

Forword

Ten years ago, world leaders agreed on an ambitious set of development goals to be reached by 2015. Although progress has been made, the Millennium Development Goals remain elusive for many countries and their citizens. If more rapid progress is to be made in the future, learning from success and failure will be crucial for governments, international organizations, and civil society organizations as they try to improve the livelihoods of their citizens around the world.

By making learning and accountability its two main purposes, evaluation tries to make a contribution to this process. Whereas accountability directs our attention backward, learning requires us to focus on how to improve results in the future. Evaluators have developed an excellent range of rigorous tools and methods to find out what has worked and what has not, and we spend much of our time and resources on the process of gathering evidence and producing knowledge. However, we are far less certain that we have all the tools and methods to help organizations and stakeholders learn from evaluations to improve development results.

The Learning Spiral has been developed to help fill the gap between the creation of knowledge and its application by concerned stakeholders. It combines theoretical approaches with individual, organizational, and governmental learning. It has a sound foundation from both a theoretical and an empirical perspective. The Learning Spiral is grounded in theories that have been developed and tested successfully. At its center is the recognition that learning is a nonlinear and highly contextual process. It requires no less effort to learn from evaluations and to apply knowledge to improve future outcomes than it does to conduct evaluations in the first place.

At the World Bank Group's Independent Evaluation Group, we have further developed and applied the Learning Spiral over the past two years as a tool for learning from evaluations together with our stakeholders all over the world. This book enriches the theoretical basis for the Learning Spiral with practical experience in bringing about change based on evaluation findings.

We have worked with clients to develop structured learning events that have taken us to Nigeria, where we focused on state-level engagement in federal states, as well as to Washington, DC, and Addis Ababa, where stakeholders from 10 African countries exchanged challenges and solutions on public sector reform. As a result of applying the Learning Spiral, we have been able to step further in the direction of complementing our mandate for accountability with learning. Focusing just on the former is like standing on one leg—both, accountability and learning, are needed to run. We believe that evaluations can make a considerable difference in helping our stakeholders understand what works and what does not and it is for that reason that we have started dialogues on how to improve development results through evaluation.

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