

**“We closed our books and put them away.”**  
**Learning Stories from Mozambique – A Critical Reflection**  
**on Communicating about the Reality and Future of Learning**

**Muriel Visser**  
Florida State University

**&**

**Jan Visser**  
Learning Development Institute

Paper presented at the International Conference of the Association  
for Educational Communications and Technology  
held from 22 to 25 October 2003 in Anaheim, CA

October 23, 2003

**Abstract**

Does learning perpetuate existing structures and reality or open the doors to change? What constitutes meaningful learning for people in Mozambique and what implications should the manner in which they communicate this experience have for development interventions? This paper presents and analyzes the learning stories of a selection of women and men from rural Mozambique. The lessons from this qualitative study underscore how learning needs and opportunities as formulated by the target group continue to be at odds with the delivery and formal conceptualization of education. The implications of this conclusion for development interventions are discussed. Critical recommendations are made for an expanded role of communication and media as a vehicle for promoting debate and discussion and for the adoption and implementation of basic ethical guidelines for development interventions.

**1. Learning stories as a tool for understanding**

People’s perceptions of what learning is are often confused and they vary widely. This is not unusual with concepts that are commonly used. Many people would also have great difficulty trying to describe what is, in their view, ‘beauty’ or ‘love.’ Their ideas about these concepts may be as varied as we found them to be about the meaning of learning.

In the context of the research reported on in this paper, we claim that it is important to raise the question of the meaning of learning for at least the following two reasons. In the so-called developed part of the world a whole industry, called education, is based on the

idea that by putting certain conditions and processes in place one can ensure that human beings, particularly members of a new generation, learn. If we don't know what we mean by learning – and many a professional educator has difficulty defining the term – then we are at risk of wasting an important human effort on something of which we may later conclude that we don't really want it. In the parts of the world that we use to refer to as developing nations and regions, the industry of education is less well established and many people who live there are deprived of the opportunity to go to school or to partake in other deliberately designed efforts to help them learn. While part of the international development effort focuses on spreading the industry of schooling to those lesser developed parts of the world, pertinent questions must be raised about what purposes schooling is to serve and if one of those purposes is learning, what that means in the context and in the views of those who will benefit from it.

In this paper we focus particularly on the latter question formulated above. The underlying premises of our research being that learning is essential for human development; that it is possible to put systems and conditions in place that help people find a response to their learning needs; and that not necessarily the school – as most of us know it – is the most appropriate environment to cater for the real development needs of people. We have built our research on earlier work undertaken by the Learning Development Institute's Learning Stories Research Project carried out in the context of that institute's Meaning of Learning (MOL) focus area (Meaning of Learning, n.d.).

Our research is distinct from the earlier research (Y. L. Visser & J. Visser, 2000, October; Visser, J., Visser, Y. L., Amirault, R. J., Genge, C. D., & Miller, V., 2002, April; J. Visser & Y. L. Visser, 2002) in that our analysis pertains to a specific community, located in Northern Mozambique, and seeks to understand the relevance of learning in that particular community. The earlier research was based on learning stories collected from different regions of the world and was focused on elucidating the meaning of learning in general, across contexts. Our aim in carrying out the research was to apply its results to the decision making process concerning international and national development priorities regarding the community we studied.

Learning stories research employs a deliberately broad focus. It thus stands in contrast to much of the habitual educational research, which tends to focus on learning tasks that are narrowly defined in scope and time and that may involve only very specific learning behaviors, usually assumed to be undertaken by isolated individuals. Inquiry based on the learning stories approach typically focuses on the entire human being or on the activity of an entire collaborative entity in a cultural-historical perspective. It thus involves units of analysis whose order of magnitude by far transcends the habitual research perspective. We note that the desirability of redefining the unit of analysis has been raised by others as well. Thus, this desirability has for instance been underlined in the study of socially shared cognitions by Cole (1991). Spector (2001) similarly alludes to the need to change perspectives.

An obvious consequence of the application of the learning stories approach is that one obtains data that represent a formidable level of complexity. Those not familiar with

qualitative research methods may look upon this as a drawback. We argue, however, that depth of insight in phenomena such as human learning depends on both the results of focused investigation into specific aspects of the learning process, such as can often be conducted using quantitative methods, and on equally disciplined processes of inquiry that use qualitative methods because such methods allow a more comprehensive picture to emerge. Much has been written about the usefulness of qualitative methods for such purposes. We have used specifically Sapsford and Jupp's (1996) iterative method for the analysis of unstructured data, and note that other useful methodological considerations regarding this kind of research can be found in Miles and Huberman (1994) and Patton (1990).

## 2. Getting people to talk – an overview of the methodology and other considerations

The study was conducted in the most northern province of Mozambique – Cabo Delgado. This province has a population of less than one million inhabitants and a surface area roughly equivalent to the state of Florida. It is divided into three geographical regions, namely the coastal area where the population lives mainly from fishery, the interior area in the south which is relatively densely populated and very dry and where the population lives off subsistence agriculture and some trade with the neighboring province of Nampula, and the northern area - the Planalto - which borders Tanzania and has a more humid and fertile climate.

A qualitative research approach was used to conduct this study since its objective was to collect in-depth, individual, reflections on the nature and importance of learning from men and women of different ages. A broad interpretation of learning was employed for the purpose of this study. Thus, learning was conceptualized as referring to any experience by which knowledge and skills are acquired that in some way contribute to further understanding or growth by an individual or a community. Respondents were not provided with a specific definition of learning along these lines but – as will be outlined below - care was taken to ensure that the overall line of questioning encouraged a broad conceptualization of learning. The data was collected in the context of an overall broader study of perceptions of the population about health, education and water

### **Sidebar 1: Why dried fish can be bent after all ...**

Marta exudes confidence and a certain degree of defiance by smoking in public. Being to some extent callous and hard appears to be one of the strategies that she has developed for dealing with the obstacles she faces living in a remote area of northern Mozambique. In 1983, almost 20 years ago, Marta completed 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Unable to continue because the nearest school that offered Grade 5 was 15 km away she stayed at home and made her living in the same manner as most other women, by practicing subsistence agriculture. In 2001 Grade 5 was finally introduced in her village. Marta, then aged 39, was one of the first to stand in line to enroll, a line which consisted mostly of young boys and some young girls but no other adults. In a quiet voice she tells of the first classes that she went to and how the children all ridiculed her for trying to learn more. They taunted her repeatedly by chanting: "dried fish can never be bent" which is an old saying in that area referring to the rigidity of thinking and customs as people become older. However, the teacher was on her side and after a few weeks the children were used to having Marta in class. The resistance that Marta continued to face, however, came from the other adults in the village, and particularly from the women. Unable to understand or tolerate her persistence in wanting to study, a rumor was circulated that Marta's only objective was to sleep with the teacher. For the nine months that the school year lasted Marta became something of an outcast in the village and walked, in her words, bent under the weight of what was being said about her. However, that December, Marta was one of the 15 students who successfully completed the first level of primary education and received her diploma. Asked about what people say now that she has successfully completed Grade 5 she says: "Oh, they acknowledge that dried fish can be bent after all."

services. This broader study was conducted with financing by the French Development Agency and aimed at identifying priorities for a development program to be carried out in the Province of Cabo Delgado.

Since access to social and economic resources has an influence on the overall learning context and is often a function of geographical location and urbanization, the learning stories were collected from three sites. The three areas were an urban context, a rural community with some urban influence (located about 6 miles from one of the main towns) and a second rural community located 30 miles from a small town on a road that is inaccessible for part of the year.

In each of these areas the experience of the local population and their understanding of learning were collected through a combination of focus groups and individual interviews. For the purpose of the focus groups men and women were interviewed separately. The support of the local administrative authorities was enlisted to select men and women of a variety of ages who should have varying levels of schooling, including those who had not been to school at all. The focus groups were conducted at a time and location that was selected with the local administrative authorities of the communities involved in the study to be convenient for the general pattern of activities of the community and the type of people involved. The focus group sessions took between one and a half to three hours depending on the number of people who participated and the amount of time needed with translation. Participants were informed about the overall purpose of the study and were told that the objective was to get their views and opinions. They were asked to base their responses on their own experience and feelings and were clearly told that there were no correct answers to these questions. They were also told that their responses would be treated with confidentiality.

The moderation of the focus groups was done by three locally recruited persons with some prior experience in research. They had been trained in interview and facilitation techniques for a period of one week prior to the study. Care was taken to ensure that the moderators spoke the local language. Translation was only employed in situations where multiple languages were used by members of the community or when one of the external researchers (none of whom spoke the local languages) wished to ask additional questions for the purpose of clarification. An interview guide was drawn up for the focus groups and individual interviews.

Between eight and 15 people participated in the various focus groups which covered a total of 63 people. The total number of focus groups amounted to six, two in each of the three communities involved in the study (one group of men and one group of women in each community).

The individual interviews were conducted immediately after each of the focus groups and involved the selection of between one and two people from each of the focus groups. Selection was based in part on the type of information provided during the focus groups by individual respondents. The objective was to identify both men and women who were willing to share their individual life stories and who had (during the focus group)

demonstrated an interest and capacity to formulate their experience and thoughts. Care was taken to ensure that men and women were selected for the individual interviews who had experience with going to school as well as those that had never had access to any kind of formal education. The individual interviews were conducted by the moderators as well as the external researchers. They involved somewhat more translation than the focus groups. Responses to both the focus groups and the interviews were noted down by the moderator and the main researcher who discussed their notes and observations immediately after the sessions ended. In each of the communities sessions were organized at the end of the total research period in which information was presented in an interactive manner on the results of the study and community members were asked to comment upon the results.

The sequence of questioning in the focus groups involved asking respondents to identify as many places and ways in the community where learning took place. As respondents provided this information the places were graphically illustrated on a large piece of white paper using simple drawings. This physical representation aimed at providing a visualization of the responses and at facilitating and guiding the discussion in later stages of focus group discussion. Participants were then asked to describe on the basis of their own experience what learning took place in each of the locations that had been identified and to describe in what ways the learning of boys and girls (or men and women) differed. In the course of these responses, the moderators frequently asked more probing questions to ascertain the exact meaning that was being attached to the concept of learning. Care was taken to avoid leading questions. Respondents were further asked to reflect on differences between past and present learning and on the reasons why these differences existed. For the individual interviews respondents were asked to look back on their life experience and identify what had been the single most important thing they had learnt and why this learning had been important. Respondents who had not been to school were asked to explain what factors had prevented them from having access to school and how they had perceived this. They were also asked to indicate how they felt their life might have been different if they had had the opportunity to go to school. Respondents who had had access to a more formal learning environment were asked what factors had contributed to this and in what way their life was any different from the life of those who had not had a similar opportunity. Finally, in both the focus groups and the individual interviews respondents were given the opportunity to insert additional comments and ask further questions.

### **3. Snapshots in the words of the wise – what the learning stories tell us about reality**

The following section provides an overview of the results of the study. For the purpose of analysis the results of both the focus groups and the individual interviews have been presented under the same headings. These headings cover the experience of the respondents with respect to various issues of learning including how they learn, what constitutes meaningful learning, where learning takes place, how learning is different for boys and girls, what has changed in the nature of learning over time and what kind of learning is really useful to life. These headings together aim at addressing the main research question as presented at the outset of this paper. In addition, four specific

learning stories (sidebars 1 through 4) were selected and are presented in this paper. The purpose of these learning stories is to provide, in the voice of selected respondents, an illustration of meaningful learning.

### 3.1 *How do we learn?*

For both male and female respondents the family home was indicated as being the most important place where learning takes place. The home is “where children first learn to have good ideas and to interact with others.”<sup>1</sup> According to the respondents, both the father and the mother have important, but distinctly different, roles in this respect because mothers teach children how to go about many domestic tasks, how to take care of themselves and how to behave towards others, whereas fathers have the role of decision makers. Learning in the home takes place mainly by example, imitation and through observing the behavior of elder siblings. Many of the kinds of learning that were mentioned by the respondents are essentially utilitarian in nature, involving basic skills that make it possible for children to make a contribution to the daily household routine – without which it would not be possible to ensure the continuity of the household or its survival. Learning also focuses on social skills that allow children to become useful members of the community or to be good. Finally, a further important aspect is learning the skills, tools and interpersonal behaviors to be able to get married and set up a family.

Important differences were highlighted, however, between that which boys and girls learn in the home environment. “Boys learn different things,” was a frequent and very adamant observation, especially by the female respondents. Specifically, the majority of the respondents emphasized that girls learn about domestic tasks from a very young age. They also get increasing levels of responsibility when they are still young. They have a long list of responsibilities including cleaning, going to the fields for gathering food, cutting firewood, taking care of younger siblings, and preparing food. Boys, on the other hand, only start to actively learn when they “need to be ready to go out into the real world.” This is when they learn how to build a house, make traps, build silos for storing food, as well as some activities that may help them in earning a living, such as learning how to make sculptures. Many of these skills are taught with the specific purpose of ensuring that boys can marry and set up their own household.

#### **Sidebar 2: The hats of Magaia**

A single dirt track passes through Magaia. The track is poorly maintained and there are days that not a single vehicle passes through the village of 500 people. During the rainy season the village is almost entirely inaccessible. Almost all the people in Magaia live off subsistence agriculture. Produce is bartered since money is a very rare commodity. The poverty of people is etched on their faces and apparent in the dusty, tired clothes that they wear. Not the babies, however, many of whom wear colorful patchwork hats made of cloth and almost invariably decorated with a label. Closer inspection reveals that while some of the labels carry designer names, others are simply the tickets that can be found on the inside of garments outlining the washing instructions. The hats of Magaia are made by one of the eldest men in the village. He had been given a sewing machine by a missionary who worked in the village many years ago. The missionary taught him how to read and write and how to use and maintain the sewing machine. Today, well over 30 years later, he still places his distinct mark on the area by producing hundreds of hats a year which he will exchange for anything that people can give him. “I prefer money ...” he sighs “... but I always find use for the things that people give me, just like the little patches of cloth that my hats are made of always find their way to my hands.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, unattributed quotes come from anonymous respondents.

The learning that takes place at home forms the basis for further learning at school, in religious places and elsewhere. Whether or not one has access to a formal learning experience is by many, but not all, respondents seen as being a result of the influence of external factors, either in the direct family environment or in the community. The level of individual influence on whether one goes to school, is very minimal. Only a small number of respondents felt that they could themselves take steps to make changes in their lives and the opportunities that it offers.

In summary, learning was for most an activity that starts at home and transcends to other places of learning: “to learn is what gives us life and makes us healthy.” For most respondents learning is a process of imitation and socialization which has a profound influence on what they become later in life. As will be seen below, meaningful learning is not always within reach and its illusiveness means that for many people in the community there is distinct difference between that which they wish to learn and to be and that which reality conditions them to.

### **3.2 Where do we learn?**

The inventory of places where learning takes place provided an interesting insight into the lives of men and women, as well as indications of the kind of power relations that are in place and that influence access to a variety of sources of knowledge. As can be seen from the discussion below, places where we learn were interpreted variously by the respondents as referring to a physical location, a certain source (e.g. a person or a physical object), or a specific kind of event (a meeting, a religious ceremony, etc.).

One of the most striking differences between men and women was in the number of sources of learning and information that were mentioned, with men providing a far more extensive list of places of learning than women. For women it is the home, the school or the adult literacy center, the church or mosque, and occasionally the health center, that constitute the main sources of learning. Other possible daily activities that they are engaged in, such as working in the fields, fetching water, talking to other members of the community, amongst others, were *not* specifically identified as being sources of learning. The male respondents, on the other hand, had a far less institutional interpretation of the concept of learning and of the circumstances in which learning occurs. They identified both a greater number of sources of learning and a greater variety in types of learning. For men almost any activity – institutionalized or otherwise – was mentioned as having an important learning effect. Among the most interesting to note were aspects such as traveling, talking to older men or people from outside of their community, listening to the radio, discussing news, observing activities around their community or in new areas that they visit, holding meetings, and participating in rites for the living and the dead. In addition, the male respondents also mentioned the sources of learning that most of the women identified as important for themselves, including the home, the school, and the church. Men were also very vocal in giving examples of specific moments in which they had learnt things that were important to their lives or that made them think differently. In the rural setting one of the elder men talked with much enthusiasm about the radio program *Uma data na historia* (An event in history) from which he had learnt that

“things change and even if now we don’t believe it, in many years this community may be something totally different.”

Women, while listing a much smaller number of places of learning, differed from men in that they emphasized the importance of continuity and consistency between the different places of learning: “Children can only really be the seeds of new life if the teacher and the parent and the pastor are able to make them understand what is really important in life – respect for others and dedication.” In the view of many women consistency between that which is learnt at home and the other sources of learning is therefore essential. As will be further discussed below, it is in this respect that they expressed negative feelings with regard to some of the changes that have affected their communities in the past years.

Among the things that are learnt at school were some that were rather surprising at first. Cultivating the fields, carrying water, sweeping, cutting wood, building a house for the teacher, were mentioned together with other skills such as learning to read and write.

Clear differences were also apparent between the rural and urban environments with both male and female respondents being more vocal and to a limited extent more optimistic about perspectives for change in the more urbanized settings as compared to the rural areas. They were clear, however, about the very limited role that institutionalized learning played in promoting this kind of change and, for women in particular, a sense of intense frustration was often apparent with the lack of opportunity that even those that had been to school had for making real changes to their lives: “We studied in order to open up our mind. Those who study don’t know how to deal with people. But even those that do study do not manage to get work.” As another respondent put it: “It is true though, that whether you study or not, here in this village everyone has the same kind of house and the same kind of food.”

At the same time, there is the dream of the potential that school could make a difference: “The school is definitely worth more than the home. What we learn at home is only for us to be able to eat, while the school is what should make us better able to deal with life, to find a job, to make money to live better lives.” It is a dream that is not reflected in the reality of what happens in the communities, since, as will be discussed below, for almost all respondents it is clear that even those members of the community who went to school are not able to change their lives in any significant manner.

### ***3.3 What role does learning really have in life?***

As was mentioned before, learning was clearly seen as a lifelong activity by respondents in the three locations that were covered by this study. In the words of one of the elderly women in the peri-urban setting: “At school when a student comes and does not feel well, the teacher may send the student to the hospital. But education begins at home. It may be that the parents will be the first to see that the child is sick. We can never learn only at school. No, first we learn at home and then we increase our knowledge at school and in other places. Even us, elderly women, we like to learn and if there were a school here now we would go there.”



The potential benefits of learning were highlighted in many ways by the different respondents. “If girls could go to school they would maybe marry later and not so many babies would die prematurely,” was the comment of one of the women. She continued to highlight that in practice “we are unable to see any difference between those that study and those that don’t because girls do not finish school. And even if they go to school they only learn to become more snobbish but end up like all of us.” A group of men was also adamant in saying that: “this community is backward because we did not study. We only know how to cultivate the fields and sweep our yards, we don’t have any other possibilities.”

Many examples were also given of the learning of practical skills and how this had changed the lives of specific individuals. It was interesting to note in this respect that some respondents were very conscious of the individual and social capital that specific knowledge and skills can represent and for that reason were unwilling to share what they knew, for fear of going out of business or becoming one of the many. A local health worker in the rural setting, for example, was seeing up to 50 patients per day and complaining about how much work he had. When asked why he did not teach someone else his trade, or recruit an assistant he said: “If I share what I know then I will no longer be who I am and people will not need me.”

For many respondents, the learning that would really make a difference is related to skills that would allow them to earn a living or make their lives more comfortable. The women wanted to learn about health and nutrition but also how to make clothes. When discussing this issue they would highlight specific examples of people in their own environment who had such skills and were able to make their lives more bearable: “Since the traditional midwife has received some training she is able to ask people to pay for her services and now she can send her children to school in Chiure [a larger town nearby].” The men indicated that they wanted to learn many of the skills that missionaries used to teach during colonial times, such as carpentry and metalwork, sewing shoes, making hats, etc.

From the interviews it emerged that in reality, and despite some accounts to the contrary, women have less access to opportunities for learning. Often this is because of social and religious factors. As one woman said: “Nobody wants to help us learn. We are women and we are told that what we need to do is get married.” A strong force of social repression or conditioning was evident in these communities so that women who did go to school were reminded, on countless occasions that even though they went to school their lives were no different. The story in sidebar 3 illustrates this clearly. A further problem is that because there are only so few women who go to school,

**Sidebar 3: “You end up at home like everyone else”**

Elsa, Julieta and Maria are all over sixty. At various moments in their lives they had the opportunity to go to school but other factors intervened. “Before independence (in 1975) ...” says Elsa, “... there was the colonizer. Sometimes they would come to recruit girls from the village but our parents would tell us to hide in the closet or run out to the fields so we could not be found. Then in 1975 Frelimo brought us independence and with it the opportunity to go to adult literacy classes. But Frelimo soon brought us the war and so we never did get a chance to do more than one or two years of schooling. Now we are old, but if we were given the opportunity we would still want to learn, although the truth of the matter is that whether you study or not in this village, if you are a woman, you end up at home like everyone else.”

and because those that go to school don't have a chance to do any better in life, there are also no role models that would encourage people to think differently.

There is a clear conflict between what respondents describe as the potential benefits of learning – particularly in a school context - and the reality in communities. It was interesting to note that respondents would on the one hand claim that if everyone could go to school then life would be better while at the same time clearly stating that whatever people did, and even if they went to school, only very few ended up being different from the rest. This conflict was more apparent in the rural setting than in the urban, possibly because the chances of achieving a reasonable level of education are even more elusive there.<sup>2</sup>

So while learning is seen as a lifelong activity and as having the potential to change individuals and communities in many ways, many examples highlighted that this potential goes unrealized for the vast majority of people, and particularly for women. All these examples illustrate that the potential benefits of learning range from issues related to making a better living to improving one's health. The potential of learning lies in both its benefits to the community as a whole as well as to the lives of individuals.

### ***3.4 What learning used to be and how it is today***

Of the various frustrations with the limitations of their environment that respondents expressed at different moments during the interviews, one of the most frequent and intense ones was the frustration with the fact that learning was not perceived as being as effective and useful as it had been in the past: “Today, it takes a long time for our children to learn anything at all when they go to the church... and the pastor keeps them for a long time because he says they are not ready.” Or, as indicated by another respondent: “Many people who participate in meetings of the (political) party do not obey what the party wants them to do, it is not as it was before when people did what they were told.” In many ways, these changes are presented as being a reflection of a greater sense of disconnection from and disorganization within the community, with children and adults feeling that they have no collective obligation or responsibility and that they can basically do as they please: “The big difference is that today people see no purpose in participating. They try to talk about problems but it does not make a difference. What is necessary is to have a certain degree of organization within the village – but where to get it from?”

As a result of these changes, the learning that does take place does not bring the benefits that it would have done in other times: “There is a big difference between the past and

---

<sup>2</sup> Less than half of the children in the school-age in Cabo Delgado go to school and many schools only teach up to grade 3 or 4. Because of the poor quality of education and the lack of opportunities to apply what they learn many children end up relapsing into illiteracy even when they have been to school for a few years. Cabo Delgado also has the lowest indices of enrollment for girls in the country - 38% in grade 1 and 32% in grade 5 (MINED, 2001).

today. Before, students in second grade already had good notions of reading and writing. Now, even those that complete grade five do not know how to read or write. The big difference is that now teachers do not teach the ‘abc’ and that students are not able to learn anything else.”

The frustration expressed extends to the fact that people have, particularly in the rural areas no ways to voice their concerns or to get support in solving problems. In the words of one of the respondents: “We wanted to change our community, so we used our own resources to build these three classrooms. We built a house for the teacher, but a teacher has never been sent here. We have nowhere to go to ask for help.” In another community, the problem was that the teachers that had been placed in the school were not coming to teach their classes and that repeated complaints had made no difference. In more than one sense these communities expressed their difficulty as one of having been abandoned without the resources they need to make changes.

### **3.5 What it means to learn**

As was outlined above, learning has an important role in many aspects of day-to-day life. During the individual interviews respondents were asked to reflect on what had been the most meaningful learning experience in their lives. For every one of the female respondents, independently of whether they had been to school or not, it was learning to cultivate the land that was the most important learning experience: “Learning to work in the *machamba* is what keeps us going.” So even for women who had gone to school their most useful learning experience was not in any way related to the formal school environment.

Asked to qualify their answer, the women responded that working the land was the most meaningful experience because it is an activity that one can also fall back on in times of need and crisis. It was interesting to note the uniformity of responses among female respondents, compared to the males who gave a variety of responses. For the male respondents, school *was* sometimes mentioned as having made somewhat of a difference because they could get employment as seasonal labor although such opportunities are increasingly scarce<sup>3</sup>. Other important learning experiences mentioned by men were related to skills such as riding a bicycle, which allowed them to transport goods to other places, or learning to fish, doing carpentry work and making baskets.

#### **Sidebar 4: “Dreams have taught me everything”**

Learning has various dimensions and various realities for people in northern Mozambique. The local witch doctor, a woman of about fifty, sees some 20 to 25 people a day in her “hospital” and tells us that she decides what treatment people need on the basis of what the spirits tell her in her dreams. To illustrate this she calls on three patients and describes in detail what symptoms each of them had when they first came to see her and how she treated them. Each of these patients then testifies to how much better they feel. Will she teach others, though, what she knows? “Yes,” she replies “they will learn a lot about potions, and how to deal with people who lack blood or water in their body, and how to get rid of bad spirits. However, they will never be as good as I am because they will not be able to dream.”

---

<sup>3</sup> Since many of the government-owned companies and industries started being privatized in 1994 many companies have gone bankrupt or out of business. As a result there are far less opportunities for employment now than there were 10-15 years ago.

The similarity between that which men and women respectively cite as the most important thing they learnt lies in the fact that it relates to something that can produce either income or forms of sustenance. None of the most important learning experiences mentioned by the respondents had been learnt at school. However, the dream of what the school could offer was again apparent when respondents were asked what they would like to learn. Their responses covered many of the practical skills mentioned above (sewing, carpentry, etc.) as well as learning to read and write and for many respondents it is the school that should be giving them these opportunities. References to what the school “used to be” were again frequent here.

### **3.6 What learning makes a difference and how**

For both male and female respondents it is learning that allows one to actively change one’s life and destiny in a meaningful way that constitutes meaningful learning. As was mentioned above, this often relates to practical skills that allow people to earn money or improve their resource base. In the words of some of the respondents: “to learn is to grow”, and “if we could learn more we would have better seeds for life.”

Knowledge with regard to health and life-skills in general also figured prominently on the list of priorities for women. In particular women emphasized that they would like to know more practical techniques that will allow them to address basic health problems of their children given that health care provision is often absent or inaccessible to them.

## **4. So, where does this all lead us?**

### **4.1 Some overall conclusions**

The focus groups and interviews, as well as the learning stories presented above, provide a detailed – although very context specific – account of the lives of these men and women in northern Mozambique. Many of the stories are specific to a person or to a small group of people. Nevertheless, by talking to both men and women in different settings a number of common themes and issues emerged, which we will attempt to summarize below. These themes and issues are combined with a further reflection on the implications of these conclusions for development interventions.

- a) The study underscored that individuals and communities in the three areas studied adhere to a broad and comprehensive definition of learning. Learning is seen as a lifelong engagement. The primary concern of respondents is with learning that can in some way improve their livelihood and the future of their children, but learning was also considered important for the purposes of socialization and for ensuring a sense of cohesiveness and organization within the community. Women to some extent expressed a narrower and a somewhat more “institutionalized” vision of learning than men, possibly because they receive less encouragement to learn and do not have access to certain means of learning (e.g. the radio, which is

- under the control of the men, who often carry the radio with them when they leave the house, or a means of transport such as a bicycle, which is, if one is lucky enough to have one, a male possession).
- b) Within this broad conceptualization of learning by these individuals and communities, the school is seen as an extension of the learning that starts at home and continues throughout life in many different places within communities.
  - c) The responses, however, highlighted a clear schism between the reality that school only plays a very limited role in what is important to the life of communities and the myth that if one goes to school life will become better. This contrast is expressed in the numerous references to the school as a mythically powerful instrument for solving the problems of the community, while these same respondents conclude that those who went to school really have no different opportunities than those that did not go.
  - d) This broad and comprehensive definition of learning by individuals and communities in the area that was studied stands in stark contrast to the narrow school-based focus of most traditional development interventions. These interventions largely adhere to an academic and institutionalized view of learning. They do not take into account the integrated and comprehensive nature of learning that, as this study evidenced, exists within communities. They also do not adequately address the need for complementarity with these other dimensions of learning. And finally, interventions generally do not address the specific learning-related needs and priorities of these communities. As a result, one is left with the distinct feeling that if development interventions continue along the current lines – with a strong focus on a standardized and institutionalized solution - much of the effort, the time and the resources that are being directed to them will be of no major consequence to the kind of changes that communities themselves consider to be important.
  - e) The gap between the potential that education is thought to have and the reality that schools only play a relatively minor role in the total learning process requires a drastic rethinking of what learning means. Such rethinking is particularly important at a participatory level. It requires involving individuals and communities – who as this study demonstrated are capable of a sophisticated and comprehensive level of observation and analysis – in the definition of modalities and interventions that promote learning in a much broader sense. Above all, it means that learning priorities as defined by communities should form the basis for decisions about how to promote learning.
  - f) We argue that the gap indicated above also implies that there is a set of basic conditions that a school will need to meet if it is to be at all effective in contributing to meaningful learning. These basic conditions are partly context-specific but could include, amongst others:
    - a. Ensuring that the key learning goals of the school are defined on the basis of context-specific priorities and needs. The implication of this is, of course, that teachers should be capable of identifying and addressing these needs, which in turn means a heavier investment in training of innovative, community-oriented teachers. The already much debated tension between quality and quantity is evident here.

- b. Measuring of the learning outcomes of the school not just on the basis of very specific, abstract skills and abilities, but primarily in terms of the contribution to these overall learning goals.
- c. Conceiving of the school as a place where people become versed in interacting with real-life problems and acquire the ability to reflect on – and thus improve while continuing to learn throughout their lives – their own learning.
- g) It would appear, too, that channels of communication need to exist and/or be promoted and developed for the social reflection and discussion on learning. These channels need to ensure an equitable participation of all the stakeholders in development interventions and imply a basic principle of respect on the part of development workers for the key role that individuals and communities should play in promoting and developing learning. In other words, individuals and communities need to have the space and opportunity to reflect on what learning means to them. This should be an incremental process of assessment, reflection on the implications of this assessment, experimentation with change and further assessment. As the responses given in this study indicate, this process of can involve both interpersonal and community-based forms of communication as well as mass media.
- h) Furthermore, in order to effectively address and promote this process of rethinking learning, policy makers and development workers will need to accept that a single formula for addressing learning needs in communities will not exist. The current state of affairs in much development work is one of considerable cynicism. While it is recognized that the solutions that are being offered are inadequate, in the absence of clear and simple alternatives that development agencies can manage, the age-old formulas for addressing learning are being maintained.

#### ***4.2 Will dried fish always bend if given the chance? What will need to change.***

Many of the suggestions offered above have in one form or the other also emerged from previous processes of reflection on the meaning of learning and the assumed role of the school in creating better opportunities and a better future for communities. The key question that needs to be asked, therefore, is what really needs to change. From our perspective the answer lies in a commitment on the part of persons involved in development work to true dialogue and to context-specific end goals that are not influenced by the politics of development organizations but that are formulated on the basis of needs of individual communities as seen by them. This study suggests that unless such basic premises are met, many development interventions will achieve far less than they potentially could. In fact, their effect to some extent appears to be to enhance the level of frustration of communities who are very aware of what they need but cannot achieve it with the means and strategies that are currently available to them. Ultimately, therefore, those involved in development work will need to let ethical principles of partnership and dialogue guide processes of joint decision making on what needs to be changed and why. Given this statement it would appear that, the metaphor of dried fish quoted above applies not only to individuals within communities – i.e. what are

traditionally known as the beneficiaries – but rather also to development workers and their approach to change.

## References

- Cole, M. (1991). Conclusion. In L. B. Resnick, J. M. Levine & S. D. Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on socially shared cognition* (pp. 398-417). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Meaning of Learning (n.d.). *Website of the Meaning of Learning project* [Online]. Available <http://www.learndev.org/MoL.html> [2002, November 1].
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis - An expanded sourcebook*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California.
- MINED (2001). *Levantamento Estatística 3 de Março – ano 2001*. Ministério de Educação. Maputo, Mozambique.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990) *Qualitative data analysis and research methods*. Sage Publications, Newbury Park, California.
- Sapsford, R. & Jupp, V. (1996). *Data collection and analysis*. Sage Publications, London.
- Spector, J. M. (2001). Philosophical implications for the design of instruction. *Instructional Science*, 29, 381-402.
- Visser, J., & Visser, Y. L. (2002). Undefined learning: Implications for instructional designers and educational technologists. *Educational Technology*, 42(2), 15-20.
- Visser, J., Visser, Y. L., Amirault, R. J., Genge, C. D. & Miller, V. (2002, April) *Second order learning stories*. Paper presented by at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), New Orleans, Louisiana, April 1–5, 2002.
- Visser, Y. L., & Visser, J. (2000, October). *The learning stories project*. Paper presented at the International Conference of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology, Denver, CO.