norms reward curiosity and learning.

Stacey: Yeah that's really good Piers. What I'm hearing here is different takes on the same nest of questions around individuals and their context. And you know of course I loved what Gwen said because what she said I could have said the same thing about USAID.

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Right we have staff who are passionately committed to the mission of the organization we can see that demonstrated in staff surveys and so what we did was we set about to ask what's in the way and remove those obstacles. Exactly how we came to CLA at USAID. And Karen is talking about this organizational focus on knowledge Management, how knowledge is captured and stored and how it's flow is supported throughout an organization but then also individuals within that. So bringing that focus on individual training, individual capacity together with the organizational focus on knowledge stock and knowledge flows. And then of course Duncan talking about the individual behaviors but how those are supported by the broader norms within which the individuals are situated.

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So in all of these I think we hear a lot of resonates with our own work which looks at both of these dimensions right. What are the kinds of situations that individuals need to find themselves in order to collaborate well in order to be open to new learning and be supported in learning and in order to adapt their programs as they go. And what is the culture? What are those broader enabling conditions that we can put in place in order to make all of that possible so that in order to whole symbiotic process is removing the obstacles to good development. That back and forth between the individuals and the culture or the context in which they're operating. I think it's no accident that that's a common theme among these three.

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Pierce: Yeah I think that's exactly right and one of the things that you reminded me of was some of the work that we've done together in Nairobi and in Deli and seeing learning as almost a reminder of that connection to mission because when you ask people why they're doing this work, why should they take the time to really dig in and learn more about what's going on. There's only one answer because we want to make the world a better place, everybody is there for that. And learning is a way to do that, is a pathway to that.

Stacey: Yeah. That's exactly right. I'm so glad you reminded me of that. We have seen almost literally right the lights bulbs turning on above people's heads really people coming alive at the notion that I don't have to pretend anymore that this is working when they know it's not working.

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It kills people to do that because they are so passionately committed to doing good development. And when the institutional norms or the expected behaviors, the surrounding culture, the incentives that are tied into place by the process that we have when those get in between people and being able to do good development they sort of - they energy gets zapped. And they're not able to connect with their sense of mission and their sense of purpose. And so I think you're absolutely right that focusing on learning and then all of the other things that facilitate good development really helps connect people with their sense of purpose again so they're able to bring their best game to this work that we do.

Pierce: It's so true.

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And I think one of the really fun dichotomies is the work that we do with USAID and that Gwen was doing with DFID and Karen does with IADB and many of the other people we talked to are part of an organizational bureaucracy that is intentionally trying to break down bureaucracy.

Stacey: Right. And therefore will ultimately fail but on the way I'm being partially factious but there's a lot of change that we're able to institute. And I have to quibble just a little bit with Duncan he's talking about broad shifts toward inclusion and what enables those. I think that we do know some about that. He's right that there's a great deal that we don't know about how those tides begin to gain momentum -

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but as somebody who has previously studied social movements for instance and participated in them I think some of those things are known. And I think a lot of that same dynamic he's right to connect that to the work that we're doing on organizational learning because there are shifts that take place and you're not really sure which of the many things that you tried to do helped that shift come about and of course it's not just things that you're trying to do it's things that other people are trying to do as well. But yeah to his point it's not a recipe and it is way more complicated than we'll ever be able to understand but it's just so helpful to see how many implementing partners are working in more adaptive modes. How much organizations are invested in learning. How we're all getting better at some forms of collaboration even as other impediments remain.

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Pierce: And I think that's right and as we'll hear in a subsequent episode of this, a huge acknowledge needs to go to the donors because as we started talking about earlier is implementing partners will take the lead of donors and one of the things that attracted me to this job right now that I have and being able to work with you and your team for the last three and a half years was straight up front was this very clear message from the bureau for Policy Planning and Learning that you're implementing partners are doing innovative

things. And sometimes the implementing partners are out in front and that there's an opportunity to learn from that.

Stacey: Yeah definitely and again I think it's back to that dynamic that Gwen mentioned looking at how we as donors can remove the obstacles in the path of you as the implementing partners to really achieving as much as you possibly can.

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Pierce: One point that I wanted to bring out, I wanted to interpret what Duncan was saying that he didn't outrightly say is that when we are doing three or five year contracts and we're doing projects if you do not have good monitoring in place and you do not have good and effective evaluation of those programs and those evaluations are not used in designing the next effort it is much harder to know over 30 years what has happened. At the same time there's immense pressure to create change in a short period of time if you're only looking at an effort in a five year chunk.

Stacey: Fair enough.

Pierce: So talking about 30 years and massive changes. Let's move on to the third set of clips which I think is fundamental to the way you and I talk about learning.

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And our partners and our friends and our colleagues and the other champions in this business is when asked why does learning matter in international development because it improves development impact. So first we're going to hear from Gwen, then we'll hear from Karen and then we'll from Duncan.

Gwen: So organizational learning obviously there's a textbook definition. But for DFID this is fundamentally about impact. DFID is very driven by maximizing the impact of the north .7 that we spend. And this is very much it's _____ *[inaudible]* about using the evidence, the knowledge and the know how that our teams have got across the business better so that we're sharing that across the business and so people are actually feeding it into what they do and adapting how they work. And when we finish something we're feeding what we learned from that back so others can learn from it whether in DFID or beyond.

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Karen: A lot of us have worked in knowledge Management in random ways or not systematic ways. And I think when you're intentional and your planned then you're trying to prioritize in a way that's hooked into the organizations mission it's hooked into the development challenges that the countries that we work with are facing. And it allows us to really reflect on what is important and then start to invest in areas that will get the knowledge to the right people at the right time.

Duncan: The donors or not _____ *[inaudible]* and you have people in the donors who I think are way ahead of us on this who are doing development differently, phenomenon they're thinking of working politically. These coalitions they merge mainly out of governance when people realize the old way hadn't achieved much in terms of institutional reform and they were looking at new and really interesting ways to bring about institutional reform.

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                They're dominated by donors and academics and the NGO's are rather far behind. But when we take money from donors we don't talk to those guys. We talk to what you call the bean counters. And that's why it's interesting. That conversation at USAID you asked your contractors so what do you need from us to enable this to happen and the first thing that came out was we need a hotline because you may say all this nice stuff about being adaptive but when we talk to the sort of junior sand of dandruff official they're just going to want an easy life and they're going to dig their heals in and say no you can't change your indicators or you can't change your plan. So there is that issue of who you're talking to and what level. The senior people always, as far as my experience people get this. Politicians the actual political leaders are interesting because in their private or in their life as politicians they totally understand events dear boy that's what messes up any politicians life. They become ministers and suddenly they want to ask for proof and evidence and business cases.

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                And I don't quite understand how they square those two completely contradictory approaches in their own lives but they seem to do that quite often.

Pierce:　　So again three quite different clips that at least to me in reviewing these spoke to the question of impact. So we have Duncan talking about really accountability and how you square that need for being able to talk about the funding and what it has done and the actual impact of work and how donors are recognizing that things need to be done differently to get to greater impact. We have Karen talking about not just getting the right knowledge to the right people at the right time so that our outcomes can be approved -

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but I would say making it available to the right people at the right time. It's not just a push model. And Karen talks very much about knowledge Management and knowledge Management is a key, key component of learning and we know that sometimes people use different terminology but it is about knowledge and know how as Gwen was talking about having the right guidance, having the right expertise and really getting to that bottom line which is impact. And one of the things, one of the challenges I certainly can recall in the earlier days of knowledge Management and you and I have talked about this before Stacey is that are time at which we would pull together working groups of knowledge Managements and it would feel like we were almost a support group. Hi I'm Piers and I'm a knowledge Management. Hi Piers. Because we had to justify our existence.

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And there seems to be more and more of this tide shift towards recognizing that investing in intentional and systemic organizational learning and knowledge Management efforts will improve impact. What do you think?

Stacey:　　I agree. I think that's right. So now the conversations are not so much should we be doing this but how should we be doing this, how can we do it better? I think Gwen and Karen also really got at the importance of doing that in order to be sure that our development work is relevant to as Karen said the priorities of the organization but also the priorities of the country context in which we're operating those are really different. But it speaks to the importance of being able to push an organization to adapt it's planning processes and it's monitoring processes, -

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it's performance management processes to a more iterative, modality so that you can take advantage of that learning you know if you get the right knowledge to the right people at the right time but you have the wrong processes, you have the wrong incentives, you have the wrong set of efforts around how to make sense of the impact that we're doing and the wrong accountability measures as Duncan was getting at then it's all for not. So again it's this issue of how you help the people do the best that they can but how you make sure that the context around them supports that. And then how you understand that on the other end. How do we define impact? What does accountability mean?

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Does it mean that we are holding people accountable for knowing what the latest learning is for grappling with the implications for their programs for instituting institutional processes that are designed not to figure out did you spend the money on time, did you spend the right amount of money? Did you stick to the plan? What are your indicators at a very granular level say but really are we achieving development impact. Do we know? If we don't know that's okay because it's a hard thing to do but how can we get at that. Those sort of higher order questions that can really support people and then taking that important knowledge and fitting their work to the context that addresses the priorities of the people that we're trying to help and so on.

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Pierce: Well there's a lot in there.

Stacey: Sorry.

Pierce: No you did a great job of trying to highlight everything that is worth considering and it reminds me as Karen said that this is not a hard science. It also gets me thinking we were talking about impact and trying to help those that we are serving that even though we have these three buckets of answers there's a fundamental piece to it which is it's not just about impact from our perspective, was the money spent well? What kind of social change have we seen? But it is how does organizational learning contribute to the self-reliance of the people we're serving.

Stacey: Yeah and as you're talking about that Piers I'm thinking about a couple of examples that come out of the facilitative approaches that we most often see in market systems development -

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but we also see in other sectors sometimes. So for instance I know I've talked with you about this before, watershed management effort in Southern Africa that brings together all the watershed users from the people who are using it to water their livestock and irrigate their kitchen gardens to the industries that are drawing water from the sourced for manufacturing. And it brings people together to try to define what is development with respect to protecting the water shed and also supporting the livelihoods and the economic activities of those who use it. And starting at that very basic level of even language.

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How do we talk about this resource and how do we talk about our use and how do we talk about governance and rights and all of that and starting there as a very learning intensive effort at collaboration to begin to define an agenda that can then go on and help a donor figure out how do we support self-reliance among this very desperate group of people around this common resource, just as an example.

Pierce: And what I hear you saying is that the starting place is an acknowledge of the complexity of the situation.

Stacey: Right. And how much we need to learn about it before we even know what we're doing to catalyze.

Pierce: Right. And I think that's been a fundamental principal in the work that the CLA team has been doing that USAID has been doing and that we've seen a lot of our thought leaders in learning promoting the place of seek first to understand.

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Stacey: Right and then seek again to reunderstand because things have changed right.

Pierce: Absolutely. Well I think we could talk about this all day.

Stacey: Probably but our listener's wouldn't like that.

Pierce: But we have five more episodes after this one. So if you want to hear more of our voices that's great and some of these themes you

will notice as you listen to this series will crop up again and again but Stacey I want to take this opportunity to thank you as always. This has been a really fun project to work on with you and it's fun to record these episodes. And I wanted to thank Gwen Hines and Karen Mokate and Duncan Green for their interviews. And as always our intrepid podcast producer Amy Leo.

Stacey: Thank you Amy.

Pierce: And to thank the Office of Learning, Evaluation and Research and USAID Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning. Stacey any parting words for this episode?

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Stacey: Well thanks to you and to Amy but Piers what are we talking about next time? What is the next episode?

Pierce: That is a wonderful question. Episode three will be what is the role of evidence and data in organizational learning efforts.

Stacey: I'm really looking forward to that. Thank you both.

Pierce: Until next time thank you. The USAID Learning Lab Podcast is a production of USAID Learn implemented by Dexis Consulting Group and its partner RTI international. On behalf of USAID Office of Learning Evaluation and Research in the Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning. The opinions in this podcast do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Government. Our music is by Podington Bear.

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