Enhancing viability through better management of learning in Non-Profit organisations

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*I dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother who died at 110 having sown in me the seeds of systems thinking by teaching me that the world was one connected whole.*

# ABSTRACT

The question of how to enhance viability is ever present in the minds of leaders of Non Profit Organizations. By using a methodological pluralism approach involving concepts in organisational learning, appreciative inquiry, systems thinking and the Viable Systems Model, this study investigates the capacity for learning in five Non Profit Organizations and links this capacity to their viability. A case is established through a review of literature that only organizations that adopt a generative learning posture, can survive in times of great change and contextual turbulence.

The study, which followed an appreciative inquiry process, interviewed leaders from the five organizations in both semi-structured interviews as well as questionnaires. It found that while learning is taking place all the time in the organizations studied, most of that learning is lost to the organisations for lack of effective capturing, storing, disseminating and rewarding systems. These organisations also lack a clear conceptual framework to guide their learning. The learning present in most of the organizations is of a single loop nature, which is limited in not allowing the critique of the assumptions and worldviews behind the experiences of individuals in the organisation.

This study therefore recommends prioritisation of collective learning within the organizations studied by investing in policies, structures and systems that support dialogue and reflective practices. To this end, the study recommends that if these organizations are to better their viability, they will have to develop a more systemic approach not only to their learning but also to their management.

Key words: Learning Organisation, viable systems model, knowledge management, participatory action research, systems thinking and practice, strategic conversations, dialogue, non profit organizations, Appreciative Inquiry, vocabularies of hope

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**ACRONYMS**

NPO:        Non Profit Organisation

CBO:        Community Based Organisation

NGO:        Non-Governmental Organisation

VSM:        Viable Systems Model

AI:         Appreciative Inquiry

NGDO:       Non-Governmental Development Organisation

ESSA:       The Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa

ESSET:      The Ecumenical Services for Social Economic Transformation

CAFSA:      The Charity Aids Foundation of Southern Africa

*The world is nothing but my perceptions of it. I see only through myself. I hear only through the filter of my story.* Byron Katie

# 1. Introduction

This dissertation investigates learning within non-profit organisations and how better management of such learning can enhance organisational viability. The traditional approach to inquiring into organisational learning tends to be problem based. This often begins with an identification of where learning is not taking place. This study adopts a different and affirmative position. Using an appreciative inquiry approach, it seeks to demonstrate that learning is already happening in organizations. This study also looks at ways in which such learning could be amplified throughout the organisation. Using the Viable Systems Model (as developed by Stafford Beer) in the design and analysis of data collection, a deliberate link is made between the ability of an organisation to learn and its viability. A key criterion for viability within the Viable Systems Model is that of regulation of variety. An organisation or system that flouts this principle would see a proliferation of variety to the point of overwhelming it. An argument is therefore made in this research for the need of organizations to be continuously robust through learning to ensure viability.

This topic arose in the context of the consulting practice of the researcher with organisational leaders in the Non Profit Sector and the observation that more could be done to enhance organisational viability through better management of learning within Non Profit Organizations.

## 1.1    Problem Statement

A key challenge facing many Non Profit Organizations (NPOs) is how to ensure long-term viability in what is a highly competitive and vicious environment. Many NPOs, keen to ensure community transformation, are driven by their reliance on donor support along a linear path of segmented service provision without the necessary back up to ensure their own long term survival. Unlike private sector organizations, these organizations often have donor restrictions on how much of the donor funding they can use for their own organisational capacity building.

It is therefore not surprising that the path towards community transformation is littered with the corpses of many NPOs, which suffered casualty to the forces of what is a turbulent and rapidly changing global environment.

The environment in which these organisations function in is a complex one. Myriads of unceasing needs continue to plague the communities almost in mock defiance of the ingenuity of numerous NPOs, government agencies and other such initiatives intended to improve the lives of the underprivileged. Apart from the external challenges they face, these organisations also live constantly in the conflict between central management and field implementation. Suzuki (1998), while writing about Non-Governmental Organizations, describes this tension as relating to the need to have organisational-centred activities, which focus on securing and maintaining the organisation itself, and programme-centred activities aimed at accomplishing the organisation's goals.

Owing to the fact that most organisations in this category are formed as means to provide relief from an immediate need with little long-term strategy, and due to the service nature of their mission, many of them tend to function as a series of projects whose existence is highly dependent on availability of donor funds. They struggle to

create coherence in their operations with departments that function semi-autonomously thereby creating unhealthy competition. Functioning in this way also means that the organisation fails to harness the synergistic energies that would arise from a more coherent approach. Many of these organisations struggle, unable to make use of the knowledge acquired in the course of their operations in a collective manner.

As an organisational development consultant working in this field, I am faced with a choice regarding what approach to take in relation to my clients. On one hand is the approach of routinely applying the knowledge that I have acquired over the years which seeks to identify organisational problems and prescribe a solution.
This is an easy approach but one that rarely works, for underneath the calmness seen in many NPOs is a messy and undefined situation that limits viability and also that defies linear and simplistic problem solving approaches.

The other choice that I have is to help my clients move away from this one-dimensional linear approach to that of seeking to understand the often complex and unbounded situations that characterise the unseen life of these organisations. It is here that one confronts problems involving poor management of learning within the organisation; a factor that makes the organisation vulnerable in what is a hostile environment. Gerard (2004) contends that in order to survive and to ensure effectiveness, an organisation must continuously learn from its experiences and constantly adapt to changes in its environment. The problem though is that most NPO managers are trained to define knowledge based on a technical rationality model. Schön (1987) defines technical rationality as an epistemology of practice derived from positivist philosophy, which encourages one to view themselves as an instrumental problem solver for all situations facing organizations and society. Positivism which was largely, developed by the sociologist Auguste Comte in the

middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century views authentic knowledge only as scientific knowledge that can be positively affirmed through scientific methods and that largely, the goal of knowledge is to describe our experiences. This thinking saw the rise of empiricism in universities, industries and even in disciplines like management sciences. Schön (1987) argues that positivistic ideology led to the separation of research from practice and an epistemology, which was insufficient to deal with complex and messy problem situations. He goes further then to argue for an 'education for artistry' which enables people to reflect in action. He advocates a world where people 'learn by doing' as opposed to a world that is deterministically driven by laws of cause and effect.

The challenge that I face then is to develop some way of assisting these organisational managers to better understand that they operate in a very complex situation and hence the need to work towards positioning their organisations in a way that ensures robustness. This involves assisting the leaders of these organizations to put in place policies and procedures that promote and enhance collective organisational learning. Without proper policy and practice guiding the process of organisational learning, these organizations often resort to a limited form of single loop learning which teaches people how to solve problems arising from their function within an organisation. This kind of learning only enables organisations at best to adapt to their changing environment without much more creative learning. The danger in this lack of creative learning is that these organizations are deprived off the means for enhancing viability and sustainability or even to better their performance. Only organisations, which are able to quickly learn and then innovate their work, are able to change their work practices to perform better in the constantly changing environment (Gerard, 2004).

While many of the leaders within the Non Profit Sector would see the need for their organizations to continually learn, they would also admit that they lack a conceptual framework with which to guide and peg their learning. Without such a framework,

learning within these organizations is often not well-captured and directed towards enhancing impact and sustainability. It is here that I believe the Viable Systems Model provides a very helpful means for diagnosing the functioning of roles and positions within an organisation as well as its relation to its external environment. This model used in tandem with other concepts around organisational learning can provide a much-needed means for assessing and also managing organisational viability. This research uses VSM to provide a framework for assessing the location and quality of learning within the functions and roles of such organisations.

## 1.2   Purpose Of The Study

The purpose of the study was to explore learning within five organisations in the non-profit sector and how these organizations can enhance their viability through better management of learning.

## 1.3   Research design

This research takes on a methodological pluralism approach that incorporates concepts from Systems Thinking, Participatory Action Research, Double Loop Learning and Appreciative Inquiry.  The use of methodological pluralism is well argued for by among others, Jackson (2000) and Midgley (1992). Jackson (2000) argues that methodological pluralism which is at the heart of critical systems thinking is driven by a quest for three things. First, a need for flexibility with regards to the use of a variety of methods, tools and techniques tailored towards the complexity of the problem situation under investigation. Second, the use of different methodologies based upon alternate paradigms. This has the advantage of offering the best that each methodology has to offer. Third, pluralists must be able to cope with a degree of paradigm incompatibility. This argument developed further even suggests that

differences between the assumptions of various methodologies should be emphasized in the intervention process rather than rationalized away.

Since each of the methodologies have their assumptions and corresponding weaknesses, a pluralistic approach enables the researcher a complementary advantage. The inherent danger is that of falling into the pragmatist trap of being led by 'that which works in practice' without due regard to the contradictions that may arise from their theoretical distinctions (Jackson, 2000). This study mitigates against this potential weakness of methodological pluralism by interrogating the theoretical assumptions behind the various methodologies used.

## 1.4    Research questions

The key questions that guide this study are as follows:

1.  Where is learning taking place within the organisation?
2.  What learning is currently taking place within the organisation?
3.  How is such learning currently valued, rewarded, stored and disseminated?
4.  Is the learning taking place in ways and places that would enhance organisational viability?

## 1.5    Data collection and analysis

To allow for a participatory action methodology, this study took place with participants from five Non Profit Organizations, which are facing the question of how to ensure viability in a fast changing context. Two approaches were used in data collection. Firstly, a structured interview was conducted where organizations were invited to identify participants representing five functions as identified in the Viable Systems Model. The second approach was where questionnaires were sent to heads of three organizations along the same lines as the structured interviews. The aim of the survey was to locate where learning is taking place within the organisation as well as

how such learning is rewarded, disseminated and also stored. The data collected was used to create a model consistent with the Viable Systems Model. The participants were then invited to a report back workshop where the findings of the survey were shared with them. During the workshop, the participants were also assisted in engaging with the main concepts behind the Viable Systems Model. They were also led through a process of identifying where further action is necessary to strength the capacity of their own organisation to learn. To complete the study, the participants' feedback on their experience of using the approach to study learning was solicited.

## 1.6   Delimitation and Limitation of the Study

Since the value in this study is more qualitative than quantitative, it is limited to only five organizations which are not necessarily a significant sample neither representative of all types of organizations in the Non profit Sector. Mouton (2001: 151) argues that one main limitation of a participatory action research study is that the small number of cases and low degree of control can have adverse effects on the generalisability of the findings as well as possibility of strong causal and structural explanations. However, in this kind of study, the participation of subjects and the eventual ownership of the findings far outweigh the limitations. It is also hoped that the findings of this study would be useful in generating discussions within other organizations along the same lines of how to enhance organisational learning. Assessing an organisation is a complex undertaking and also a political one. It is necessary then to focus on a particular aspect of the organisation, in this case, the decision making process with regards to how the organisation places itself in view of the changes around it. Clemson (1984), argues that decision making within an organisation is an essential part of its effectiveness given that managers are faced with numerous possibilities on how the organisation ought to function (: 147).

## 1.7 Significance of the Study

This study emanates from real situations which practitioners in the field face on a constant basis. The hope is that once leaders within the Non-profit Sector gain insights into how to guide and structure organisational learning, they will also have enhanced the viability and sustainability of their organisational operations and hence the impact to the recipient communities.

This study by adopting a systemic view, also seeks to enhance the ability of organisational leaders to apply non-linear approaches to dealing with the problems they face. The intention is that this in itself would strengthen greatly the capacity of the organizations to change and perform in improved and better ways (Dodgson in Rhodes, 1996).

## 1.8 Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into five main chapters. Chapter One gives the introduction as well as the main overview. It also locates the study within the problem situation faced by organizations in the non-profit sector. Chapter Two gives a literature review of the main conceptual and theoretical framework underpinning this study. Theories relating to systems thinking and practice, appreciative inquiry, organisational learning as well as the viable systems model (VSM) are explored. Further to this, chapter two also seeks to interrogate other uses of these concepts in organisational research and practice. Chapter three describes the research design and methodology used for this study. Since the participatory action research used in this study incorporates the Appreciative Inquiry processes, it was deemed necessary to go into some detail into the theory behind this approach as well as highlighting some cases where Appreciative Inquiry has been used in organisational research. Chapter four describes the results after implementation of the actual study as well as the analysis of the findings while chapter Five presents the conclusion as well as recommendations from this study.

# 2 Literature Review

Four main theoretical frameworks underpin this study. Firstly and very importantly, a number of concepts relating to systems theories form the backdrop to the research, secondly the Viable Systems Model (VSM) is used to guide and assess the practical aspects of the research and thirdly, various understandings and applications of organisational learning are explored. Further, the Appreciative Inquiry approach to research is also explored as it guided the data collection process.

## 2.1   *Systems thinking*

The term 'system' is one that has been used (and misused) in contemporary society to refer to a host of objects and things, many of which have no connection or relationship to each other. However, the use of the term in this paper follows that found within the discipline of 'systems thinking' where systems refers not to 'things' but to a way of perceiving the world. Systems thinking seems to have emerged as a discipline in the 1940s mainly as a reaction to the failure of the prevalent mechanistic thinking of the time to explain biological phenomena (Flood & Jackson, 1991). Flood and Jackson continue to illustrate how biological entities had peculiar characteristics, which rendered reductionist thinking, prevalent within a classical scientific approach, inapplicable to them and their situations. For example, they had 'emergent' properties, which could not be derived from their parts. They also had 'open' interactions with their environments. The difficulties encountered in biological entities were also to be found in attempts to understand and intervene in organisational entities. The need for a more holistic way of understanding complex situations especially involving human interaction gave rise to the discipline of 'systems thinking'. Flood and Jackson therefore continue and argue that, 'In systems thinking, a "system" is a complex and highly interlinked network of parts exhibiting synergistic properties-the whole is *greater than* the sum of its parts.' Systems

approaches then are committed to holism, which entails looking at the world as 'wholes' that exhibit emergent properties. Jackson (2000:1) sees those emergent properties arising from the relationships between the parts, as at times being more important than the nature of the parts themselves. He contends that Instead of reducing complex problem situations into their constituent parts in order to understand them and to intervene, system's thinkers advocate 'holism' which concentrates on the relationship between the parts and how this could give rise to surprising outcomes.

Luckett, Ngubane and Memela, (2001) define a system as:

> A set of 'things' and activities that are interconnected to form an adaptive whole, which can be ascribed a purpose.

Key concepts in this notion of systems include: system environment- boundary, input, output, process, state, homeostasis, hierarchy and purposeful or goal-directed. A systemic study therefore differs from a reductionist one in that rather than reducing the entity to the property of its parts or elements, the study focuses on arrangements and relationships between the parts which make them a whole entity (Heylighen & Joslyn, 1992). This entity has emergent properties whose sum total is more than the individual parts and also has the capacity to adapt.

System's thinking involves the cognitive use of this idea of an adaptive whole into organisational life (Checkland and Scholes, 1990). Applied systems thinking is client oriented and hopes through each intervention to stimulate learning about the theory employed and also about the area in which the intervention took place (Jackson, 2000).

This systemic way of thinking also influences the manner in which one approaches research into organisational life or even other such entities where the concept of adaptive wholes is present. For example, Kurt Lewin, in seeking to find ways of

understanding complex social and psychological processes realized the need to move away from reductionism, which seeks to tear such processes or entities apart, to a study which entails the process of testing the theory in practice. Through this process he developed what is commonly referred to as the action research model (in Jackson, 2000).

The advantage of using systems based methodologies as opposed to other methodologies is captured well by Jackson (2000) when he asserts that:

'The most developed argument in favour of systems approaches must however rest upon the diversity, range, effectiveness and efficiency of the approaches themselves in relation to real-world problem management' (p.18).

The practice of systems thinking has generated numerous methodologies, which were generally classified as either hard systems thinking or soft systems thinking. Hard systems thinking methodologies (such as systems engineering, systems dynamics and operational research) emerged in response to a need to solve engineering type problems. However, some people such as Checkland saw these methodologies as inadequate in solving complex human problem situations giving rise to soft systems methodologies (Luckett et al, 2001). With the vast development of the discipline of systems thinking, the challenge that faces someone wishing to apply systems thinking to address problem situations in organisations is that of how to choose the methodology that is appropriate. Its important to note that each of the methodologies developed have particular assumptions underlying their use. These assumptions can be described using various metaphors as developed by Morgan (1986). Flood and Jackson (1991) discuss in detail five of the eight metaphors that were developed by Morgan (1986). These are:

- Machine metaphor
- Organic metaphor
- Neurocybernetic metaphor

- Cultural metaphor

- Political metaphor
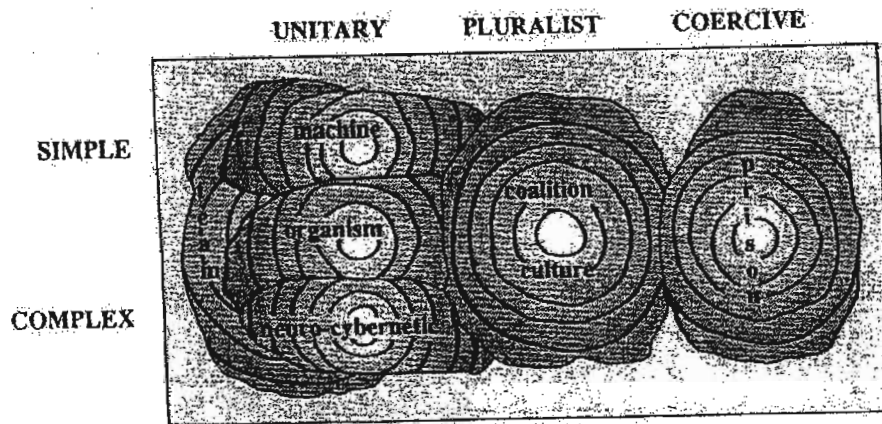


**Figure 1 Constituting the system of systems methodologies through dominant metaphors (Flood & Jackson, 1991)**

The machine metaphor, which can also be described as a 'closed system' sees organisational life as functioning in predetermined sets of activities. The emphasis is placed on organisation and control. The organic metaphor sees organizations as organisms with needs, which have to be met if they are to survive. This view of organizations sees them as 'open systems'. The key elements of the organic metaphor are survivability and adaptability. The neuro-cybernetic metaphor sees the organisation as one large brain and assumes that organizations are capable of communicating and learning rather than passive adaptation to their environment. The culture metaphor lays emphasis on the various nebulous characteristics found within organizations, which include aspects of language, religion, history and a sense of belonging. The notions of norms and acceptability as well as collaboration and community become important in this view of organizations. The political metaphor sees organizations as entities characterised by competition and a pursuit of power. This metaphor lays emphasis on issues of interests, conflicts and power.

In later writings, Jackson (2000) argues that while these metaphors are useful in enabling an understanding of the assumptions behind the various methodologies, it should be noted that their use should not lead to a methodology of choice, as that would negate the very reason why they are constituted. Instead, the discussion of the various metaphors serves to highlight their strengths and weaknesses and hence establish a stronger case for methodological pluralism. So for example the Viable Systems Model, which is one of the methodologies used in this study, leans on a neuro-cybernetic metaphor seeing organizations as being a 'brain' capable of learning. Flood and Jackson (1991) argue that this metaphor finds its greatest use in organizations that are constructed as autonomous working groups. Organizations in the Non-profit Sector, which are generally formed as a response to perceived needs in society, tend to maintain a high degree of autonomy within their departments. Due to their dependency on donor funding, many tend to run different projects funded by different donors again reinforcing a high degree of autonomy. In this regard, a cybernetic model, which lays emphasis on communication between the parts as well as the development of shared learning, becomes highly applicable. On the other hand, the double loop learning methodology also used in the study would emphasize the need for reflection and shared meaning creation hence leaning towards a culture metaphor. For Non Profit organizations, which rely heavily on social capital, the value of shared meaning creation is immense. Flood and Jackson (1991), in concluding their discussion on the five metaphors argue that 'if nothing else, metaphors remind us that many so-called organisational problems are consequences of the way we choose to conceptualise the situation'.

## 2.2    The Viable Systems Model

The Viable Systems Model, which is largely credited to the work of Stafford Beer, seeks to address the question of how one can create an effective nervous system for

the organisation, making it capable of maintaining itself by enabling it to learn and adapt towards improving its effectiveness (Clemson, 1984). According to Beer, a system is viable if it is capable of responding to environmental changes even where they occur after the system was designed (Jackson, 2000). Beer (1975:108) refers to this aspect of the system as ultrastability. He describes it further as the 'capacity of a system to withstand perturbations which have not been foreseen by the designer'.

This definition of viability goes beyond the common one which primarily refers to an institution's economic well-being. Beer (1985:xi) argues that because many people understand viability in organisations in terms of economic viability, they assume therefore that the main problems in organizations are economic. Economic aspects according to Beer are only constraints and not the goals of the enterprise. Instead of a concern about the energy that propels organizations, viability is about the dynamic structure that determines the adaptive connectivity of the parts. In order to understand and appreciate the application of VSM, two concepts are essential. Firstly, in order for an organisation to remain viable, it has to achieve requisite variety. The second concept that VSM relies on is that of recursion. Requisite variety means that in order for an organisation to be viable, it has to have enough regulatory capability to handle external variety (Leonard, 1999). The concept of variety has its roots in the work of Ross Ashby (1956) and Stafford Beer (1979,1981) where it is understood as the number of possible states of a situation. Espejo (1997) building on this concept argues that variety within a system is often used as a measure of its complexity. Beer (1979:89) contends that the law of requisite variety is to management what the law of gravity is to Newtonian physics. In dealing with variety, the role of management is ultimately to 'procure requisite variety' (Beer, 1991). This it does by increasing the organisations own internal variety through the use of amplifiers, by reducing the variety which it is presented with, or by both. Increasing the internal variety within an organisation inevitably leads to additional information

and has the danger of over loading the system. Reducing variety on the other hand leads to a reduction in information and thus has inherent dangers as well. However, without these two means of handling variety, it would not be possible for an organisation to have the necessary requisite variety to be a viable entity. Reducers available to management in an organisation may include divisionalisation, very detailed planning, close administration and massive delegation (Beer, 1991). Amplifiers on the other hand may include diversification, the use of consultants as well as improved Information Technology systems. Beer (1979) continues to argue that in an organisation, the operation level must have variety that is less than that of the Management level within which it is embedded. In like manner, the management unit would also have less variety that the environment within which it is found. The only way then that each of these units can obtain requisite variety is by attenuation (reduction) and or amplification.

Recursion means that there is repetition of the same patterns and relationships for example at different levels of an organisation. Beer (1979:118), describes recursive systems in the following manner:

> 'In a recursive organizational structure, any viable system contains, and is contained in, a viable system'.

Thus one can see the same pattern at higher levels where the organisation is embedded in and also at lower levels of the units of the organisation. Leonard, (1999) argues that when using the Viable System Model, it is often helpful to consider one level of recursion as the 'system in focus' and to explore the levels of recursion immediately above and below it. In practice, then, the person studying the system ought to decide which large organisation the total model represents; what counts as its divisions and what counts as divisions of this divisions as well as what institution the larger organisation is part of (Beer, 1981). For managers, recursion

means that the different parts of the operational levels of the organisation under study need to operate autonomously while remaining part of the whole institution.

The main advantage of the Viable Systems Model is that it enables the assessment of roles and functions within the structures of the organisation, something that traditional organisational charts cannot do. VSM is a helpful way of understanding both how decentralized parts of an organization function as well as how the whole is maintained in a cohesive manner. The Viable Systems Model, which is underpinned by principles of control and communication in an organisation, provides a helpful diagnostic framework for designing flexible, adaptable organizations that balance both internal and external dynamics (Espejo and Gill, 1997).

The VSM approach sees organisations as needing to function at five systems or levels in order to maintain both internal stability and also adapt to a changing environment. Clemson provides a means of understanding the functions of each of these systems within an organisation (1984: 142).

System one comprises the operational and is charged with the production of whatever the organisation exists to do. For organizations in the Non Profit sector, this often means delivery of services like training, but can also mean production of goods. Viability at the level of system one stops when a team of people is responsible for a complete work task (Espejo & Gill, 1997). Based on this argument, a person, in organisational study is not considered a viable system, as the system of interest is that of the organisational model.

System two has a coordinating function ensuring that oscillations and conflict between production units are avoided. This system functions to coordinate between value adding units of the organisation and support functions through lateral communication and mutual adjustment (Espejo & Gill, 1997). In Non Profit

organizations where different production units tend to compete sometimes to the detriment of the entire organisation, system two function would ensure better coordination between them as well as avoiding unnecessary oscillations.

System three star (3*) is the audit channel and functions to ensure internal stability when the system three needs to audit particular functions or operations of system one. System three on the other hand is responsible for the internal and immediate functions of the organisation: its here and now and day-to-day management (Beer, 1985). System three then is responsible for resource bargaining, the allocation of resources and the accountability aspects of the internal functions of the organisation. System four has a future orientation and functions to interact with the environment while System five monitors the relationship between Systems three and four, providing the organisation with an identity. Clemson (1984), further argues that the channels governing these five systems need to be functional, balanced relative to each other and adequately large enough to handle the variety present at each level of the organisation (: 143). Espejo and Gill (1997) use different but more user friendly terminology to describe the same five functions as follows; implementation, co-ordination, control, intelligence and policy. Figure 2 below gives an example of a diagrammatic representation of a VSM model.

# The Viable System Model
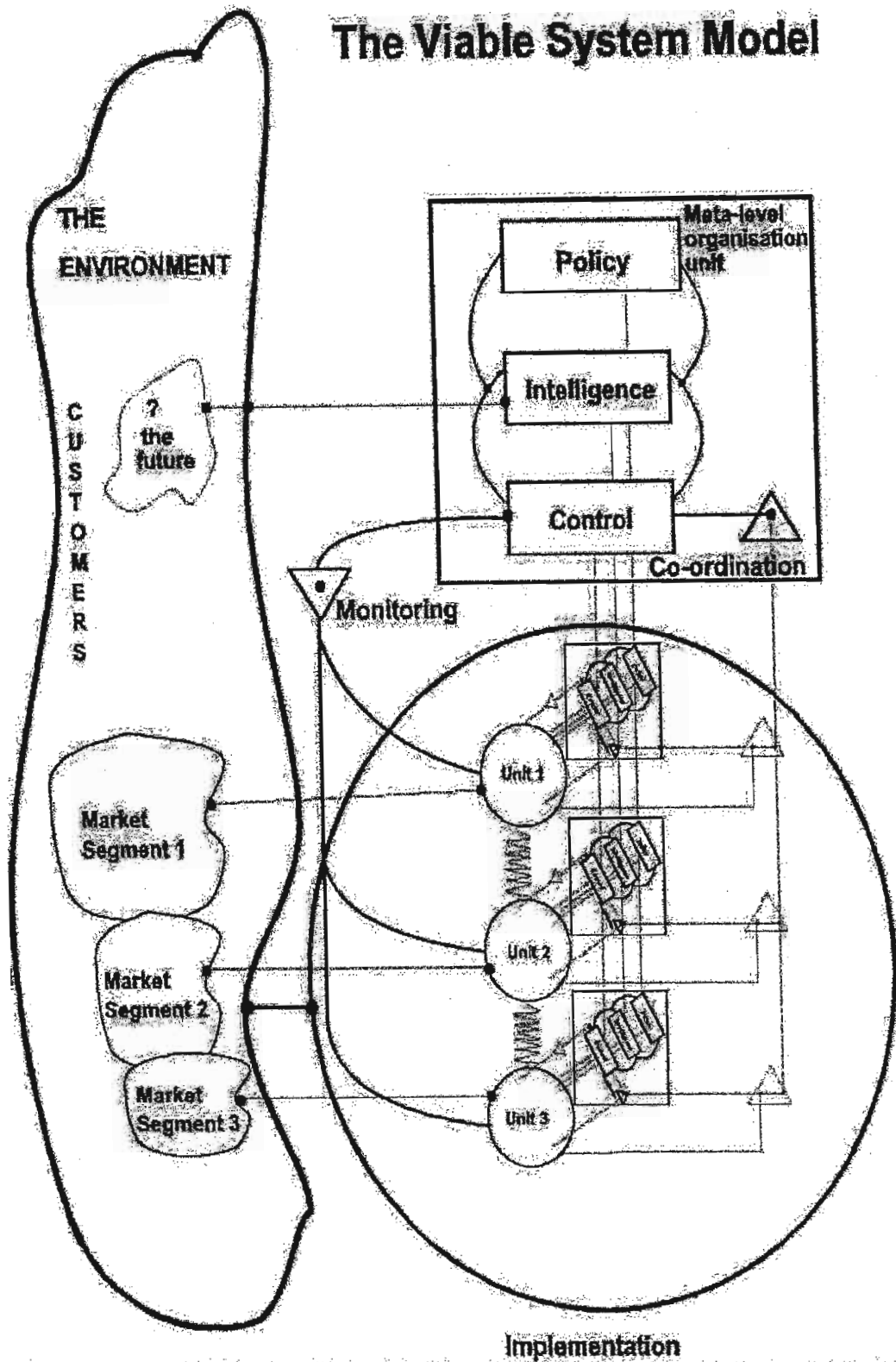


Figure 2 An example of The Viable Systems Model in two levels of recursion (Espejo & Gill, 1997)

## 2.3   Organisational learning

Learning in organizations is said to have occurred when organizations change and perform in improved and better ways usually as a result of requirements to adapt and improve in times of change (Dodgson in Rhodes, 1996). The need to learn in modern organizations is made even more urgent by the rapid change in the context in which these organizations conduct their business.

While there seems to be general consensus around the outcomes of learning in an organisation, there is less agreement as to how and where the learning actually takes place. One school of thought seems to place value on the capacity of individuals within the organisation to learn and then through a process of dialogue, create shared meaning. People who represent this view would therefore argue that learning organizations must of necessity, 'create contexts in which members can continually learn and experiment, think systemically, question their assumptions and mental models, engage in meaningful dialogue, and create visions that energize action' (Barrett, 1995:36). Senge (1990) who holds a similar view on learning as being located within individuals, sees Learning Organisations as organisations 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 to see the whole together.

In this view of organisational learning, the ability within an organisation to promote the exchange of information between employees and hence create a more knowledgeable workforce is seen as key to learning. Gerard (2000), in support of such a view, argues that there is need to create a flexible organisational environment in which sharing of information between employees is promoted and where people will accept and adapt to new ideas and changes through a shared vision.

There is another school of thought though which questions this assumption that organizations can be said to have learnt if the individuals learn. Those who hold this view raise the theoretical problem of how the systems, procedures and rules, which make up an organisation, evolve during the learning process (Mangolte, 2000). Levitt and March (1988), who also hold to this view, define organisational learning as the evolution of the routines and procedures that make the organisation over time. In this latter definition, the two main elements are; firstly routines and secondly permanence. This view also brings to the fore the nature of organizations as where the existence of a political and social dimension gives rise to the ever present reality of conflict leading to a definition of an organisation as a coalition of different individuals each having different goals and distinct orders of preference (Cyert and March cited in Mangolte, 2000). In support of the same arguments, the 'Barnard-Simon' Organisational equilibrium sees each participant playing their part within an organisation only so long as the inducements offered are greater than the contributions he or she is asked to make (Mangolte, 2000). For the organisation to survive then, a critical balance must be maintained between the individual gains and the required cost and sacrifices the individual is expected to make. For Levitt and March (1988), learning in organizations is more about interpretations of the past rather than anticipations of the future.

While there are differences between the two schools referred to above in locating the locus of learning, both seem to find agreement in the fact that learning happens as a reflection on the past experiences towards an improved future. This paper seeks to develop this idea of reflective learning by seeking means of putting processes and structures that can promote learning. It goes further to argue that learning is not only about reflecting on the experiences of the individuals within the organisation but also about the learning capacity created by processes and functions within the organisation. In this way, this paper makes an attempt to hold both schools on

organisational learning in tandem. In this regard, the approach to interviewing individuals seeks to highlight their role in the learning process while the application of a cybernetics model raises more structural and routine aspects.

Following the above argument, · processes in an organisation as well as the individuals all become central to organisational learning. Writing from the experience of building a learning community, Bawden (1997) makes an important statement that 'learning systems are sufficiently self-referential; that means that they will be able to learn about their learning. Dixon (1997) elaborates further on this same point by arguing that it's the learning-related processes themselves that constitute organizational learning, rather than the knowledge that is accumulated in the process. Barrett (1995) sees these learning related processes as being appreciative in approach, having the ability to see radical possibilities beyond the boundaries of problems the organisation faces. This study follows a similar line of argument, which seeks out the learning-related processes rather than the products, which arguably degenerate with time.

Having defined organisational learning, it is important at this point to understand the ingredients necessary for an organisation to learn. Britton (2005:13) argues that for organisational learning to take place, three key factors must be in place: the motive, the means and the opportunity (MMO). He understands these concepts as follows: Motive is the reason for; means are the tools or methods while opportunity is the occasion for staff to contribute to organisational learning. This next section looks at organisational learning in NPOs using these three key factors.

### 2.3.1 The motive for organisational learning in the Non-profit Sector

One question that demands asking at this point is why organizations need to learn. Dixon (2004), writing on how organizations can be placed in order to reuse

knowledge gained, argues that knowledge creation only happens when there is a demand for it. In a similar vein, it can be argued that organizations will only invest in the facilities and structures necessary for learning if they can see the value that will accrue from the learning. The need to establish the benefits of learning may be even greater in Non Profit Organizations, which tend to operate under very limited resources. While the idea of a 'Learning Organisation' is widely used and developed in business circles, the concept has not seen as much receptivity in the Non Profit Organizations. Much of the writing in the area of learning organizations is also found within the corporate world where, as Britton (1998) argues, performance is measured in terms such as 'competitive advantage', 'market share' and the 'bottom line' of profitability. In the Non-profit sector however, the measures of success are different and arguably far harder to quantify. Indeed, there seems to be a strong tendency towards moving away from a measurement of success that relies on quantities to a more qualitative approach that observes changes in people's behaviour, relationships, activities or actions of people. (Hailey, James and Wrigley, 2005).

One must therefore agree with Britton (1998) when he highlights the need to ask a fundamental question of why organizations in the non-profit sector need to learn. In response to this question, he argues that a key aspiration for many NPOs is in the area of reputation, which has to do with what the organisation would like to be known for. In this respect, he continues to argue that since reputation has to be earned, learning has to take place not only from the experiences of the organisation itself but also from other organizations, which have themselves an already established reputation.

There are other ways of looking at the benefits that NPOs could accrue from adopting a learning culture. For example, a group of senior NPO leaders (cited in

Britton (1998) when asked what advantages learning would bring to their organisation highlighted the following:

- Improved cohesion
- Increased adaptability
- Increased impact of organisation
- Increased effectiveness and efficiency
- Increased staff motivation
- Ability to retain staff and their knowledge
- Legitimise grassroots knowledge and experience
- Greater opportunity to be creative
- Increased ability to initiate change

It is of interest to this study that although these NGO managers did not explicitly use the words 'organisational viability' in their response, Britton (1998) summarises their responses with a comment that, 'If NGOs do not learn, they are likely to cease to exist as they will not be able to adapt sufficiently well to the changing circumstances they find themselves in'. It seems clear then that organizations in the Non Profit sector have to increase their capacity to learn if they have to be effective in their mission, and also if they have to sufficiently adapt to their changing context. As Revan argues, for an organisation to survive, the rate of learning must be equal to or greater than the rate of change in its external environment (cited in Garratt, 1987).

The reality though is that within the Non Profit Sector, the culture within many organisations does not reflect a high prioritisation of learning. This is in sharp contrast to the above findings of the advantages to be accrued from such learning. It is to this seemingly lack of prioritisation of learning that we now need to turn. Fowler (cited in Britton, 1998) succinctly bemoans this lack of learning when he says:

An almost universal weakness of Non Governmental Development

Organizations (NGDO's) is found within their limited capacity to learn, adapt,

and continuously improve the quality of what they do.

He continues to argue that unless these organizations learn from their experiences,

they are destined for insignificance and atrophy as agents of social change. If, as

Fowler argues, NPOs have a universal weakness in relation to their capacity to learn

as organizations, it is vital to interrogate the question of why NPOs find it difficult to

inculcate practices and policies that support learning.


Britton (1998) categorises the barriers to learning in NPOs into two categories i.e.

external and internal barriers. He defines external barriers as those that the

organisation may have little or no control over. These include pressure to

demonstrate low overheads, and competition for funding. The internal barriers

include a prevalently ideological culture among the NPOs, which does not want to

waste resources unnecessarily and therefore sees learning as a luxury. Many NPOs

have hierarchical control oriented structures, weak incentives and rewards for

learning. They also have underdeveloped systems for accessing, storing and

disseminating learning and are not generally good in dealing with discordant

information. Fowler (cited in Britton, 1998) supplements this list by adding the impact

of the attitude of the leaders or managers. Donors also, whilst increasingly requiring

NPOs to demonstrate impact of learning, continue to use and insist on delivery of

outputs and financial probity as the measure for their 'return on investment'. Britton

argues that these measures are in themselves a constraint to learning (2005). He

continues to argue that due to the pressure on NGOs to demonstrate results, most

have adopted an action orientation or 'adrenalin culture' where the delivery of outputs

is seen as the main measure of success. These barriers are important and central to

this study, as organizations that seek to inculcate policies and structures as well as

an internal organisational culture that supports learning have to overcome them.

In mitigation however, Britton argues that while the concept and terminology of the Learning Organisation may not be as commonly used in the Non Profit sector as in the private and corporate sector, more and more NPOs are exhibiting characteristics of organisational learning. He goes further to even suggest that as these organizations seek to be more responsive to changes in their context, they will also more consciously align their activities with the requirements for organisational learning.

### 2.3.2 Means for Organisational Learning

Senge (in Flood, 1999) argues that for organisational learning to take place, the skills to test each other's mental models as they arise will be institutionalised through organisational practices that have to do with a facilitative organisational structure. One of the methods that he gives to illustrate this kind of facilitative practice is the 'left-hand column' in which participants list those things that were said in a situation perceived as difficult on the right hand side of a table they draw. They then proceed to list those things that were thought but not said in the left hand side of the table. Clearly, for organisational learning to take place, more than a review of experiences is needed. People have to be able to engage in a dialogical process that allows for deep listening and reflective inquiry into each other's mental models. Flood describes Senge as contending for the need not only for participative openness where people speak freely but more importantly reflective openness where people challenge their own thinking (1999). Dixon (2004) also sees organisational learning as going beyond the collection of lessons into a database. In her view, learning takes place in a social dialogue that allows for the development of relationships, reflective conversations, probing questions and in-depth interactions.

The kind of 'means' then that Britton (2005) is arguing for have to create an environment conducive for such dialogue to take place. In his view, 'the means'

include aspects like clear conceptual models, a supportive environment for learning, a range of methods and tools that enhance learning, specialist support where necessary and adequate investment of financial resources. In other words, means provide the 'how to' for learning or for the use of the learning acquired. I think that it's necessary to give a brief description of these 'how to' especially for NPOs, which may be just starting on the path of creating a learning organisation.

### 2.3.2.1  Conceptual models

One of the barriers to organisational learning is the lack of clear conceptual models that would guide the process (Britton, 1998). Conceptual models help individuals make sense and arrive at meaning of themselves and the world around them (Britton, 2005). Conceptual models become like pegs on which to hang the learning as it takes place. Britton (2005) continues the discussion on various conceptual models that are in common use by organizations in the non-profit sector and points out that many of these models have been borrowed from a wide range of other fields of study.[1] For the sake of this study, its important to highlight two models, the Kolb's experiential cycle and the double loop learning by Argyris and Schön.

a)  The Kolb's cycle

Kolb (1974) articulated in a very succinct manner how individuals create meaning from experiences through a process of reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation. Kolb contends that immediate concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection. The observations are then assimilated into abstract concepts and generalisations, which then act as guides into establishing new experiences. Kolb (1984) summarised his understanding of learning by contending that learning should be seen as a process and not in terms of its outcomes, differentiating his model from behavioural theorists. Secondly, that it is a continuous

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[1] For a fuller discussion on the conceptual models and examples of their use see Britton B (2005:25) Organisational Learning in NGOs: Creating the motive, means and opportunity, UK: INTRAC

process rooted and grounded in experience. Thirdly, in his view, learning is an holistic adaptation to the world, which also involves transactions between the person and the environment. The strength of Kolb's work was in highlighting the important part that experience plays in the learning process. This has great implications for individuals within organizations wishing to position themselves as learning institutions. The individual experiences become key starting points for learning and hence crucial building blocks for creating shared meaning in organizations. Based on the Kolb model, one can then argue that while the adage 'experience is the best teacher' would hold true in many cases, its also true as Taylor (in Meyer & Boninelli, 2004:174) argues that much learning is lost because 'our taught paradigms do not recognise the legitimacy of that which experience is trying to say.'

Bawden (1997), building on the work of Kolb, gives a helpful approach to understanding how meaning can be seen as an emergent property. He argues that meaning emerges as a result of the interaction between the process of what he calls 'experiential learning' and 'inspirational learning'. The main point here is that meaning is created when there is an interactive process between the concrete world, the conceptual world and the spiritual world. He continues to argue then that the first step in creating a learning community is the facilitation of learning about learning or what he later refers to as epistemic learning. This level of learning enables one not only to be aware of the place of worldviews within learning but also to explore and challenge this domain of learning.

b) The double loop learning

Argyris (1991) moves away from the notion of experience as the main basis for learning to a reflection on the cognitive rules that people use to design and implement their actions. He distinguishes between the 'espoused theory' and the 'theory in use'. According to Argyris, the distance between these two theories gives space for dialogue and reflection on the internal rules that drive and govern behaviour. Further, he uses the terms single loop learning and double loop learning

to distinguish between these two forms of learning. Using the idea of a thermostat, he argues that in single loop learning, the main function is to regulate according to a set parameter. So for instance when the temperature rises above the set parameter, the thermostat kicks in and regulates the temperature. The thermostat does not interrogate the parameter but simply 'obeys' it. Double loop learning on the other hand would be if the thermostat, apart from regulating the temperature based on a set parameter, could also think about the parameter itself. Argyris continues to contend that single loop learning, which is prevalent in many organisational situations, is characterised by a problem solving approach using assumed and often untested mental models. He also refers to this kind of learning as Mode I learning. Double loop learning, or Mode II learning on the other hand would occur if situations were created where these mental models would be exposed and interrogated. The implication of this understanding for organisations wishing to adopt a learning approach is enormous. It calls into place the need for reflection both for individuals but also within the organisation. Reflective practice opens up for public scrutiny our interpretations and assumptions providing a basis for future action (Raelin, 2002). For this kind of shared reflection to take place there is need to provide for safe space, physical or otherwise, where meaningful dialogue can take place.

### 2.3.2.2  Supporting the necessary competences to learn

For organisational learning to take place, individuals within the organisation have to learn. This seemingly obvious statement is often overlooked by many NGOs in their quest to promote organisational learning (Britton, 2005). A general assumption made is that individuals know how to learn having gone through formal schooling. Writing on the same point, Argyris (1991) argues that those members of the organisation that many assume are best at learning are in fact not good at it. The highly competent professional is often a specialist at problem solving and because they are very good at what they do, they rarely experience failure.

For an organisation to build a culture of learning, it's necessary to build competencies that enable the individual within the organisation to learn but also to collectively create shared meaning. In this regard, Barret (1995) provides a helpful approach to understanding the necessary competencies necessary for learning while Swinth's model (1974) is useful in ensuring that the learning process does not alienate important stakeholders whose knowledge may be vital to the rest of the organisation. It is important then to go into some description of each of these approaches.

(1995:40) identifies four competencies necessary for a learning organization. These are as follows:

1) An affirmative competency in which the organisation selectively focuses on current and past successes, strengths and potentials to accentuate human capacity.

2) An expansive competence whereby the organisation provokes members to experiment on the margins and to stretch in new directions.

3) A generative competence in which the organisation enables members to integrate their learning, see the consequences of their actions and to experience a sense of progress.

4) A collaborative competence whereby the organisation creates forums that promotes dialogue and exchanges diverse perspectives.

For Non Profit Organizations to promote organisational learning, there must be a commitment to support these necessary competencies to learning.

A challenge that faces many organizations at this point is how to define the organisation in a way that ensures there is collective learning within and between all stakeholders. Swinth (1974) gives a helpful approach, which can be used to

understand the organisation as constituted of different systems each with its own set of interests and goals. Approaching the study of an organisation using this approach becomes very helpful in ensuring that a more holistic picture of the different stakeholders is maintained in the process of intervention. Swinth contends that firstly, there is a need to distinguish systems of interests within an organisation and identify their functions, goals and purpose. Secondly, there is a need to develop models of the systems indicating relationships between the components of the systems and their relationships to each other. Thirdly, it is imperative to develop some criteria of assessing the effectiveness of the systems in meeting their objectives.

Swinth argues that in order to consider systems of interests within an organisation, three functions of an organisation can be identified. Firstly, meeting the demands of its clients, secondly, providing meaningful work to its participants and thirdly to return some form of social benefit to its owners. These functions for a non-profit organisation can be depicted in a systems map as in Fig.3 below.
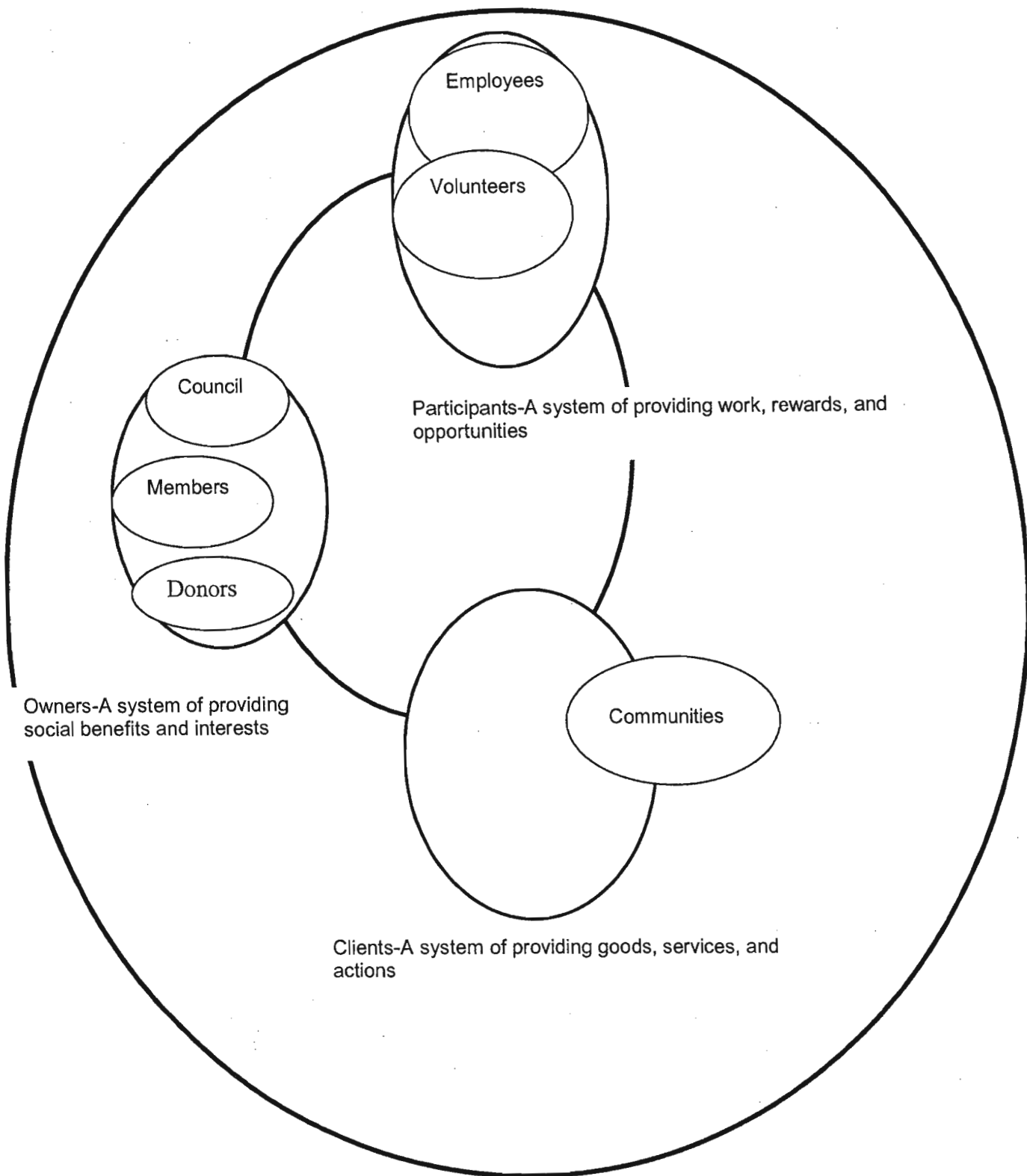
**Figure 3** A systems map of an NPO showing relationships between the organisation and different stakeholders

This model by Swinth provides a useful way of clearly identifying stakeholders and their function within an organisation. This is of great use especially in smaller non-

profit organizations where roles and functions are not clearly defined and also where people may play different roles within the same organisation. For the purpose of this study, this model will be used to ensure that data collection regarding where learning is taking place is representative of each of the three systems of focus.

It's important to give a critique of the model though. Useful as this approach by Swinth is to the main thrust of the study of learning within the non profit organizations, it does not go far enough in establishing a criterion for assessing learning within the three systems that he identifies as of interest in NPOs. The model does not establish a means of assessing roles and functions that each of the stakeholders plays. It is here that the Viable Systems Model (described later in this paper) can be more helpful in that, while not necessarily highlighting the three systems, does provide a much more helpful framework for assessing the functioning of roles within a viable system. The value of the model and approach provided by Swinth should not be overlooked though. This model enables the identification and hence involvement of stakeholders at different levels of the organisation to be collectively drawn towards creation of shared meaning.


### 2.3.2.3  A range of methods and tools

Luckett (2004) describes a method as a specific approach chosen or set of activities undertaken in a particular situation by a practitioner who is guided by a methodology. Methods help organizations bridge the gap between theory and practice (Britton, 2005). In considering methods and tools that are necessary for organisational learning, the key aspect is ensuring that the method or tool chosen is appropriate for the organisation and context. There is a wide range of methods and tools available for Non Profit Organizations including approaches like Learning Before, During and After (Collison and Parcell, 2001), Learning Workshops, Communities of Practice, Action Learning, Case Studies, Organisational Performance Indicators and Learning

Maps. It's not the intention of this dissertation to go into great detail into any of these methods and tools, as the important thing is to highlight the principle behind the selection of a particular method. It is vital that the choice of tools or methods of intervention be informed by a well thought through methodological approach.

### 2.3.2.4  Specialist support

Britton (2005) argues that in many cases where organizations in the Non Profit Sector wish to develop a learning culture, the engagement of a specialist is necessary. The specialist acts as a guardian of the process of learning of both individuals and teams as well as ensuring that the choice of tools and methods is appropriate to the organisational climate and context. Britton (2005) continues to argue though that the danger with engaging a specialist is that other individuals in the organisation can abdicate their responsibility towards learning. In some organizations, the specialization is located in a learning team rather than a single specialist. Whichever format a particular organisation chooses to follow, the key factor is to ensure that there is someone (or a team) who guards and guides the learning process.

### 2.3.2.5  Adequate investment in financial resources

While many organizations in the Non Profit sector would identify the need to invest in organisational learning, a common hindrance cited is that of a lack of unrestricted funds (Britton, 2005). Increasingly, as donors battle with what they perceive as a lack of delivery on the part of the Non profit organizations, they are turning more and more to providing funds that are largely restricted to specific programs. A common cry of many NPOs is that there are less and less non-designated funds, which could then be utilized for other non-core activities like organisational learning. Whether the lack of funding is an issue is debatable as the amount of funds needed to promote a culture of dialogue and learning within many NPOs would be minimal.

### 2.3.3 The opportunity for organisational learning

Within an organisation, it is not enough that individual members learn from their experiences. For the organisation to have learnt, shared meaning must be created. It becomes important then to not only to study how individuals learn but also importantly, how does that learning become part of organisational life.

In discussing the environment necessary for the process of dialogue, a key ingredient for shared learning, Britton (2005) argues for the need for both formal as well as informal spaces.

Informal dialogue is an ongoing phenomenon in all organizations and communities. Dixon (1997) refers to the informal spaces as 'hallways of learning' and argues that these are often more effective than formal learning spaces as they are voluntary and also people contribute according to levels of interest. Informal hallway exchanges are also non-hierarchical making participants seem more equal. In these hallway exchanges, collective meaning is constructed enabling what is known by one individual to be accessible to others. Brown and Isaacs (1996), writing on the same subject argue that the most pervasive and widespread learning in organizations happen not in training rooms and conferences but in the cafeteria and the hallways. They continue to contend that rather than seeing the 'grapevine' as a poisonous plant to be cut off, it should be seen as a natural source of vitality and hence cultivated and nourished.

The reality for many organizations though is that the value of these informal dialogues goes unacknowledged and in many cases is not even encouraged. Brown and Isaacs (1996) assert that the tenet in many organizations is 'stop talking and get to work'. They argue that a more helpful operating principle should be, 'start talking and get to work!' In saying this, they see conversations as essential catalysts of

meaningful action. Given the above potential value in conversations, there is need to develop systems and processes that 'help foster new and useful kinds of conversations in the workplace' (John Seeley Brown cited in Brown & Isaacs, 1996).

Literal hallway learning is not adequate though for an organisation. Formal processes that are more focussed and intentional need to be created. Dixon believes that these formal approaches to learning should be characterised by the positive atmosphere present in the non-formal hallway conversations. She identifies seven characteristics that are necessary for meaningful learning to take place as follows: (1) Reliance on discussion, not speeches; (2) egalitarian participation; (3) encouragement of multiple perspectives; (4) non-expert-based dialogue; (5) use of a participant-generated database; (6) the creating of a shared experience and (7) the creation of unpredictable outcomes.

Formally, spaces may be provided through Human Resources processes like inductions, supervisions, appraisals and exit interviews. Setting aside times for reflection and learning during key organisational meetings and forums sends the signals that learning is valued within the organisation. Increasingly, use is also being made of communication tools like the intranet to facilitate learning conversations. Creating opportunities for learning also involves practices that manage the load of staff enabling them to be able to take time for reflection and learning. This is a hard call for many NPOs, which tend to be understaffed, and hence have overloaded workers.

### 2.3.3.1 Storytelling as a means of harnessing opportunities for learning

While creating the opportunities for learning is important, harnessing the value of the emergent learning is often a daunting task for many organizations. However, approaches that cherish storytelling have proven to be invaluable in enabling

organizations to capture the learning created in both formal and informal settings (2003:1) highlights this value succinctly when he writes that:

> In all my exploration of how to develop human potential, I begun to notice how the sharing of stories was a crucial doorway. I began to realize the significance of how stories open people to deeper learning and self-understanding. I saw that when people share stories with one another-whether traditional stories or personal experiences- it creates a powerful chemistry for mutual learning as well as deep bonds of trust and cohesion between people. I saw that people coming together around stories- and their re-enactment through ritual and process- is the very lifeblood of a vital community.

Stories exist in all organizations; managed and purposeful story telling provides a powerful mechanism for the disclosure of intellectual or knowledge assets in organizations. Storytelling can also provide a non-intrusive, organic means of producing sustainable cultural change; conveying brands and values; transferring complex tacit knowledge (Snowden, 1999). Hazen (in Rhodes, 1996) also sees value in storytelling approaches when he describes organizations as the 'polyphonic organisation'. Further, he argues that organisations can be seen as socially constructed verbal systems. In this case, the role of the researcher becomes one of amplifying individual voices allowing access into the person's meaning of a past or anticipated experience. Stories are easy to collect and can also become avenues for the construction of collective meaning within an organisation (Boyce in Rhodes, 1996). Stories also enable a diversity of voices to be heard thus expressing one reality in the pluralistic perspectives of members at different levels (ibid, 1996).

An additional value of a story telling approach to research is that it levels the ground making it possible for the marginalized voices to be heard. Rhodes (1996) contends

that, stories of disagreement and resistance must be heard alongside the legitimised stories of organisational power holders.

## 2.4 Appreciative Inquiry (AI)

This study deliberately positioned itself within the appreciative inquiry paradigm. Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a way of looking at the world with a generative frame, 'seeking and finding images of the possible rather than scenes of disaster and despair' (Watkins & Cooperrider, 2000). Watkins and Mohr (2001) define Appreciative Inquiry as:

> A collaborative and highly participative, systems-wide approach to seeking, identifying and enhancing the 'life-giving forces' that are present when a system is performing optimally in human, economic and organizational terms.

Being a part of a participatory action research method, AI is especially significant in that it seeks that which is working well in an organisation rather than that which is not. The strengths of such an approach especially in relation to organisational learning are discussed in depth in chapter three. While in its initial stages AI was mainly used to study entire organizations, there is increasing use of the methodology to study aspects of interest within an organisation. This is consistent with systems thinking and practice that recognizes the legitimacy of identifying a system of interest nested within a larger system. The process of defining a system within a larger system necessitates a critique of the boundaries of the system as well as the processes of setting them. Ulrich (1998:5) defines boundary setting as the conceptual border lines which distinguish the system of concern from its social and physical environment. Boundary critique becomes essential in also distinguishing between a system of concern and the context of application of an intervention process. Essentially, this form of boundary critique takes into consideration the effect of the intervention process on third parties. This boundary critique as advocated by among others Ulrich (1998) and Midgley (1992), enables the inclusion into the

process of people who would otherwise be marginalized or excluded through the boundary setting process.

The study, by adopting an appreciative approach, seeks to move away from a linear approach that identifies problems and then proceeds to look for solutions. Consistent with systems thinking and practise, the Appreciative Inquiry process allows for a much more holistic approach which seeks improvements to problem situations. The Appreciative Inquiry process also allows for a dialogical approach that values storytelling. The value of a storytelling approach is not only to the researcher but to the organisation as well. Increasingly, organizations especially in the Non Profit sector are finding that the measurement of performance must not only be in quantifiable figures and numbers but also in anecdotal stories captured from the participants.

This study employs a storytelling approach where through semi-structured interviews; the respondents were guided through an identification of where learning takes place in their organisation. A deliberate effort was made to guide the stories along an Appreciative Inquiry approach, which seeks to amplify that which is working well rather than focusing on the problem line. Barrett (1995:37) sees this appreciative component as a necessary ingredient of all learning organizations. He understands the term 'appreciative' to have two meanings. Firstly, the appreciative system is not about a particular set of images but a 'readiness to see and value and respond to its situation in a certain way'. Secondly, he defines appreciation as that which values what is best about human systems.

The importance of an appreciative approach to a process such as the one undertaken in this study is made even clearer by Ludema, (2001) who argues that:

"The purpose of social and organizational inquiry ought to be to create textured vocabularies of hope- stories, theories, evidence, and illustrations—

that serve as catalysts for positive social and organizational transformation by providing humanity with new guiding images of relational possibility".

It's this idea of social research as creating vocabularies of hope that lies at the heart of the application of the Appreciative Inquiry Process to this study of learning within non-profit organizations. The 'vocabularies of hope' generated provide organizations with the resources necessary for the construction of a transformative and affirmative response to the challenges that confront them.

To further understand why the AI process was relevant for this study, its important to locate it within a credible theoretical and conceptual framework. Watkins and Mohr (2001) argue that AI is located within two main theoretical frameworks i.e. the 'New Science' and the 'social-constructionism theory'. A brief examination of these two concepts is necessary given that the Appreciative Inquiry process informs the data collection approach adopted in this study.

The New Science arose as a reaction to the Classical Newtonian concept of understanding reality. The Classical Newtonian worldview sees reality as being about reducing complex things into few simple absolute and unchanging components. Classical Newtonian thinking sees reality as being about cause and effect and thus lends itself to problem identification and solving techniques. While traditionally, this approach was also used to try and understand human behaviour, more recent times have seen the general acceptance that issues involving human beings defy such linear approaches, a view that has seen the 'new science' thinking gaining more recognition. The thinking behind New Science is that it's more important to understand the systems as a whole and to see value in the relationships between the seemingly discrete parts. The New Science has exciting ramifications for the field of organisational management as Watkins and Mohr (2001) argue:

> "Organizations as living systems do not have to look continually for which part is causing a problem or which project is not living up to some set of criteria. The "new" science embraces the magnificent complexity of our world while

assuring us that built into the very fabric of the universe are processes and potentials enough to help us and all of our organizations move toward our highest and most desired visions."

The second theory underlying the Appreciative Inquiry Process is that of social constructionism. Social rationalists argue that the theories we hold have a powerful effect on the nature of social 'reality' (Bushe, 1995). Bushe continues to contend that while most action research uses logical positivist assumptions which treat reality as something fundamentally stable and out there, social rationalist approaches like AI treat social and psychological reality as being a product of the moment, open to continuous reconstruction. Located within this thinking, Appreciative Inquiry sees social forms as inherently 'heliotropic'- evolving towards the light i.e. the images that are affirming and life giving (Cooperrider in Bushe, 1995). Bushe concludes then that conscious evolution of positive imagery is a viable option for changing the social system as a whole.

Having located AI within some theoretical framework, it's also important to note that the process has been widely used in different settings in place of the traditional problem solving approaches that concentrate on problem solving. Such application has included the use of AI in addressing the issue of inclusion of women into top management structures of leading organizations (Watkins and Cooperrider, 2000) and also in guiding a strategic planning process for NASA (Watkins and Mohr, 2001: 107). More importantly for this study, AI has been used to build capacity in Non Profit Organizations (Watkins and Mohr, 2001: 68) and in community development (Ole Sena & Booy, 1997).

Fuller, Griffin & Ludema (2000) give the following as the main steps of Appreciative Inquiry: (1) Discovering and valuing; (2) Envisioning (3) Design through dialogue; and (4) co-constructing the future. Fuller, Griffin and Ludema (2000) summarise these key steps of AI in more user-friendly terminology as depicted on the figure 4 below.
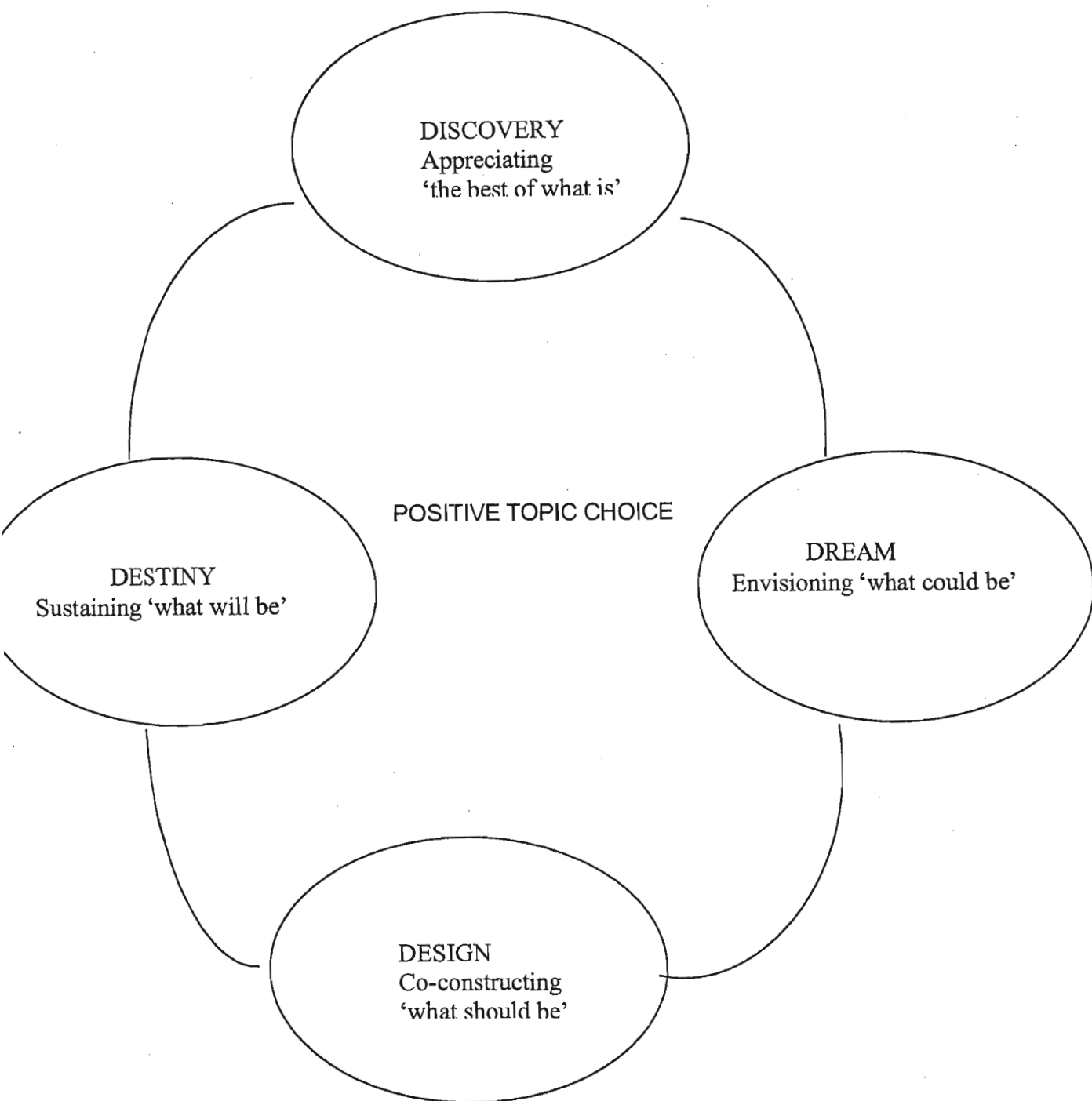
**Figure 4 Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Model** after Fuller et al (2000:4)

The use of AI as a process in organisational study and intervention therefore offers a number of advantages over traditional deficit based approaches (Bushe: 1995). These advantages include the following:

1. Appreciative Inquiry releases an outpouring of new constructive conversations that refocus an organization's attention away from problems and deficiencies. For organizations in the Non Profit sector, many of which operate under heavily restricted budgetary and donor constrained environments, the ability to generate constructive energy would have profound value. Many NPO managers in line with other managers in other sectors would have learnt to see themselves as expert problem solvers basing their self-worth on what problems they identified and how the solutions they proposes solved the problems (Barrett, 1995). Appreciative Inquiry takes people in organizations away from this perennially diminished mindset to a more creative and generative one.

2. Secondly, AI generates forward momentum for change through enhancing social cohesion and bonding. Critical and problem-oriented approaches to human and organizational inquiry tend to diminish human capacity for positive relational construction without necessarily providing alternative perspectives (Ludema, 2001).

3. Thirdly, Appreciative Inquiry unleashes a self-sustaining capacity for learning within the organisation. Again, for Non Profit Organizations which often struggle to encourage organisational learning; AI creates an affirmative environment that does not focus on problem solving and faultfinding. Problem solving approaches tend to reinforce a defensive attitude that is not conducive to open sharing- a crucial ingredient for organisational learning.

4. Fourthly, AI provides the conditions necessary for self-organising through the promotion of increased dialogue and equalized conversation. It enables people to see 'wholes' and to move away from a fragmented worldview, which

ignores the emergent factors, which arise as a result of the systemic interaction between the parts of an organisation. A problem centred mindset does not facilitate a collective approach to equalized dialogue and sharing and only serves to further fragment various organizational stakeholders (Barrett, 1995). The appreciative inquiry process on the other hand allows people within an organisation to appreciate the diversity of perspectives shared by different stakeholders.

5. Finally, AI provides vital energy for positive change. Appreciative Inquiry enables organizations to tap into their 'positive core' (Cooperrider & Whitney, 1999) enabling them to take a quantum leap forward. Barrett (1995) argues that in organizations which are continually problem solving, a mindset is created that no matter what progress is made, something is bound to go wrong soon. This in itself can lead to a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. Appreciative Inquiry allows people to tap into the energy that arises from that which gives life to the organisation.

# 3 Research design and Methodology

The major aspect of my study relates to the viability of an NGO and the management of learning spaces and knowledge. This research employed methodological pluralism approach with sought to allow for the use of a number of methodologies in a complementary manner. While methodological pluralism approach has the dangers of being caught in the pragmatic trap of ignoring the different, and at times opposing paradigms of the various methodologies, a pluralism approach allows for the strength of each of the methodologies to be incorporated into an intervention process guided by the nature of the problem situation. In particular for this research, a Participatory Action Research process was maintained as the research was taking place in a real life situation. Participatory Action Research allowed for research with the participants rather than on them. It also allowed for reflective learning as the research was undertaken in the context of real organisational life. Being an action research also meant that it sought to understand a social or human problem within a natural environment allowing for the application of the findings and the learning towards improving the identified problem situation. Participatory Action Research by involving the subjects in the process enhances the chances of high construct validity, low refusal rates and "ownership" of findings (Mouton, 2001:151).

## 3.1 Methods of data collection

For the purpose of this study, five organizations in the Non Profit sector were selected as a form of case study research. Mouton (2001:151) argues that in Participatory Action research, data collection techniques such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, using documents, constructing stories and narratives are appropriate. Being a qualitative action research, there was less emphasis on the sampling technique as the main factor was to test applicability of the

model. Two approaches were used in data collection. In the first instance, three participating organizations were invited to select people to be interviewed. The interviewees had to be people who function at each of the five functional levels of the organisation under study as detailed in the Viable Systems Model. The focus group from each organisation was interviewed separately in semi-structured interviews. The approach taken was one where the participants were encouraged to share their stories in response to the questions posed. The key responses to the questions were captured and recorded for analysis. For the remaining two organizations, questionnaires were emailed to the heads of the organizations along the same lines as the structured interviews. Follow up on the responses from the questionnaires was made telephonically. This approach ensured that organizations that could not afford the time to get key representatives together could still participate in the research.

Using the responses and information gathered from the participants in both cases, a systems model was constructed for each organisation based on the Viable Systems Model. The participants were then invited to a report back workshop. This workshop entailed a facilitated story telling process that enabled participants to engage with the basic concepts used in the study as well as the findings from the data collection process. At the end of the day, the data collected from them as well as their evaluation of the process were used to form the reflections around the use of VSM in enhancing organisational learning. Secondary information, which gives different forms of feedback regarding the assessment of the organisation by other parties, was also used to supplement the findings of this study.

## 3.2   Data Analysis

Data and information collected was reviewed and analysed. In line with the requirements for a participatory action research methodology to involve the research subjects in the analysis thereof, the findings were shared with the participating

organizations and the validity of the findings tested against their judgement. Their comments and feedback were recorded as part of the analysis. This kind of approach in analysis is consistent with the formal content analysis in which the researcher begins by creating initial conceptual categories and then filtering the data received through these groupings (Page & Meyer, 2000). On one hand, the information gathered from the respondents was analysed using the five systems as detailed in the viable systems model. This was to ascertain that all the vital roles in an organisation were being considered for the capacity they had for learning. Secondly, the data obtained was also analysed against key supportive concepts in organisational learning as follows.

a. What forums are available for learning? This aspect sought to establish what structures and policies were in place to enable learning. The lack or availability of deliberately created means and structures, which promote shared meaning creation, was deemed as important to this research.

b. What type of learning is taking place? This category sought to find out whether the learning could be categorised as single loop or double loop learning. As detailed in the literature review, double loop learning was considered more valuable to organisational viability than single loop learning.

c. Is the learning valued and rewarded? The presence or absence of means for recognizing and rewarding learning was considered an important factor in promoting a culture and posture of learning within the organisation. The information obtained was thus analysed for evidence of reward systems in place.

d. How is the learning stored and disseminated? How the learning is stored and disseminated also has an impact on its accessibility to other sections of the organisation. Inference in this section was also drawn from how the organisation stores information collected in the process of its functions.

# 4 Results Presentation

The main questions that formed the basis for this study were as follows:

1. Where is learning taking place within the organisation?

2. What learning is currently taking place within the organisation?

3. How is such learning currently valued, rewarded, stored and disseminated?

4. Is the learning taking place in ways and places that would enhance organisational viability?

## 4.1 Description of the sampled organizations

The sample consisted of leaders from five Non Profit Organizations who were interviewed through semi-structured interview processes or through questionnaires. These five organizations were selected by the researcher from organizations that he had established some relationship with through his consultancy practice. This method of sampling is consistent with a judgemental sample in which the respondents are chosen by the researcher on the basis of their ability to supply the necessary information for a study (Page & Meyer, 2000). While the findings from such a study are useful, they may not be representative of the entire population of Non Profit Organizations. The sample chosen in this case, though, allowed for some form of stratification. All the organizations chosen for the research have been in existence for at least five years. The staff component varies from three in one organisation to twenty in another. All the five organizations rely heavily on a host of volunteers at their operational functions as well as at the board level. The five organizations chosen included the following:

a. Charity Aids Foundation of South Africa is an international Non Governmental Organisation. For such an organisation, there is an international dynamic that influences aspects of its management

including its association with similar branches in other countries and sometimes some funding support from international sources as well. Such organizations also tend to have one or more staff on secondment from another country. The question of local support raising and ownership is central to the future of CAFSA.

b. Lesedi is a church based community development organisation that while working to alleviate the needs of the poor is located within an affluent neighbourhood in Randburg, Johannesburg. Being a church based organisation means that the church has a very great influence on the managerial practices of the organisation. The church in this case also provides financial support and dictates to a large extent what programs the organisation should run. The leadership of the organisation is chosen by the church and is often members of the church itself. The lines of authority also tend to be rather blurred in such an organisation between its leaders and those of the church to which it belongs.

c. Emthonjeni is also a faith-based organisation, which is co-sponsored by a number of churches. Such organizations tend to have a unique challenge of managing the relationships with the different sponsoring partners. Emthonjeni was also chosen for this study on the basis of its location within an informal settlement. This raises huge issues of security as well as the extent of it acceptance and sense of ownership by the local community. The staff of the project are drawn from the informal settlement while the senior management are often outsiders. The founder of the project, an outsider to the community and a foreigner, still remains the leader of the organisation and questions of the future leadership of the organisation then become increasingly important.

d. ESSET is an activist group, which while being faith based, works primarily to raise advocacy and lobbying for marginalized communities. An organisation like the Ecumenical Service for Socio-Economic Transformation (ESSET) tends to attract leaders who are very committed emotionally and otherwise to the cause for which the organisation exists. The board members in particular are chosen on their ability to be a vocal and critical voice on behalf of the cause for which the organisation was founded. By their very nature, such organizations tend to be very reactive and also exist within networks of other similar organizations and movements. Many organizations in this category tend to be seen as anti-government, and hence their funding often comes from other international partners.

e. The Evangelical Seminary of Southern Africa (ESSA) is a tertiary institution, which while accredited by the Council for Higher Education, does not receive government funding being a theological seminary. The Council for Higher Education tends to have very stringent criteria for accreditation and hence such an institution would have a lot more structural support in place to meet the minimum accreditation criteria. However, many theological institutions continue to experience decline in student numbers and find themselves reliant on international donor funding. Such organizations also tend to experience the challenge of defining their ownership and consequently their membership.

## 4.2 Demographic profiles of the respondents

The respondents were chosen by the organizations listed above as being the best placed to supply information on the areas under study in this research. They were made up of the following.

a. Males made up 4/11 of the respondents while the rest, 7/11, were female.

b. 2/11 were founding members of their organizations, while 5/11 have been with their organisation for at least 5 years.

c. In terms of their ages, 8/11 of the respondents were in their 30s, while 3/11 were in their 40s.

d. 5/11 of the respondents have tertiary qualifications, while 6/11 have not.

The fact that the majority of respondents in these organizations were women is consistent with the fact that majority of workers in the Non Profit Sector are female. Also of interest was that the two founding members interviewed were all in one organisation, which currently is struggling with issues of succession of leadership. The majority of respondents have been with their organizations for more than five years and so were well informed about the life and activities of their organisation. It was also interesting that the majority of the respondents were in their 30s and that for most of them, this was their first career after college or high school, many having joined their organizations initially as volunteers. A majority of the people interviewed do not have tertiary qualifications and yet are in the leadership of their organizations. While academic qualifications in themselves are not necessarily a measure of success, it may be noted that the lack of tertiary studies could become a barrier to accessing further education.

### 4.3   Summary of findings

The research findings for all the five organizations surveyed are summarised in the Figure 5 below. An important note for the VSM models is that the information in the model is summarised to fit into the one- page size of the models. Thus, a staff meeting through which people share diaries for the week and which therefore fits into

the role of a Systems 2 function is only depicted on the model as a 'staff meeting'. This is in no way suggesting that a staff meeting is a systems 2 but rather that the function of coordination is handled at the weekly staff meetings. A fuller description of the various systems in the different organizations is given in the accompanying tables.

| System | Forums available for learning | Type of learning currently happening | Reward systems in place | Storing of learning | Means of dissemination |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **System One: Operational** | • Staff meetings (5/5)<br>• Program reporting and proposal writing (5/5) | • In all the organizations surveyed, (5/5) the type of learning at the operational level is mainly problem solving/ single loop. | One (1/5) organisation has a staff appraisal system in which contribution to learning is recognized. 4/5 of the organizations have no reward system | All the organizations surveyed (5/5) have some form of documenting information at operational level mainly for donors. All however do not have a system in place for reflecting on the information documented. | 4/5 of the organisations have a newsletter though which information and learning is disseminated. |
| **System Two: Regulatory** | • All five organizations have strategic planning processes (5/5)<br>• Two have a shared staff diary and/ or timetable (2/5) | • Little reflection on regulation process. Single loop mainly solving operational units conflicts (5/5) | All the organizations (5/5) do not have a system in place for rewarding learning at the regulatory level. | All the organizations surveyed 5/5 have a strategic plan document, 2/5 have a timetable that regulates activities while 3/5 rely on verbal communication. | 4/5 disseminate information internally through verbal means. 3/5 of the organizations have a newsletter for external communication |

| System | Forums available for learning | Type of learning currently happening | Reward systems in place | Storing of learning | Means of dissemination |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| System Three: Internal management | • All five have staff and/or management meetings (5/5)<br>• All five have strategic planning sessions (5/5)<br>• All five have fundraising and donor reporting process (5/5) | • Mainly problem solving type of learning with occasional double loop around strategic planning processes (5/5) | All the organizations surveyed (5/5) indicated that they had no formal means of rewarding learning at the management level. | Learning at the management level would mainly be stored in inaccessible notes in 3/5 organizations. 2/5 have minutes and documents that are well filed and accessible. Not much reflection though is made of these documents. | 1/5 of the organizations shares information internally through memos while 4/5 of the organizations rely mainly on verbal communication. |
| System Four: Research and future thinking | • All five have strategic planning process (5/5)<br>• Two have learning seminar forums (2/5)<br>• One has a journal club (1/5) | • One organisation (1/5) has journal club which deals mainly with reflection around papers of academic interest | All the organizations surveyed (5/5) indicated personal satisfaction as the only means of reward to learning available at the internal management level. | All the organizations surveyed do not have formal means of storing learning at the research level. Some of the information obtained at this level is stored in newsletters (3/5) and in academic journals (1/5). | Of the organizations surveyed, one (1/5) documents and circulates papers presented at journal club. The others (4/5) rely on newsletters and internal minutes. |

| System | Forums available for learning | Type of learning currently happening | Reward systems in place | Storing of learning | Means of dissemination |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | • | • Other organizations (3/5) have meetings/seminars with partners geared towards interacting with the context and learning. | | | |
| System Five: Governance and organisational identity | • All five have regular board meetings (5/5) | • Only one (1/5) of the organizations have a proactive approach to learning at the governance level. The others are in the process of developing functional governance structures. | All the organizations (5/5) have no means of acknowledging and rewarding learning at the governance level. -All five also have no means of measuring the performance at the board level. | Information at the board level is stored in documents and board minutes in all five organizations. These minutes however tend to only capture information and not necessarily learning. | Dissemination of information from the governance level is mainly through verbal means (4/5). |

**Figure 5 A summary of the results of the survey on the five organisations**

A more detailed summary of the responses received from each organisation is contained in the next session. A brief description of each organisation as accessed from the organizations website or promotional material is given. A model of each organisation drawn from the data collected along the guidelines from the Viable Systems Model is also provided.

### 4.3.1   Case study 1: EMTHONJENI

Emthonjeni is a community centre that is located in the Zandspruit informal settlement in Johannesburg. The organisation, which has been in existence for four years, understands its mandate as that of enriching disadvantaged communities in a holistic fashion by assisting them to live full, meaningful lives and empowering community leaders. Emthonjeni means "the fountain". Currently, the organisation has a staff component of twenty-three including part time workers on the projects. The projects include a children playschool and day care facility for children from the informal settlement, a medical care unit for expectant mothers, a computer school as well as a job creation department.  Five Emthonjeni staff participated in a structured interview as well as the report back session. Figure 6 is a VSM diagram of Emthonjeni while figure 7 gives a summary of forums available for organisational learning.
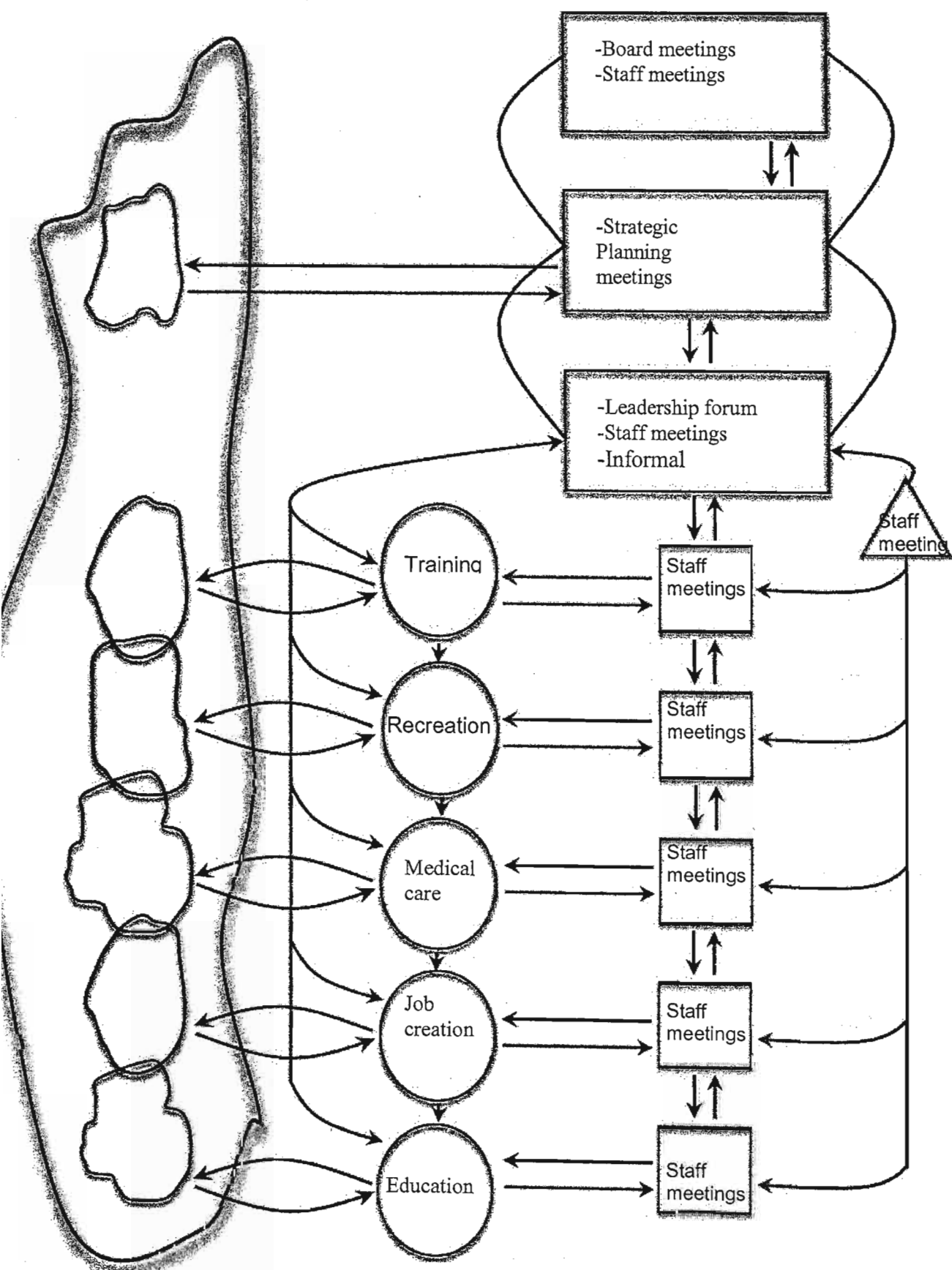
Figure 6 a viable systems model of Emthonjeni showing key function areas as well as forums available for learning

| | System 1 (Operational) | System 2 (Regulation) | System 3 (Management) | System 4 (Research) | System 5 (Governance) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| hat forums e available learning | The weekly staff meetings provide opportunities for report back and reflection of field experiences of staff -Informally -There are occasional training sessions, which address issues of interest to the organisation. Periodically, senior staff get to attend the Leadership summit | The weekly staff meetings provide forums in which the operational units discuss and share information vital for the regulation of the organisational functions. The strategic plan also provides a document around which roles and activities are arranged thus avoiding conflicts among the operational units. | The quarterly leadership meeting as well as the weekly staff meeting all provide forums through which collective learning can take place. Presently though, the forums are more for information sharing and have a low priority on collective reflection on the management function and roles within the organisation. | Research on future trends takes place at occasional partners meetings. The annual strategic planning meeting also provides a forum for future thinking and research. However, the concept of these forums as learning events is a new one in the organisation and not yet well established. | The quarterly board meetings would provide a forum in which collective learning can take place. Currently though, the quarterly meetings are not well established and their potential as learning forums not well realized. Periodically, staff outings provide forums for team building and establishment of organisational identity. |
| e of ning ently ng place | Mainly problem solving in an ad hoc manner. Though there are forums for training, they are not necessarily used for shared meaning creation through reflection on individual learning | Mainly problem solving in an ad hoc manner | Occasionally generative learning when the leadership team takes time away to attend some training | Very little shared learning taking place at the system four level as the function of future thinking within the organisation as well as a deliberate engagement with its context is still fairy new. | Very little shared learning is taking place at the governance level of the organisation |

| | System 1 (Operational) | System 2 (Regulation) | System 3 (Management) | System 4 (Research) | System 5 (Governance) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| w the rning is varded | There is no formal or intentional means of rewarding learning are in place. Rewarding is mainly though personal satisfaction after problem solved | At the regulatory level of the organisation, no formal means of rewarding learning are in place. Rewarding is mainly though personal satisfaction after problem solved | At the internal management level, there are no formal or intentional means of rewarding learning are in place. Rewarding is mainly though personal satisfaction after problem solved | The research and future thinking process in the organisation is not formalized and hence no deliberate means of rewarding learning exist. | The board is still at its formation stages and has not had formal means of collective learning. No formal or intentional means of rewarding learning are in place. |
| v shared rning is red | Some shared experiences and reflection thereof is stored in an irregular newsletter | Apart from the strategic plan, most other learning is only stored through personal notes and individual memory. | Through the strategic plan which is often typed and availed to staff. Also through personal notes and individual memory | There are no established means of storing learning at this level of the organisation. | Mainly information and data is captured and presented at Board meetings and hence recorded in the minutes. The board meetings are not seen as a learning forum and so not much use is made of the minutes from these meetings. |
| / the ning is eminated | There is no proper systems of communicating shared learning apart from verbally and through the newsletter | Information is shared verbally at the Wednesday meetings and during the daily devotion meetings | Information as well as individual experiences of staff members are shared verbally at the Wednesday meetings and during the daily devotion meetings. | Information researched or gathered from the organisational context is often shared verbally at the Wednesday meetings and during the daily devotion meetings | There are no proper systems of communicating shared learning apart from verbally and through the newsletter |

Figure 7 A summary of organisational Learning at Emthonjeni

### 4.3.2  Case study 2: LESEDI

Lesedi is a program of a Section 21 organisation called Homo Novos situated in Randburg, Johannesburg. Homo Novos itself in an outreach arm of the local Fontainebleau Community Church in Randburg, Johannesburg. Lesedi is mainly an adult education centre, which runs a number of adult literacy programs including a computer centre as well as a sewing and cooking department. Lesedi has a staff component of 8 full time staff as well as another 6 part time staff. The director of Lesedi participated in the research by responding to the questionnaire as well as a feedback session. Figure 8 is a VSM model of Lesedi while Figure 9 gives a summary of forums available for learning at Lesedi.
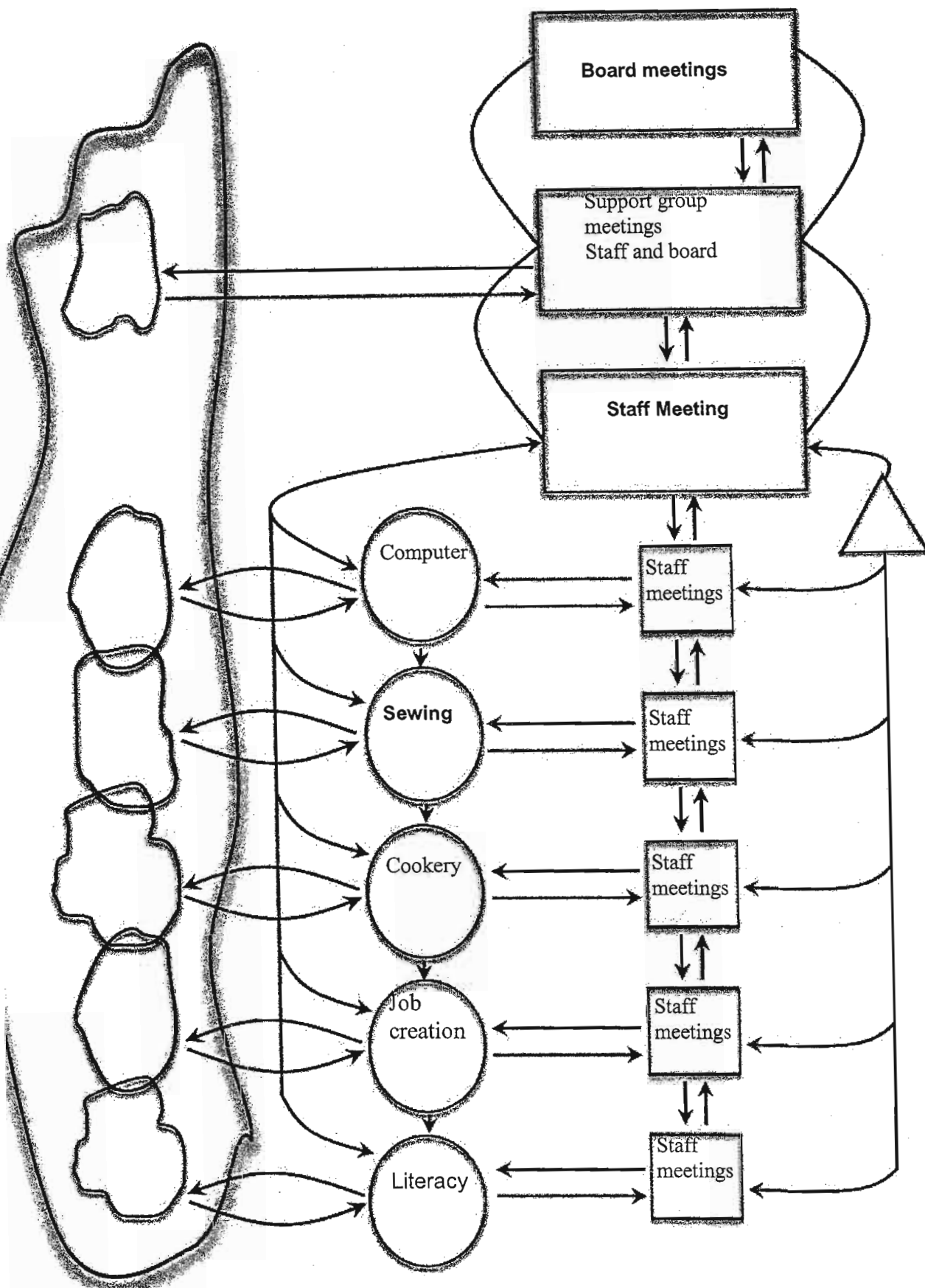
Figure 8 A viable systems model of Lesedi showing main functions and forums for learning

| | System 1 (Operational) | System 2 (Regulation) | System 3 (Management) | System 4 (Research) | System 5 (Governance) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| t forums vailable earning | Main learning collectively is through the weekly staff meetings. There are also Informal forums in which learning takes place | Some limited form of learning around system 2 takes place during the weekly staff meetings and also through Informal forums | The annual strategic planning process provides a forum for reflection and learning around resource management and audit functions. There are also occasional review meetings | Irregular meetings with support groups comprising of friends of the project provide learning forums | Occasionally board meetings provide a learning forum around issues of governance and identity |
| s of ing ntly taking | Mainly linear and problem solving around operational tasks | Learning is mainly adaptive when conflicts arise around operational units | Learning tends to be of a corrective nature when a problem arises requiring an intervention. -Occasionally generative learning happens during planning and review meetings | The occasional meetings where outsider partners are invited tend to be generative of new learning. These | The learning at this level is irregular as no formal processes are in place to promote collective learning. |
| the ing is ded | The staff is publicly acknowledged when a new means of problem solving is created. | Apart from the personal satisfaction that arises from better performance, there is little else as an incentive. | At managerial level, there is not much rewarding of staff for learning except the possibility of the staff being given roles with greater responsibilities | Though seldom, people are recognized for new ideas | There are not many incentives to learning at the level of governance. |

| | System 1 (Operational) | System 2 (Regulation) | System 3 (Management) | System 4 (Research) | System 5 (Governance) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| the ing is minated | The transmission of learning is mainly done verbally with no process of more effective transmission. | Some learning is transmitted through documents like the strategic plan but most learning is transmitted informally | Some learning is transmitted through documents but most learning is transmitted informally | Transmission is mainly through the verbal processes | The Board minutes tend to capture information arising at the level of governance. The transmission to others in the organisation tends to be verbal |

Figure 9 A summary of organisational Learning at Lesedi

### 4.3.3   Case study 3: ESSET

ESSET is an independent ecumenical service agency founded in 1996 with a mandate of building the capacity of the churches to work for socio-economic justice. Working for socio-economic justice is understood as working for the transformation of socio-economic process, systems and structures so that the quality of life of the poor is enhanced in a sustainable manner. Inherent therefore in ESSET's mandate is the challenge to work outside normal relief (poverty alleviation) and development (poverty reduction) work. Presently, ESSET has three full time staff but often relies on the services of a number of volunteers as well as staff from partner organizations. Figure 10 is a VSM diagram of ESSET while Figure 11 indicates forums available for learning within ESSET.
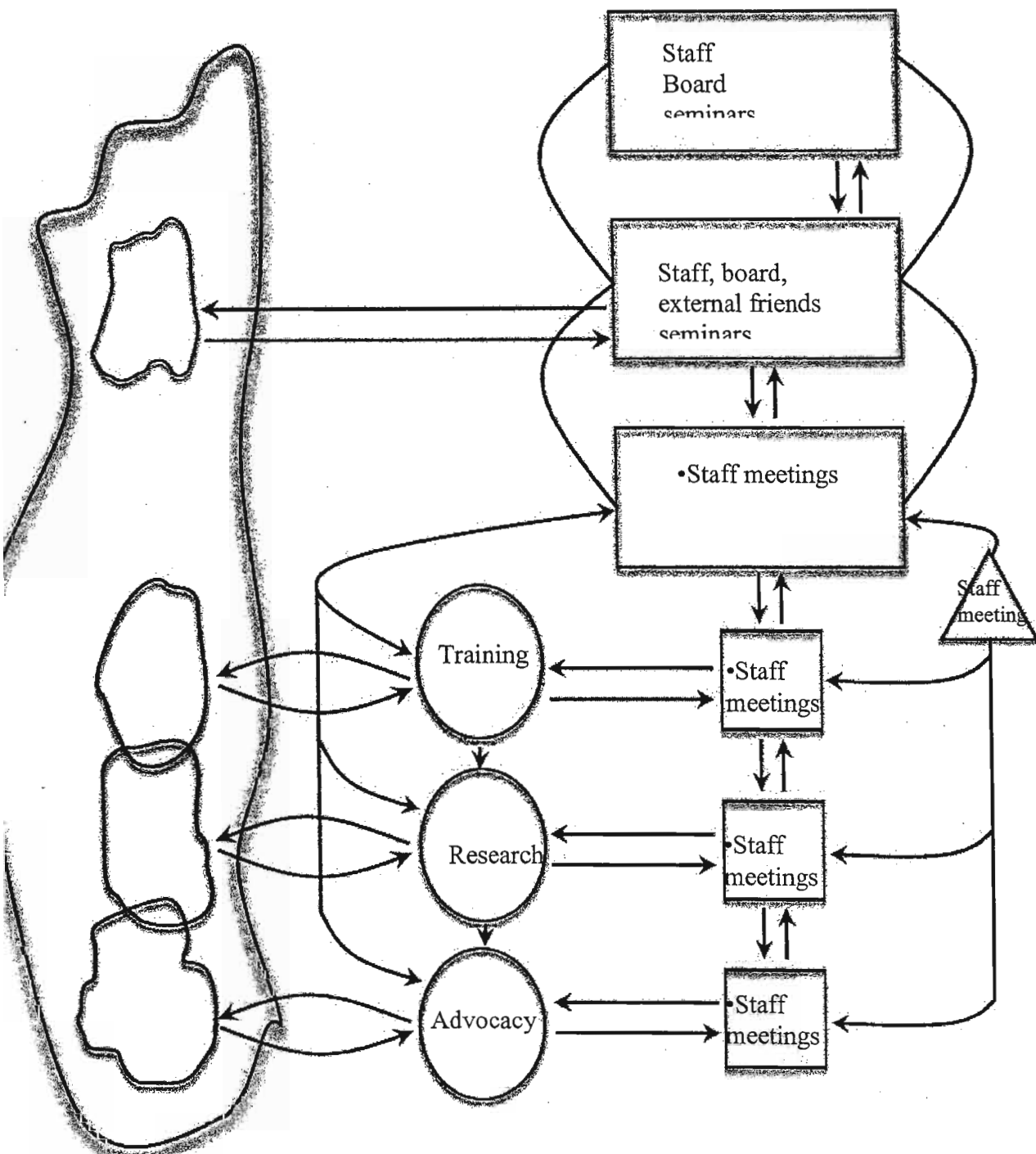
Figure 10 A viable systems model of ESSET indicating main functions as well as forums available for learning

| | System 1 (Operational) | System 2 (Regulation) | System 3 (Management) | System 4 (Research) | System 5 (Governance) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Forums available for collective learning | There fortnightly staff meetings as well as other informally set meetings would provide the forum for organisational learning. Presently however, they are mainly used for information sharing and report back. | The regulatory function tends to happen informally and also at the fortnight staff meetings where diaries and events are shared thus minimizing operational conflicts. There is not intentionality of reviewing learning at this forum though. | ESSET being a small organisation, it has no management structure and instead the internal management function happens with all staff mainly at the staff meetings. Learning at his level is not intentional and there are no proper means for enabling collective learning. | The research function tends to happen continuously on an informal basis. At a more formal level, the seminars at which external people are invited to make presentations provide the best forums for learning at this level. | Learning forums at the governance level are available at the organisational-wide seminars as well as occasionally at board meetings. |
| Type of learning | The staff meetings tend to be report back sessions and when need arises become forums for people to discuss problems and challenges they have faced while in the field. By their nature they are usually problem-solving sessions and are not valued for generative learning. | Since the regulatory function happens irregularly and also informally, not much collective learning takes place beyond what arises out of a discussion around information presented by a staff. | Occasionally, the management meetings take on as issue and in the ensuing discussion become generative in nature. However, apart from the strategic planning sessions and also when preparing donor feedback reports as well as funding proposals, there are no formal forums available for collective shared meaning creation. | The public seminars tend to be generative in nature by not being restricted to current organisational problems but more generally contextual issues. | The board meetings also tend to bring together people who are very much involved and aware of the context and issues that the organisation seeks to address. In this way, the board meetings tend to provide robust and lively discussions and have a great potential as learning forums. |

|  | System 1 (Operational) | System 2 (Regulation) | System 3 (Management) | System 4 (Research) | System 5 (Governance) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| How the learning is rewarded | There are no systems in place currently for appraising or for rewarding learning at the operational level. | There are presently no systems in place for recognizing learning at the regulatory level within the organisation. | Apart from the reward of personal satisfaction, there are no other means of rewarding learning at the internal management level. | The reward for learning at the research and future thinking level of the organisation tends to be mainly through peer recognition and no other formal means of reward exist. | Participation at the board level tends to be on a voluntary basis and on commitment to the values and social issues around which the organisation was formed. Currently, no means of recognition or reward exist in the organisation. |
| How the learning is stored | At the operational level, reports are written mainly directed at donors. These notes and documents contain information vital for organisational learning. Currently however, not much collective reflection and critique is made of these documents. | Information at the regulatory function is stored in a shared diary. Again at this level, this information is not valued for its potential for collective learning. | The information obtained at the management level tends to be stored in minutes as well as in a strategic plan document. Other information related to field experiences is contained in reports sent to donors. As noted previously, not much reflective learning is made collectively around these documents. | There are no systems currently in place to store learning at the research level. Papers presented at the seminars tend to be filed and would be available if a proper way of learning was established. | The information obtained at board level is documented and stored in minutes of the board. Often however, not much use is made of these documents beyond the board level. |
| How the learning is disseminated | Learning at the operational level tends to be disseminated verbally at the staff meetings. The staff meetings provide forums for feedback and for joint planning. | Learning at the regulatory level of the organisation would be disseminated verbally at the staff meetings but also through the joint staff diary and strategic plan. | Dissemination of learning at the management level of the organisation would be disseminated verbally at staff meetings | Dissemination at this level is mainly verbal during the seminars and also through he papers presented. | The board minutes are the main means of disseminating information and learning at the governance level of the organisation. |

Figure 11 A summary of organisational Learning at ESSET

### 4.3.4   Case study 4: ESSA

ESSA is a tertiary level theological seminary based in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, offering degree and certificate levels education at undergraduate level with a post-graduate offerings of a BTh Honours level. A Masters degree is in the pipeline. Most of ESSA's students live on campus and study full time, but they do also draw a number of part-time students. ESSA's history begun in 1975 when delegates at the first of three Consultations on Advanced Bible Training expressed their conviction of the need for a tertiary level, English medium, Evangelical seminary to serve Southern Africa. ESSA opened its doors to its first students in 1980. Presently, ESSA has a teaching staff component of 5, 3 graduate assistants, 17 support staff, 51 students on the undergraduate programs and 2 students registered for the post graduate studies. Figure 12 is a VSM diagram of ESSA while Figure 13 below shows where learning is taking place.
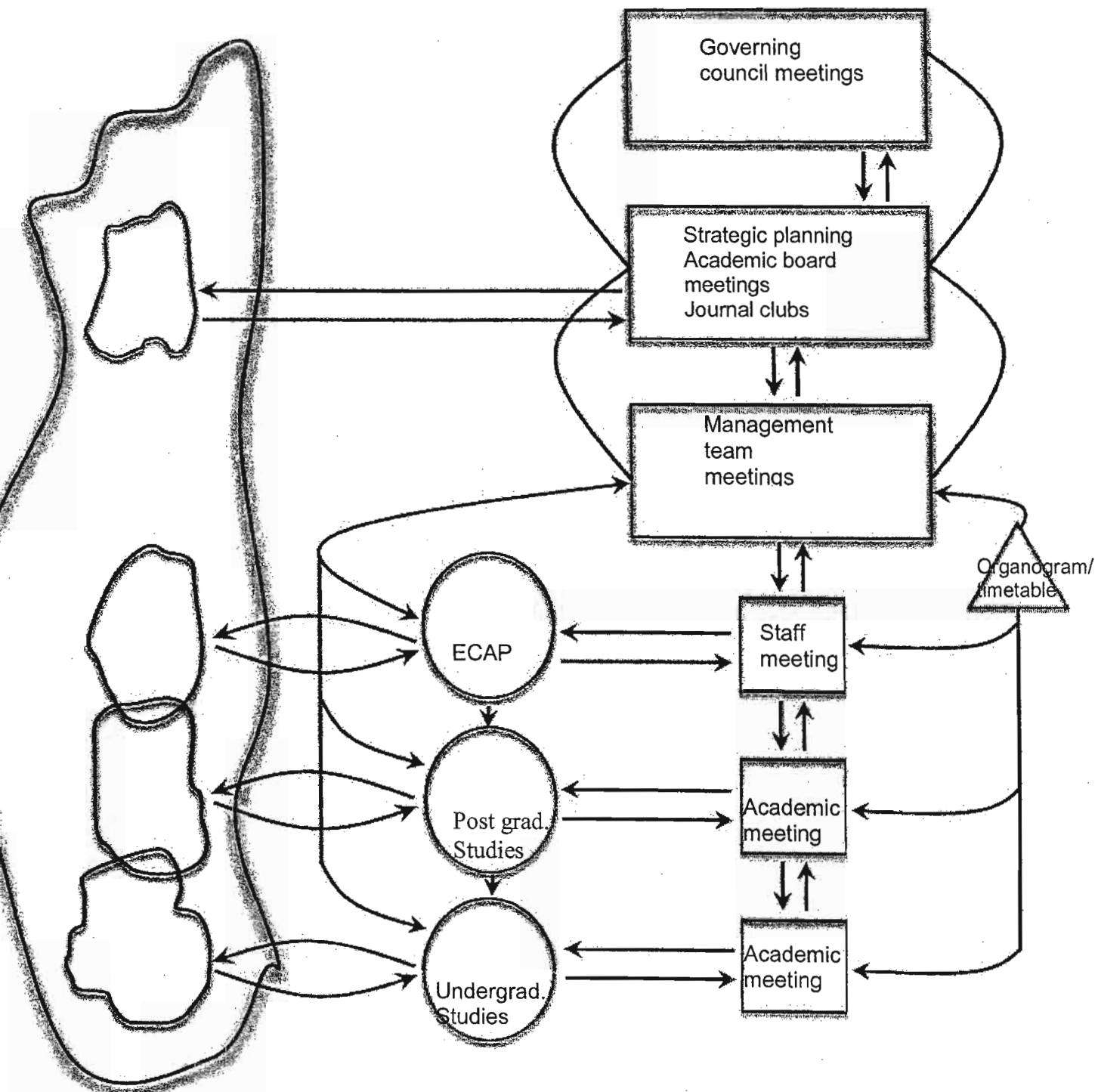
Figure 12 a viable systems model of ESSA showing forums available for learning as well as the main functions

| | System 1 (Operational) | System 2 (Regulation) | System 3 (Management) | System 4 (Research) | System 5 (Governance) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ms able for ctive ing | The Academic Board meetings often have discussions around the experiences of individual departments and staff with input from the others -Journal clubs also provide forums for learning through presentation of academic papers. | Departmental meetings as well as the academic board meetings provide forums where information on events and programs is shared. This often though does not translate into shared meaning creation. | -Management meetings provide forums for creating shared meaning. Weekly staff meetings that bring together all staff are also used for information sharing | In the Academic staff meetings, research papers are presented and critiqued. This is a good forum for collective learning. | The council meetings are available forums. The current experience though is that they have not been used for the purpose of collective learning. |
| of ing | Learning at this level tends to be one of looking for ways of improving the effectiveness of the different departments. Often though, this learning does not become generative. | Minimum generative learning takes place at the level of regulation. Once a particular problem is solved, the attention tends to move to other areas needing a solution. | -Periodically especially through forums like the strategic planning and the management meetings, collective learning is created through discussions around information shared | The main type of information researched and shared is usually around that which is of academic interest and less of a managerial nature | The board Has tended to be dysfunctional in establishing a collective pattern of learning. This limits the learning available to problem solving and often random. |
| he ng is ded | There are no structured and formal means of measuring and rewarding learning. | As there are no structured means of measuring and rewarding learning at the regulatory level, the reward is mainly through individual satisfaction | The internal management function has no means of measuring and rewarding learning | The reward at the level of research and future orientation in the organisation is mainly of an informal and personal nature where acknowledgement is made through peer review mechanisms of papers presented. | There is no formal means of rewarding learning at the governance and organisational identity level. |

| | System 1 (Operational) | System 2 (Regulation) | System 3 (Management) | System 4 (Research) | System 5 (Governance) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| the ...ing is ...d | The information shared at the academic meetings and the journal clubs tends to be captured in minutes. However, lessons acquired through reflection on the information tend to be left to individuals. | Documents like the Organisation diagram as well as internal policy documents are used to store information and lessons acquired at the regulatory function level. | At the management level, minutes are used to store the information acquired. | The research tends to be captures in academic papers and while learning around management issues are stored in the strategic plan document | The Board minutes tend to store mainly information and do not necessarily capture collective learning |
| the ...ing is ...minated | Lessons from the academic meetings may be contained in minutes circulated after the sessions. Management learnings are also shared through minutes | At the regulatory level, learning is mainly disseminated through the minutes. The time table also tends to capture proceedings from the regulator function | Learnings from the internal management function tend to be disseminated through internal memos as well as verbally through staff meetings | Research outcomes are shared through the circulation of academic papers and the organisational strategic plan | While not much shared learning is happening currently at the board level, the minutes sent to the management level are the main means of the board communicating with the rest of the structures. |

Figure 13 A summary of organisational learning at ESSA

### 4.3.5   Case study 5: CAFSA

The Charity Aids Foundation of Southern Africa (CAFSA) is a non-profit organisation working to increase social giving through opening up new sources of funding and increasing the pool of givers. Its aim is to ensure that donations reach reliable and trustworthy organisations, working with the sector to build their capacity to use funding effectively and assisting government to draft legislation that will benefit both givers and non-profits. Currently, CAFSA has nine fulltime staff. The issue of long-term viability is critical to the organisation, as its current model of reliance on donor funding is deemed not desirable in the long run. Figure 14 is a VSM diagram of CAFSA while figure 15 shows forum available for learning within CAFSA.
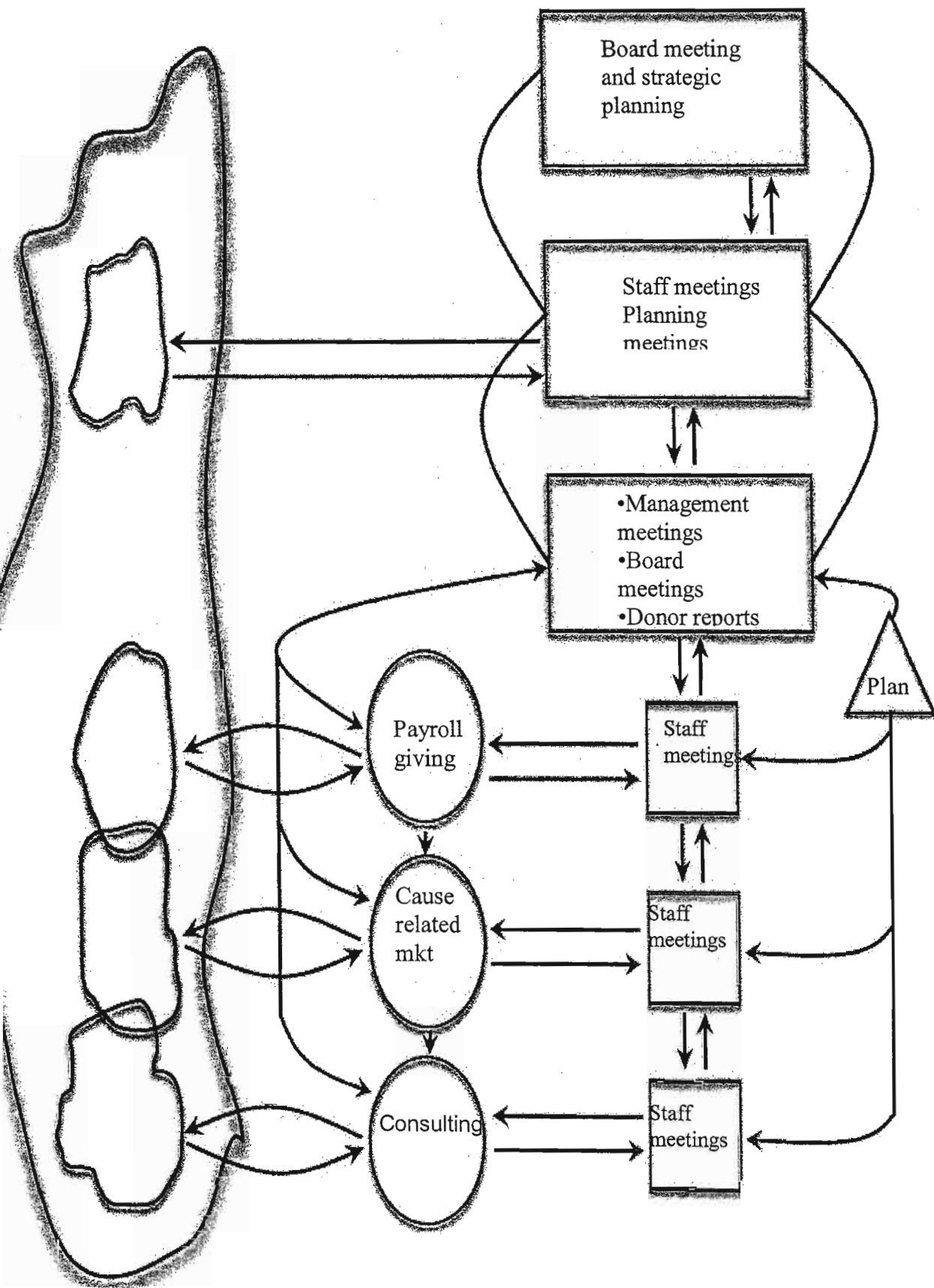
Figure 14 A viable systems model of CAFSA showing available forums for learning as well as main organisational functions

| | System 1 (Operational) | System 2 (Regulation) | System 3 (Management) | System 4 (Research) | System 5 (Governance) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ms able for ctive ing | Learning mainly takes place through informal staff interactions. The fundraising and reporting mechanism provides forums for reflection and accountability, which can then be utilized as learning forums. | The strategic planning sessions provide a forum where collectively, staff get to discuss the organisational goals and plans. Arising from the strategic plan, individual staff then develop work plans | The management meetings as well as board meetings provide forums where reports and other information are shared. These can be useful forums for collective learning. | The main learning forums around the organisational future and context happen at the strategic planning processes. Further reflection happens in the funding proposal process. | -Some learning around governance and identity issues happens occasionally at board meetings while the strategic planning process provides additional reflection around organisational governance issues. |
| of ing | The kind of learning is mainly seeking solutions to problems or to obstacles they have faced while in the execution of their duties. | Learning at the regulatory function happens while on the job and is mainly around problem solving | The management meetings once in a while do yield generative learning. | There are no formal learning processes for learning at the research level; the type of learning that occurs tends to be of an ad hoc problem solving nature. | There are also no formal learning forums for the board and hence learning around issues of governance also tends to be informal and sporadic. |
| he ng is ded | There are performance appraisals in place through which staff are recognized for innovation and improvements in performance. | Although rare, the regulation of operational units tends to be rewarded after performance appraisals. | Internal management processes are evaluated and assessed during the formal performance appraisals processes. | There is no formal processes in place for research and future learning and hence no reward systems in place. | There are also no formal processes of rewarding learning at the governance level of the organisation. |

|  | System 1 (Operational) | System 2 (Regulation) | System 3 (Management) | System 4 (Research) | System 5 (Governance) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ...the ...ning is ...ed | The processes of storing learning are still very basic and much of what is stored is information collected through the feedback processes rather than actual learnings. | The organisational strategic plans as well as specific staff plans contain information that helps to regulate the operational units. | Learning at the management level is captured in the minutes and documents of the organisation's management meetings. | As there is not much intentional learning forums at the research level, there are also no systems in place for storing learning at this level. | Any lessons acquired at this level would tend to be contained in the board minutes. However, there is no process in place to extract and reflect on the lessons. |
| the ...ing is ...eminated | The dissemination of learning at this level is ad hoc and inefficient. Information tends to be communicated verbally | The information gained from any research and future thinking processes tends to be distributed verbally at staff meetings | Learning acquired at the internal management level is often disseminated verbally at staff meetings. | There are no formal process of disseminating learning on the future of the organisation except through the strategic plan | The board has an inefficient communication with the operational units of the organisation. The trend is only to communicate when there are crisis moments. |

**Figure 15 A summary of organisational learning at CAFSA**

### 4.4    Key Findings

A number of key findings emerged from this study. Their importance for the study and for organizations in the Non Profit Sector in general are discussed in the section below.

### 4.4.1    Learning is taking place in organizations

The assumption that learning is taking place in organizations was proven true.  The interviewees often highlighted that their time in the organisation had been a time of personal growth and learning. This is also in line with the findings of Britton (1998) that there is much learning taking place all the time in organisations. A number of forums were also found in which even more learning could be taking place. All the organizations interviewed indicated that the most learning happened informally in the organisation's corridors. Other more formal forums like strategic planning processes as well as funding proposal writing and donor report backs provide opportunities for dialogue and for shared meaning creation. All the interviewees highlighted such events and processes as times when learning takes place. In all the organizations researched, there seemed to be a healthy culture of information sharing with little hoarding noted.

### 4.4.2    Organizations researched lack means of capturing learning

Though much of the learning in the organizations researched was found to have been taking place in informal settings, none of them had developed means of harnessing and capturing that learning. 4/5 of the organizations researched do not have formal processes of evaluating their performance or impact. This in itself means that they do not have adequate data with which to make informed decisions about the organisation or its mission. While informal learning is vital and necessary in an organisation, the failure to have means of harnessing such learning nullifies any long-term benefits that would be accrued to the organisation in question. In all the

organizations researched, there did not seem to be a clear commitment to improving their learning capacity.

### 4.4.3 Most learning was found to be of a linear, single loop nature

In most of the organizations surveyed (3/5), the only deliberate forum in which the basic assumptions that inform the life and functions of the specific organisation are open to scrutiny seems to be at the strategic planning processes and the fundraising and reporting meetings. At these forums, much more reflection and critique of the organisation takes place. It is also at the same forum that most generative learning seems to take place. Apart from that time, the learning that was identified to be taking place in all of the organizations researched was mainly of a problem solving nature. In this case, the learning arises inadvertently from efforts put in place to find a solution to a hitherto unknown problem. Around the corridors and sometimes in the formal meetings, solutions to this problem are sought and applied to the context. It was also noted that two of the five organizations use the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) in response to donor requirements. It was of interest though that none of the two organizations referred to the LFA as an aid to learning.

### 4.4.4 A fragmented approach to the management of the organizations leads to unequal prioritisation to Learning

In all the five organizations surveyed, a problem of communication between the operational functions and the strategic and policy functions was highlighted. Thus in some of the cases, what happens at the board level is not aligned to what takes place at the operational level of the organisation. This leads to a fragmented approach to organisational management and also adversely affects organisational learning. Emphasis on data collection and a reflective engagement with it seems to be happening only at the operational level. It is thus not surprising that even the learning observed mainly takes place in sections of the organisation that are located

within systems one to three. Not much intentional learning was highlighted in systems four and five in any of the organizations researched. All the organizations surveyed also invest more resources in systems one to three level with inadequate learning structures at the research and governance functions of the organisation. This has huge ramifications for the viability of these organizations, as they do not meet the criteria for viability according to the Viable systems Model.

This observation also highlights the lack of a systemic understanding and approach to organisational leadership leading to a fragmented management style and learning approach.

### 4.4.5 The organizations had low means of storing and disseminating knowledge and rewarding learning

4/5 of the organizations surveyed did not have intentional ways of rewarding learning. Only one organisation (CAFSA) has built a performance appraisal element to the organisational life. Even then, this organisation does not seem to have criteria for appraising learning. Without good systems of evaluating and appraising individual performance, data essential for generating collective learning is lost. The means of storing and disseminating the learning were also rudimentary and not very effective in promoting a culture of collectively sharing meaning in all the five organizations studied. Only two of the five organizations surveyed have some system of documenting and storing field experiences for later reflection. While staff in four of the five organizations are linked to each other through an intranet, none of them make much use of the intranet for sharing experiences and information with a view to create shared meaning. A case must be made though for the fact that four of the five organizations surveyed have less than ten staff members, a factor which tends to promote a culture of informal and verbal information sharing.

The fact that the organizations surveyed had underdeveloped means of knowledge management including capturing, storage and dissemination is itself a barrier to

learning. Knowledge acquired in the process of its performance provides essential building blocks for organisational learning.

### 4.4.6   There is a lack of a conceptual framework for learning

All the organizations surveyed did not have a framework for guiding and assessing their collective learning. While all the organizations surveyed regularly take their staff and management for courses and training programs, none of them seemed to have a well thought through developmental plan for individual learning as well as for collective shared meaning creation based on the learning acquired. One of the organizations by its nature as an institution of higher learning, has a journal club at which papers are presented, peer critiqued and reviewed. Even here though, the reflection does not include a critical review on the organisation and its processes. Without well thought through conceptual frameworks guiding the learning approach, the experiences gained tend to be wasted and undervalued for their worth to the organisation. As one leader commented, 'the organisation is constantly in a survival mode leaving no resources for what is seen as the 'luxury of learning.'.

### 4.4.7   Viability in small organizations requires participation and involvement of all staff in all operational as well as metasystemic functions

It was clearly observed that to a large extent, learning in organizations is about information flows hence the appropriateness of the Viable Systems Model. As discussed before, in organizations with few staff members, informational flows tend to be informal and happen around the corridors. Consequently collective organisational learning also tends to be informal and hard to quantify. It does make sense therefore to study the patterns of information flow in organizations as a starting point for assessing capacity to learn. Since most of the organizations studied had less than twenty people in the organisation, information flows were mainly informal

and learning processes rudimentary. It was clear that the same people would sit to perform an operational function and in the same sitting undertake a metasystemic function. Viability in such organizations happens when all the members are involved in both operational and metasystemic functions, and thorough discussion at both operational as well as metasystemic levels (Walker,J 1991). This is consistent with the findings of Walker when researching small cooperatives. In the study, Walker found that viability was accomplished when all members of small cooperatives were present and involved in all operational as well as metasystemic functions (1991).

### 4.4.8   The Appreciative Inquiry approach promoted openness

On approaching a number of organizations to be researched on, there was a general reluctance observed. One organisation clearly indicated that they knew they were not a Learning Organisation and so did not want to participate in a process whose end they already knew. The same observation was made of individuals during the interviews. Constant reminders from the researcher were necessary especially in the group interviews as people tended to be defensive in the initial stages. However, approaching the study from an Appreciative Inquiry helped to diffuse the fears and defensive attitude and instead generated great enthusiasm among the people being interviewed. The story telling approach was also appropriate for this type of inquiry into organisational learning as it encouraged participation of more people.

# 5 Recommendations and Further research

## 5.1 Recommendations

### 5.1.1 Invest in organisational learning

Learning in the Non Profit sector needs to be made intentional and prioritised. The findings from the survey indicated that learning was assumed and not considered a vital part of the activities and priorities of an organisation. Part of the barrier here could be the culture often encountered in the NPO sector of 'not wanting to waste scarce resources'. If this is the case, there is a need then to quantify the gains in measurable terms to be realized from inculcating a learning posture in the organisation. Dixon, (2004) says that the investment in learning is worthwhile when the context is continuously shifting and when the costs of running the project are high.

### 5.1.2 Encourage collective double loop learning approach

There is also a need to move beyond single loop problem-solving type of learning to intentional generative double loop learning. As Dixon (1998) argues, there is need to create 'public' forums which allow for the bringing in of multiple perspectives giving room for the testing of individual mental models. This would include dialogue groups, intranet discussion groups, book review groups and lunch meetings. The creation of these processes and forums is a vital aspect of creating a posture of learning. Dixon (1997) elaborates further on this same point by arguing that it's the learning-related processes themselves that constitute organizational learning, rather than the knowledge that is accumulated in the process.

These organizations need to promote a culture of critical reflection of their individualized experiences with a view to create shared meaning. In this regard, Dixon argues that the first and most critical step in making learning meaningful for an organisation is for the members to make sense of what they really learnt (2004). She continues to contend that sense making in organisational learning requires a no-holds-barred, face-to-face dialogue. This, in essence, requires the creation of an atmosphere of trust where members can freely share without being forced to be defensive. Dixon highlights why collective learning is more difficult in organisations when she states:

> 'The commitment to collective learning is more problematic because it means an investment in something we may not get back, particularly in a time when organizations view downsizing as a justifiable way to reduce costs for the short run (1998).'

### 5.1.3 Develop organisational specific means of knowledge management

While there is a clear distinction between knowledge management and organisational learning, knowledge management provides the building blocks necessary for organisational reflection and learning. Organisational Learning provides a validation for knowledge management. In the five organizations studied, there were very poor systems of knowledge management including its storage and dissemination. There were also no formal systems in place to reward learning. There is therefore a need to develop organisational specific means of harnessing and rewarding learning acquired both formally as well as informally. Britton (2005) argues that if an organisation is not learning, it fails to recognize, value and capitalize on the experiences and knowledge of its staff and stakeholders. Britton (1998) further argues that an important ingredient for a Learning Organisation is that staff are rewarded for the learning they contribute to the wider organisation. Of the five organizations surveyed, only one had a

deliberate means of surfacing and acknowledging learning during staff appraisals. Even in that one though, the survey indicated that there were no forums for disseminating the learning as appropriate.

The findings in this research are consistent with those of Britton (1998) who found that the internal barriers to learning in NGOs include weak incentives and rewards for learning, underdeveloped systems for accessing, storing and disseminating learning, and NGOs are not good generally in dealing with discordant information.

### 5.1.4 Develop a systemic approach to organisational management and learning

Findings from the organizations surveyed indicated that much attention in NPOs is given to the operational units as well as internal management with little emphasis on learning at the more strategic and long-term levels. Britton (2005) finds this same attitude in many developmental NGOs where the emphasis is on project management and the measurement of operational outputs. Britton (1998) further stresses the point that some of the approaches to assessing performance in NPOs hinder organisational learning. The example he gives is that of the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) which in this study was only found to be in use in two organizations. The major critique against the LFA approach to project management in organizations is that because of its rigidity, it does not allow for the openness and the flexibility that allows for the unexpected and the emergent in human activity systems (Britton, 2005). Even where the LFA is used, Britton further agues that many organizations do not have the competencies required to analyse and make sense of the information obtained in the monitoring and evaluation processes.

There are however a number of other tools available for assessing and measuring performance as well as organisational learning. The Learning

Organisation questionnaire developed by the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) is one such tool[2]. While the application of such tools requires contextualization and adaptation, the idea of setting benchmarks and learning goals is appealing. The Viable Systems Model provides a useful framework for ensuring that learning is taking place in the right places within the organisation. There is need to develop strategies for strengthening learning especially at systems four and five in the organisations. The Viable Systems Model also provides a systemic means of looking beyond the obvious organisational blind spots and forces a re-look at the other meta-functions. A further reason why VSM would be as appropriate model is that it forces the organisation to think of its context. The context in which the operational functions take place in organizations, impacts quite heavily on their overall performance and eventual viability.

One of the other observed phenomenon in the organizations studied was that of the separation between the operational (system one and two) and the strategy and policy formulation functions (system three to five). This disjointed approach to organisational functioning impacts negatively on the performance of the organisation and would often compromise on its long-term viability. As observed in all the organizations studied, information flows between the operational units and the strategy and policy formulation function was often very poor. This would lead to uninformed strategic directions as well as poor implementation of policy and strategic plans. There is need to ensure better linkage and information flow between the different functions. Once again the Viable Systems Model provides a means of ensuring that all the functions of the organisation are maintained in a

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[2] The learning NGO questionnaire by Britton, B (1998) is available for free download from the INTRAC website at www.intrac.org

coherent form. The VSM has as its main function the maintenance of balance between autonomy in the parts of a system and integration of the whole.

## 5.2 Areas for further research

### 5.2.1 Broaden the number of organizations interviewed

This research was limited to only five organizations and was not necessarily representative of different types and sizes of organizations in the Non Profit Sector. A broader research involving more organizations may be necessary to provide a more comprehensive picture.

### 5.2.2 Develop a user friendly means of data collection

The Viable Systems Model as developed by Stafford Beer does not necessarily give methods and tools for data collection. While this gives room for creativity and for application of context-specific methods of data collection, it however places a limitation. Only people who understand the theory behind the Viable Systems Model can be able to design ways of collecting data. If however a user friendly questionnaire was developed, it would give guidance as to what questions one should be asking at each of the five systems in the VSM in order to determine whether the organisation is viable or not. In this way, it may be possible to measure the level of viability and hence develop a baseline.

## 5.3 Conclusion

This study sought to link organisational learning to its viability. Organisation learning, defined as the creation of shared meaning was argued to be essential for the organisation to adapt and to be viable in a context of great and turbulent change. This study on five organizations in the Non Profit sector sought to establish what

resources, structures and capacity they had put in place to foster a learning posture. Based on the argument that learning is not only about reflecting on the experiences of the individuals but also about the learning capacity created by processes and functions within the organisation, this study sought to investigate what capacity for reflective learning was present.

The Viable Systems Model provided a framework around which the capacity to learn was assessed. The Model is based on the premise that a viable system needs five functions i.e. operational, regulation, internal management, research and governance. By assessing the organisational capacity to learn at each of the five levels, a deliberate attempt was made to avoid a focus on only the more visible or active aspects of organisational life.

This study has established that while many of the leaders in the NPOs studied appreciate the value of organisational learning, few have developed means of enhancing the capacity of their organizations to learn by reflecting on the vital functions at all the five levels studied. The study has also found that the learning currently found in most of these organizations is not guided by well-tested conceptual frameworks. Instead, much of the learning is of a single loop manner, which follows a linear approach of problem solving. This kind of learning is also mainly informal and unintentional. The organizations interviewed also lacked the means to capture, store and disseminate the learning. To be viable in what is a fast changing and turbulent environment, these organizations will have to change to place more value and resources in their capacity to learn. In more ominous terms, a failure to develop such a capacity will limit the long-term robustness of these organizations leading to more carnage of Non Profit Organizations.

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# 7 Appendices

## 7.1 ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING STRUCTURED INTERVIEW

Greetings.

As you are aware, I am undertaking a study as part of my thesis towards a Masters degree in Organizational Management Systems. My particular area of focus is on how to strengthen the learning capacity of organizations within the non-profit sector. I believe that identifying where such learning is taking place as well as exploring means of amplifying such learning will go a long way in building viability and long term sustainability in organizations in the Non profit Sector.

The interview is structured around five essential roles and functions within a viable organizational system. For each section, identify people within the organization who perform that role. People who represent the five different functions covered in the questionnaire will be invited for an hour's interview together. It is possible that some people may play more than one role. These sections are (1) operational, (2) conflict resolution between the operational units, (3) internal management, (4) future research, (5) identity and policy. The important thing is to capture the exciting moments where learning is taking place within each function of the organization and to see how this can be amplified further. The feedback regarding this survey will be given at half-day workshop whose details will be communicated to you.

Thank you very much for your participation in this survey.

Yours faithfully

Samuel Njenga

1. Name of your organisation

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2. Number of years that the organisation has been in existence

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3. Number of full-time employed staff at the organisation

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4. Number of volunteers

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5. What are your main activities as an organisation?

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6. What would you say are your main products (goods and services)?

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## Section one (production level)

Identify people who fulfil this role within the organisation and then interview them).

1. What are your organization's key products, goods or services?

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2. When was one moment of great /exciting learning at this level?

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3. What made that moment/ experience exciting?

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4. What forums are available to the production line for learning?

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5. How is learning at this level rewarded?

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6. How is the learning stored?

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7. How is the learning disseminated to others within the organisation as appropriate?

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# Section two: Conflict resolution

**Identify people, structures, and documents etc, which fulfil this role within the organisation.**

8. What systems, structures, policies or documents are in place to prevent/ resolve conflicts/ oscillations between the different service/ production lines?

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9. When was one moment/ one document etc that the respondents share as a time when this function performed at its best or when most were excited about an outcome regarding this function?

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10. What made that moment/ experience exciting?

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11. What forums are available to the conflict resolution function for learning?

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12. How is learning at that level rewarded?

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13. How is the learning acquired stored?

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.....................................................................................

14. How is the learning disseminated to others within the organisation as

appropriate?

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# Section 3 Management level (Optimisation and internal regulation)

**Identify people who fulfil this role within the organisation and then interview them.**

15. Who are the people involved in optimisation and internal regulation of the organisation?

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16. When was one moment that all the respondents share as a time of great/ exciting learning at this level?

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17. What made that moment/ experience exciting?

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18. At what forums does learning in the optimisation and internal regulation level of the organisation take place?

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19. How is learning at that level rewarded?

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20. How is the learning stored?

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21. How is the learning disseminated to others within the organisation as

appropriate?

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# Section 4: Future orientation

**Identify people who fulfil this role within the organisation and then**

**interview them.**

22. What environmental (external) changes are likely to impact on your

organisation's viability?

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23. Who are the people within the organisation who are involved in connecting

with the external environment, discerning and orientating the organizations

towards the future?

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24. When was one moment that all the respondents share as a time of great/ exciting learning at this level?

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25. What made that moment/ experience exciting?

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26. What forums are available for learning at this level of the organisation?

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27. How is learning at that level rewarded?

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28. How is the learning stored?

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29. How is the learning disseminated to others within the organisation as

appropriate?

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# Section five: Identity and policy

**Identify people who fulfil this role within the organisation and then
interview them.**

30. Who are the people involved as custodians of the organisational identity and

in policy formulation?

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31. When was one moment that all the respondents share as a time of exciting/

great learning at this level?

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32. What made that moment/ experience exciting?

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33. What lessons were learnt from that experience?

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34. What forums are available for learning at this

level?..............................................................................

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35. How is learning at that level rewarded?

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36. How is the learning stored?

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37. How is the learning disseminated to others within the organisation as

appropriate?

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## 7.2 ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING QUESTIONNAIRE

Greetings.

As you are aware, I am undertaking a study as part of my thesis towards a Masters degree in Organizational Management Systems. My particular area of focus is on how to strengthen the learning capacity of organizations within the non-profit sector. I believe that identifying where such learning is taking place as well as exploring means of amplifying such learning will go a long way in building viability and long term sustainability in organizations in the Non profit Sector.

The questionnaire is structured around five essential roles and functions within a viable organizational system. These are (1) operational, (2) Regulatory function between the operational units, (3) internal management, (4) future research, (5) identity and policy.

Thank you very much for your participation in this survey.

Yours faithfully

Samuel Njenga

**Operational units**

1. What products, goods or services form the main operations of your organisation and are linked to its purpose for existence?

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2. In what kinds of forums/avenues does most learning at the operational units take place? (*Please choose one*).

    a. Mainly formal sessions

    b. Mainly informal forums

    c. Both formal and informal forums

    d. Other

Explain your response

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3. What factors indicate the value that is given by the organisation to learning at the operational level of the organisation? (*Please choose one*).

    a. People are rewarded for learning

    b. People are recognized for learning

    c. Performance appraisals include learning

    d. Other

Explain your response

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4. How is the acquired learning stored? (*Please choose one*).

    a. Mainly through individual memory and notes

    b. Minutes and documents that are easily accessible

    c. Electronic databases and formats

    d. Other

Explain your response

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5. How would you rate the efficiency of dissemination of this learning from operational units to other sections of the organisation as appropriate? (*Please choose one*).

   a. Very efficient
   b. Moderately efficient
   c. Inefficient
   d. Other

   Explain your response

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## Regulatory Centre

6. What activities, documents, policies etc enable the operational units to be regulated and to function without conflicting with each other?

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7. In what forums/avenues does most learning through reflection of the experiences in the regulatory function take place? (*Please choose one*).

   a. Mainly formal
   b. Mainly informal
   c. Both formal and informal
   d. Other

   Explain your response

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8. How is the acquired learning stored? (*Please choose one*).

   a. Mainly through individual memory and notes
   b. Minutes and documents that are easily accessible
   c. Electronic databases and formats
   d. Other

   Explain your response

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9. How would you rate the quality of dissemination of learning from the regulatory function/centre to other units in the organisation as appropriate? (*Please choose one*).
   a. Very efficient
   b. Moderately efficient
   c. Inefficient
   d. Other

   Explain your response

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## Internal Management

10. What activities are directly linked to your organisation's internal management function?

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11. In what forums/avenues does most learning in the internal management take place? (*Please choose one*).
    a. Mainly formal
    b. Mainly informal
    c. Both formal and informal
    d. Other

    Explain your response

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12. What factors indicate the value that is given to learning from experiences at the internal management of the organisation? (*Please choose one*).
    a. People are rewarded for learning
    b. People are recognized for learning
    c. Performance appraisals include learning
    d. Other

    Explain your response

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13. How is the acquired learning stored? (*Please choose one*).

    a.  Mainly through individual memory and notes

    b.  Minutes and documents that are easily accessible

    c.  Electronic databases and formats

    d.  Other

Explain your response

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14. How would you rate the quality of dissemination of learning from the internal management to other units in the organisation as appropriate? (*Please choose one*).

    a.  Very efficient

    b.  Moderately efficient

    c.  Inefficient

    d.  Other

Explain your response

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**Research and future thinking**

15. What activities are directly linked to your organisation's research and future?

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16. In what kind of forums/avenues does research and future thinking take place? (*Please choose one*).

    a.  Mainly formal

    b.  Mainly informal

    c.  Both formal and informal

    d.  Other

Explain your response

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17. What factors indicate the value that is given to research and future thinking in organisation? (*Please choose one*).
     a. People are rewarded for new and innovative ideas
     b. People are recognized for new ideas
     c. Performance appraisals include future thinking
     d. Other

   Explain your response

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18. How is the learning acquired through research stored? (*Please choose one*).
     a. Mainly through individual memory and notes
     b. Minutes and documents that are easily accessible
     c. Electronic databases and formats
     d. Other


   Explain your response

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19. How would you rate the quality of dissemination of learning to other units in the organisation as appropriate? (*Please choose one*).
     a. Very efficient
     b. Moderately efficient
     c. Not efficient
     d. Other

   Explain your response

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**Organisational identity**

20. What activities are directly linked to consolidation of your organisation's identity?

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21. In what forums/avenues does most learning at this level (board/ governance/identity) of the organisation take place? (*Please choose one*).

a. Mainly formal

b. Mainly informal

c. Both formal and informal

d. Other

Explain your response

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22. What factors indicate the value that is given to learning at this level of the organisation? (*Please choose one*).

    a. People are rewarded for learning

    b. People are recognized for learning

    c. Performance appraisals are done which include rewarding for lessons learnt

    d. Other

Explain your response

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23. How is the acquired learning stored? (*Please choose one*).

    a. Mainly through individual memory and notes

    b. Minutes and documents that are easily accessible

    c. Electronic databases, intranets and other such electronic formats

    d. Other

Explain your response

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24. How would you rate the efficiency of dissemination of learning from the board level to other units in the organisation as appropriate? (*Please choose one*).

    a. Very efficient

    b. Moderately efficient

    c. Inefficient

    d. Other

Explain your response

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**Personal data**

25. Name of the organisation

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26. Your current position or designation within the organisation

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27. Your gender ((*Please choose one*).)

a. Female       b. Male


28.  Your age category ((*Please choose one*).)

a. Below 25            b 25-30        c 31-40        d above 40


29. How long has the organisation been in existence? (*Please choose one*).

a. Less than one-year      b. 1-5 years     c. More than 5 years


30. How long have you been with the organisation? (*Please choose one.*)

a. Less than one-year      b. 1-5 years    c. More than 5 years


**Thank you very much for taking part in this study.**


**Kindly fax the responses to**
**Samuel Njenga**
**011-4412370**