Global Learning Partners

One Story of a Challenging–and Successful—Conference

GLP worked on a US government-funded international development initiative with multiple stakeholders to design and facilitate a four-day conference. Nearly 100 participants from across Africa, and from a wide range of government agencies and nonprofit partners were invited. This was a complex conference for many reasons 1) the situation was changing throughout the planning process --new requirements, changes in strategy , funding and changes in the field itself; 2) the real limitations of programs to implement international recommendations, 3) the emotional nature of the programs in which participants worked; 4) the political tensions and demands on conference hosts. Below are four design and facilitation challenges that were handled successfully. As you review these challenges, below, we hope you'll find a few helpful ideas – and come up with many of your own if (when?) you face similar challenges.

1. Too many agendas, and too much content poured into the days. Our approach: Inching toward a learning-centered design and making compromises.

There were many stakeholders in this conference – all actively involved – with competing priorities and a tendency to divvy up the time into. smaller and smaller increments to "get it all in." An extra day was added. GLP was hired to bring a "learning-centered" approach, but that really meant adding some activities to a packed "presenter-centered" agenda. Our hardest work was helping the team to clarify the purpose and use that to prioritize the content and eliminate agenda items that were not directly tied to the purpose. We kept the overall conference purpose statement alive throughout the entire planning process – and transparently presented it to the participants so that we could all hold each other accountable to reaching it.

We worked as active facilitators for weeks before the actual event including facilitating a day long meeting with the hosts, using the Steps of Design. This helped the group to sort through the broad purpose, think through the group of participants and identify achievements (outputs) *before* settling in on specifics for a set of presentations. It helped the group to see the conference as a whole and to check that the primary needs and interests of the group would be met by the collective – without major gaps or overlaps.

We protected a day for small group sessions on various topics relevant to many participants. We kept the design of the sessions just roughly sketched – so that they could easily morph into whatever people felt they needed by day 4. This gave us a place to put the new agenda items that continued to emerge without reverting back to "too much what for the when."

2. Unclear about the needs/interests of the people attending. Our approach: Eliciting, tracking and addressing big issues raised by attendees

We collected, presented, and analyzed pre-conference input from participants. Converting this data (both quantitative and qualitative) into graphics that helped the team to see the needs/interests of the participants, and to use that data to influence the design of the conference.

Presenters skipped the typical "Q and A" and used carefully articulated invitations to elicit questions, concerns, examples and ideas from participants such as:

- *Which of these recommendations are you already implementing in your country program?*
- *What are you grappling with?*
- *What strategies have you tried?*
- *Which of these recommendations do not seem feasible to you and why?*
- *What would you like to plan to shift in the way you are currently monitoring your programs?*
- *What kind of support do you feel you need in order to implement this plan?*

Structured opportunities at the start and end of each half day allowed participants to reflect on what they'd done, and express emerging concerns, ideas or interests. We took notes on the "big picture" issues raised by the group that were difficult to address – but were clearly important to success. This is where our role as facilitators demands diligence, courage, and sensitivity. Each evening, during our debrief with the team, we reflected back what we had heard and underscored the need we felt to both acknowledge these issues, and address them (without providing "easy answers").

We built space into the agenda to attend to emergent issues. On the last day, everyone in the room received back a short synthesized list of these issues and chose which of these they'd like to discuss. This modified open space approach elevated the energy off-the-roof (well, actually, we encouraged the newly-formed groups to wander outside the conference room and sit outside for these rich discussions). We actively encouraged funders, hosts, presenters, consultants to join the conversation – both to share and to listen. In our own small way, we were tipping the normal power dynamic and creating space for collective learning.

3. Complex content that was hard to visualize and concern that dialogue would not be captured. Our approach: Integrating "visual harvesting" as a way to add value to the dialogue.

A graphic harvester visually captured the highlights of the conference as it unfolded. Our three-person facilitation team worked closely together to identify what elements of the proceedings would be most critical and useful moving forward. We planned a variety of creative ways to use the visuals during the course of the conference (not only at the end as a striking complement to the conference report). The use of graphics deepened the dialogue, the collective learning, and the transfer. A few examples of how the graphics were employed are listed below.

- Give people a graphic of the core concepts being promoted in the conference (as a complement to the more detailed computer-generated framework the presenters had used). Pose open questions about the concepts as a way to refresh and deepen what they'd learned in the session on the previous day.

- Invite people to get up from their chairs and walk along the large poster created by the graphic harvester in the moment. Use this as a meaningful and substantive way for them to exchange reflections: *What questions have emerged for you this morning? What has been most useful to you?*
- On the last day of the conference, distribute legal-size paper with copies of the graphic and invite participants to highlight what they most want to remember as they leave this event, and what they want to share with colleagues when they get back home.

4. **Concern that time spent in discussion might be wasted time with "so much to cover." Our approach: Focusing on a concrete "away" piece for individuals as well as teams**

In some contexts, "dialogue" can sound like wasted time. But "action" usually sounds pretty good. Periodically throughout the conference, participants worked in small groups around large round tables. Working with the host presenters, we thought carefully about what would be the most engaging and profitable mix of people at each table for each half day of the conference. (People don't like it if you ask them to move too much–but they always say how valuable it was to work with others–so you have to find the right balance here. Be bold and purposeful.) On the last day we intentionally invited country teams, funders, and consultants to sit in private "hubs" to map out their next steps. We offered a simple graphic to help them organize (and limit!) their ideas. We asked them to create these collaboratively and to note them on large paper so that all could see. We were going to end with a simple gallery walk so everyone could see each other's "transfer intentions" but people were too eager – wanting to state aloud for all to hear, the many ways they planned to take what they'd learned forward beyond the room.