



THE PROJECT CYCLE: A TEACHING MODULE

This module is adapted from the chapters on the Project Cycle in “How to Build A Good Small NGO” from the www.networklearning.org website. Adaptation by Maeve Moynihan.

ABOUT THIS TEACHING MODULE

FOR WHOM? To run this module you need some experience with running projects and teaching groups. You need from 12 to 25 students. Fewer students means that there is little experience within the group. Any more and individuals will not be contributing fully. It is hoped that your students have practical experience working in development projects. If none of them know anything much you could bring in an experienced colleague to contribute to the discussions.

WHERE? You need a room big enough for holding plenaries and working groups – you need room for three or four groups of six to eight people working in different corners. Try to arrange things so that students sit in groups all the time. For plenary sessions they should only have to turn their chairs around to face the trainer.

HOW LONG? We estimate that this module would take about 15 –16 hours of direct teaching. From the start up to and including the plan to collect information (lesson five) is about 5 hours. From Lesson six, good colleagues, up to and including monitoring is about 5-6 hours, And Implementation to the end takes 5 hours. So this is a three-day module unless the Trainer wants to add or subtract.

What else? You will need teaching materials – a blackboard or whiteboard or big sheets of paper, chalk, pens etc.

Groups? Before you start, work out who will be in which group. You want groups of five to eight people. Spread the expertise through the groups.

OBJECTIVES OF THE TEACHING MODULE

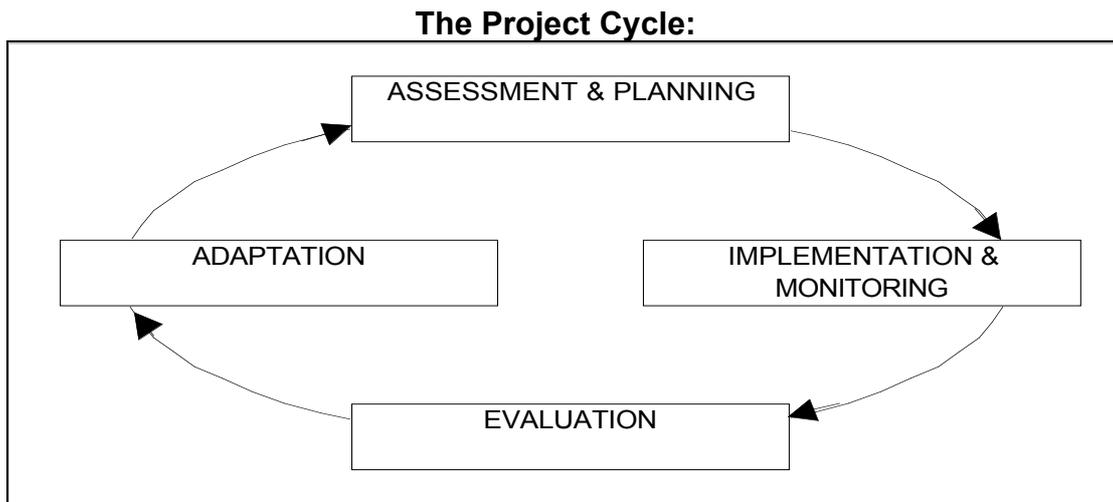
By the end of the Module, students should be able to do the following:

- 1) Explain why the Project Cycle has that name – that it involves a number of events that bring the NGO back to where it began. And then it starts the cycle again. Identify where in the project cycle are – planning, implementation and evaluation;
- 2) List what is needed to make a good plan – good objectives, good information, good colleagues, community involvement, transparency, a knowledge of best practice, action plans financing and monitoring;
- 3) List some tools for collecting essential information;
- 4) Explain what an NGO needs in personnel before it starts a project;
- 5) Describe why and how the community should be involved throughout;
- 6) Define transparency & Best Practice and give a couple of examples;
- 7) Explain why planning includes action plans;
- 8) Define monitoring and give a couple of examples;
- 9) List a few implementation problems and describe how to solve them;
- 10) Define evaluation; name and explain some criteria for evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Lesson One: INTRODUCTION

PLENARY: You, the Trainer, sort the students into their groups. Then ask them if they know or use the Project Cycle. What is it? You put a diagram of the Project Cycle on the wall. You bring the experiences of the students together and link them to the diagram of the Project Cycle. Then you explain the Project Cycle to clarify and fill in gaps in their knowledge.



Note for the trainer: Make sure the following points are clear: the Project Cycle involves a series of events – planning, implementation and evaluation – that brings the NGO back to where it began. Then the NGO uses the evaluation results to improve their plans. Then it starts the cycle again. Identify where in the project cycle are – planning, implementation and evaluation. The Project Cycle is more a way of seeing the world than anything else. Using it, the NGO starts to see life and work as cycles rather than a straight path towards the future.

1.2 You introduce the Case Study by reading out the following:

“You all belong to a small national NGO in a African country. You are based in a town called Luarlila. Some of you were working overseas or with an International NGO when the country went into a period of civil war, with killing, burning of villages etc. When peace was restored you all returned and started the NGO. Each working group is the Management Group of the NGO, which has the main purpose of reconstructing houses, since there were many displaced people and returnees with no proper housing”.

Tell them that each group, as the Management Group of this NGO, has to plan its first Project Cycle.

1.3 Lesson Two: The PLANNING STAGE

PLENARY: You introduce the Planning stage and show how it relates to the whole project cycle. Then ask the whole group: *“What do you need to plan well?”*

List answers on the board or sheet of paper: ensure that you end up with the following, and other good points. Pin it on the wall.

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A GOOD PLAN WILL HAVE, OR BE BASED ON:

- 1.3.1. GOOD OBJECTIVES
- 1.3.2. GOOD INFORMATION
- 1.3.3. GOOD COLLEAGUES
- 1.3.4. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT
- 1.3.5. TRANSPARENCY
- 1.3.6. BEST PRACTICE
- 1.3.7. DETAILED ACTION PLANS FOR ACTIVITIES
- 1.3.7. FINANCING
- 1.3.8. MONITORING

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1.3.1 **Lesson Three: GOOD OBJECTIVES**

PLENARY: Ask the group what makes good objectives. Make sure that the group is clear that objectives need to be measurable, do-able and relevant.

Read out: *“The vision of our NGO working in Luarlila is to improve the quality of life of the people through building and infrastructure projects. In Luarlila, the Goal (the long distance vision) was to enable the community to resume normal life through rebuilding the houses and infrastructure, Coming down to a more specific scale, there were three main objectives – that in two districts:*

- a. *rainproof housing would be ensured for all by the start of the rainy season;*
- b. *basic infrastructure would be restored to an acceptable standard;*
- c. *the communities would be involved in planning, implementation and monitoring, so that they would see the project as their own”.*

PLENARY: What do the students think of these Goals and Objectives? Do they fit with each other? Are they measurable, do-able and relevant?

Are the objectives going to inspire the NGO?

Can these objectives be developed into realistic plans and activities assigned to named people?

1.3.2 **Lesson Four: GOOD INFORMATION**

PLENARY: Tell the students that as members of the Luarila NGO they need good information. What do they need to know? Give the students five minutes to make notes, so that slow students can contribute. Then ask them to make suggestions. Start making a list.

Note for the trainer: try to cover the following items: good information about the beneficiaries // the extent of homelessness // siting // family sizes and past overcrowding // possible materials, their costs and ecological impact // beneficiary savings and ability to make money or muscle contributions // how the NGO decides on house size – what was there before, what people want in the future, what the NGO can afford // the point of view of the beneficiary at each point // whether funding is available // aspects of your own culture that need consideration.

Lesson Five: TOOLS FOR COLLECTING INFORMATION

see note 1 at end of document

PLENARY: Ask: what tools might you use to get the information you need? Use the experience among the students and fill in the gaps, covering:

- **A Needs Assessment or a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA):** here a team from the NGO and other disciplines goes and spends a week with the beneficiaries. But if the beneficiaries are nearby, living in shanty-towns or in a refugee camp, you can build an NA or PRA into routine NGO activities, with perhaps a pair of workers spending an afternoon a week visiting a neighbourhood and gathering information in an organised way. Then, your NGO has good information for future decisions.
- **Get information from experts outside your NGO.** No NGO has complete expertise. Needs Assessments can be done in partnership with other experts. These may be people working in Government offices or private enterprises. You might want to involve an expert on micro-enterprises; you can talk to the local health workers.
- **Talk to beneficiaries.** And make sure that what they say is taken seriously. Children over seven, people with psychiatric problems, even special education/"mentally handicapped" people may still be able to talk. Ask them in a careful and respectful way, "what are your problems?" "what kind of place do you want to live in and why?" they will have a point of view worth hearing.

Lesson Six: PLANS TO COLLECT INFORMATION

GROUP WORK: each group acts as the Luarlila Management Group. Each has a small budget and two weeks. Ask them to identify the information they need, writing with very specific questions, then design the steps they will take to collect information.

PLENARY: Each group presents to the plenary. At an appropriate moment bring in...

WHAT LUARLILA DID IN FACT:

Read out: *"Our first step was a Participatory Rural Appraisal. We needed to find out what should be done first in the situation that existed. We formed two teams, each having four local experts – an economist, a rural development specialist, a nutritionist/primary health care expert and a sociologist. The teams were given a one-week training in Participatory Rural Appraisal. Each team was then assigned a District for which, after the PRA, they would have to draft a reintegration and development plan – two Districts in all.*

After the Participatory Rural Appraisal, there was a lot of planning and preparation needed before the implementation could start. Two Community Development Plans were made from the PRAs, and were validated by the two populations. The PRAs had found that in both Districts the needs were for housing, followed by basic infrastructure like water supply, basic health facilities and some primary schools. We were surprised at how strongly the two populations wanted schools for their children".

1.3.3 Lesson Seven: GOOD COLLEAGUES

PLENARY: Introduce the issue: some very small NGOs start projects. But you need some capacity to have a chance of success. How many people, with what kinds of qualities or training, do you need to start a good project?

Note for the trainer: make sure you cover the following points. You need at least // someone to inspire and lead // someone who belongs to the beneficiary group or at least speaks their language and understands their situation (think of the elderly, women, ethnic minorities) // someone who understands money and can keep honest accounts // at least one person who can organise activities – for example organise a three-day trip out to the villages.

1.3.4 Lesson Eight: COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

PLENARY: Why do projects need community involvement? Bring together the expertise in the students and then fill in the gaps

Note for the trainer: make sure you cover the following points. You need // community involvement because // you need activities to continue after your NGO leaves. If the community feels the project belongs to them, they will continue to e.g. collect money for water so that the pump can be repaired // Nobody has the right to impose solutions on other people when they have not been consulted // the community has knowledge that “experts” do not have and can suggest better interventions.

GROUP EXERCISE:

Read out: *“Our next step was to involve the Community as Active Partners. In one of the Districts there was an active District Development Committee ready to work with us. We wanted to give this committee support, help it learn by doing, and so become more capable. However in the other District the Committee was heavily controlled by the chief and his family. It was clear that they would try to control who benefited from new housing and the sales from any water supply. Village and District Committees are elected but are mainly men from families of traditional chiefs”.*

So how would each group deal with this problem?

PLENARY: each group presents what it would do.

Note for the trainer: make sure the following points are covered // who has the right to “represent” whom? // If a chief is elected, should that not be good enough for outsiders? Maybe, chiefs who line their own pockets will then have resources to look after their people?

At an appropriate moment, introduce what they did in Luarlila:

“This problem of an undemocratic committee was addressed in the following way: Both Development Committees were told that, if they wanted the project in their district, they would need to form a Reconstruction Sub-Committee that could make decisions. The numbers, gender and ethnic background of the members were defined in advance, and the sub-committee members were warned that they were not allowed to benefit themselves from the project. Ways of settling disagreements were also worked out in advance”.

1.3.5 Lesson Nine: TRANSPARENCY

PLENARY: as trainer, you make sure that everyone understands what transparency means (it means you can see through what is going on, like you see through glass) // why an NGO needs transparency – it ensures that beneficiaries and funders know what is happening with money etc and have confidence in the NGO;

GROUP EXERCISE: If Luarlila wants transparency, it needs to agree on what kinds of people will benefit from the housing project. So decide this before any names are mentioned and before you start work. You should decide on what kind of people should contribute money or hours of work. You decide that one group to benefit should be those that are “vulnerable”. Who would you classify as “vulnerable” in your part of the world? How would you decide who were the poor (comparatively) in your villages?

PLENARY: The groups present their findings. At an appropriate moment, bring in what they did in Luarlila:

“Our next step was to try to build Transparency in the following ways before work started: both sub-committees met with the NGO to agree on who was to receive extra benefit from the project, either in the form of help with the labour of house reconstruction or by a reduction in their payments. The two selection criteria, vulnerability and poverty, were agreed on and defined. For example, women-headed households were classified as vulnerable. The sub-committees decided on which families were considered “poor”. They use an exercise; names of village families were written in letters and symbols on cards. The cards were considered in turn by the committee and sorted into three piles, “rich” “medium and “poor”. At first, almost everyone was considered “poor” and the committee had to re-think. The criteria and names were written down and displayed in the two communities”.

PLENARY DISCUSSION: The groups present their plans. Do they feel they are doing as well as Luarlila?

1.3.6 Lesson Ten: BEST PRACTICE

PLENARY: Ask the students, what is Best Practice in the students’ own fields? Why is it important? Ask each student to write down one aspect of Best Practice that he would try to ensure in a future project. Make sure students realise that it is not the most expensive practices but the best given current resources.

Read out what Luarlila did:

“We had ensured that Best Practice was built into the plans: This was done by following certain principles:

- *We used local technologies so that people knew how to construct their own houses and keep them repaired.*
- *We tried to be sensible about local resources, to avoid a negative environmental impact. We used a house design that did not involve too much local wood; we did not want to see all the surrounding trees cut down. We were also very careful about latrine siting etc.*
- *We found local people for the critical stages of beneficiary identification and mobilisation, and hired technical expertise from outside”.*

1.3.7 Lesson Eleven: DETAILED ACTION PLANS FOR ACTIVITIES

PLENARY: Ask students why detailed action plans are needed: here is an example which the trainer can write up big and put on the wall. Ask one of the students to explain it to the others:

Beneficiary families	Contract agreed on (signing with 2 committee members)	Regular visits re building & contributions. Situation at 01-06-02	Regular visits re building & contributions Situation at 01-12-02	Regular visits re building & contributions Situation at 01-06-03
Greens in Sig Village Browns in Sig Village Blacks in South Sig Etc.	Done – \$50 + 35 hrs work Done – \$20 + no work Still in negotiation	Good progress		
Pali Village				
Nandi Village				

If the subject seems well understood, the Trainer could move on. If there a problem the students could be asked to work in groups and make a plan outline: You might want an Action Plan to cover the last six months of the project and afterwards: the sub-committee needs to find volunteers in the community to help with jobs that will keep project activities going. This includes the school, the pump, and possibly a health facility.

1.3.8 Lesson Twelve: SOURCES OF FUNDING

PLENARY: The issue of funding is not covered here (see note 2 at the end of this document). However, if you do not have a good chance of funding, do not start talking to communities.

In the case of Luella, a couple of you were working previously for an International NGO. They are ready to fund a reconstruction project if the plan is of good quality. Any objections to this?

Note for the trainer: if the students make no objections, tell them that the decision to accept money from the International NGO will lead to problems down the road.

1.3.9 Lesson Thirteen: MONITORING

PLENARY: As Trainer, you ask the following questions, pull together the expertise in the group, and fill in the gaps:

Why do we need to monitor? Because, once we start the work, we need to know how well we are doing with our plan.

When? We plan the monitoring as part of the planning stage.

Who does it? Here is one way to ensure that monitoring is effective: involve the people you are working with and who will benefit from the project. They can help you monitor the progress, based on the indicators that you have identified together. This is called participatory monitoring. Just as in Participatory Rural Appraisal,

people who cannot read or write can nevertheless count and tally, so they can monitor and keep records.

What are indicators? You can break down some of the objectives and activities into small representative targets or indicators. An indicator is something that points the way, or indicates. If the activities selected as indicators are carried out well, then probably other things are proceeding well also. Each indicator has to be measurable, achievable, and relevant. For example, during the project, one indicator could be the rough percentage of village adults who come to meetings. Are you happy if it goes up, stays roughly the same or goes down over time?

Action Plans provide indicators. Look at the example above. As it gets filled in, it tells you how well the project is doing in –what? Can you see information being collected that could be an indicator?

What should we spend on monitoring? Monitoring is one of the most important management tools. It may take up to 5% of the budget.

What do we do with the results? If the information gathered does not reach the managers, or if managers do not use it, then time, money and effort will have been wasted.

GROUP WORK: each group decides how they will organise the monitoring and selects three indicators that they would follow.

PRESENTATION: the groups present their conclusions to the plenary. At an appropriate moment, bring in what they did in Luarlila:

“We then planned the monitoring. This was done in a meeting between our NGO and the two Reconstruction Sub-committees. A number of areas were discussed including:

- *How will we know if we are reaching the vulnerable groups?*
- *What will the community want to see as a sign of progress?*
- *What can the sub-committees do to keep the project activities going when the money stops and the professionals leave?*

Out of this discussion we agreed on a number of indicators, some of which were suggested by committee members. They included:

- *A month after implementation starts, a group will visit each district to check that all the vulnerable and poor families are truly included;*
- *That six months after the school is open a majority of the children will be attending regularly.*

The Reconstruction Sub-committee accepted responsibility for collecting essential information, and forms were drawn up to help them. It was agreed that supervision of the monitoring would be done by our NGO”.

2. The IMPLEMENTATION STAGE

2.1 Lesson Fourteen: IMPLEMENTING

PLENARY: Show the students where the implementation stage fits with the Project Cycle diagram on the wall. Tell the plenary that implementation can be relatively easy if you have done the planning well – and if you are lucky. Some things are bound to go wrong. Ask, what are the most common problems during implementation?

At an appropriate moment read out what went wrong in Luarlila:

“Because we were working after a war in which our reserves had disappeared, we were dependent on one donor, the International NGO. This is never good and in fact it took longer than necessary to approve the financing. This was mainly because the woman responsible for Africa got pregnant with complications. So the start of work was delayed for four months and one of the best NGO workers got bored, found a better-paid job and left”.

Note for the Trainer: make sure you cover: delayed financing // delayed supplies // sickness among the workers // bad weather.

Tell them, planning should try to take all these possible pitfalls into account. And when problems happen, NGOs have to be inventive in finding solutions. But sometimes there is nothing that can be done. Ask the students, what could they have done in Luarlila to prevent or solve these problems?

2.2 Lesson Fifteen: MORE PROBLEM SOLVING IN IMPLEMENTING

PLENARY:

Read out to the students: *“Our next step was Implementation as finally the work began. Our project had two major types of activities:*

- The first group of works were houses which to a large extent the beneficiaries could rebuild themselves or with some help from a skilled builder. The responsibility for construction lay almost entirely with the owner of the house; he/she made the bricks, collected the sand, did all the unskilled labour etc.; our NGO was only responsible for delivering building materials like cement and roofing and collecting a subsidised amount from each household*
- The second group of works were those that needed a contractor, and these were the facilities for each community – a water supply plus reconstruction of the health post and the primary school. A contractor did the work. During implementation, a number of problems arose.*
- Small amounts of cement were needed during an early stage of construction, and our NGO had been assigned an amount from a shipment. However, this quota got diverted to a Government project. Construction had to stop.*
- One sub-committee became very de-motivated. A rumour went round that our NGO had embezzled the funds.*
- A further problem was the optimism of the community. Each family had either to pay a small amount to the project, or instead, help one of the vulnerable families with their house building. People volunteered to do this but many failed to put in the hours.*

Because of these delays, the final work on the houses went on into the rainy season; extra constructors had to be found and paid so that all the roofs were put on in time. The project ran three months over the time planned and used up all the contingency budget line”.

GROUP WORK: How would the group solve these three problems?

PLENARY: Each group presents their plan. Then read in the Luarlila plan and discuss which groups has a plan as good as or better than them:

- *“The small amounts of cement needed got diverted to a Government project. Finding alternative sources took time.*
- *Demotivation and the rumour that our NGO had embezzled the funds: Morale was kept up by frequent visits. Local leaders were invited to inspect the accounts.*
- *Families failing to put in the hours of work they had promised: three-quarters of the way through, there was an emergency meeting with the defaulters. They were given a deadline for completing the promised work – or their own house would have no roofing”.*

3. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

3.1 *Lesson Sixteen:* BACK TO MONITORING

PLENARY: remind the students that they looked at how monitoring was part of the planning stage. Ask each of them to write down a definition of monitoring and go round the room. Check that most have written reasonable definitions: if not, write one up: **To monitor means constantly to check how things are going, comparing actual progress to what was planned. In other words, how well are you faring on your journey?**

Ask the students to check the indicators they chose to monitor. Are they still happy with them?

3.2 *Lesson Seventeen:* EVALUATION

PLENARY: Ask the students if they are clear on the difference between monitoring and evaluation. Pull what they know together and then make sure they understand that:

Monitoring looks at whether objectives are being achieved – how far the project has come on the road it chose.

Evaluation asks the same question, but also stands back and looks at the longer-term objectives – is the project on the right road? Is your project going to change the problem?

They will probably have mentioned one or more yardsticks or **criteria** used by International organisations to judge projects.

If not, talk about **cost-effectiveness**. Effectiveness asks whether the project has been successful in achieving its objectives. Then, adding the word “cost” asks whether it has done so for a reasonable amount of money, time and effort. If a project, following its plan, immunised 500 children, then that would seem effective.

But what if the project made one hundred field visits and spent three months doing only this immunising of the 500 children? Then, it was not very cost-effective.

PLENARY DISCUSSION: what other criteria would the students use to evaluate the Luarlila project? When the students have had their say, bring in two more criteria:

Relevance: This is perhaps the most important. It questions whether the objectives of the project really matched the problems and needs – whether the *'why'* of the project was a good one. It is easy to start activities that do not help the problem. For example, one health project found a lot of protein-calorie malnutrition (PCM) among the children under five and spent a great deal of energy persuading the villagers to start growing lettuces (not a priority food for children with PCM). Once the plants were cropped they were mainly sold in the local markets and the cash disappeared into the household budget. So there was no match between problem and activity.

Sustainability: Are there lasting benefits after the intervention such as increased self-sufficiency? Sustainability looks at what happens after the project comes to an end, whether the beneficiaries go on receiving benefits for an extended period of time after the assistance has been withdrawn.

At an appropriate moment read out the Luarlila experience:

“A further step for the project was an Evaluation, done three months after the end of the project by the funding International NGO. They wanted to learn lessons for the future. From our point of view (the local NGO) the biggest weakness of the evaluation was that we had not insisted on contributing to its Terms of Reference. We thought that the strong points of the project were the community involvement and the help given to the vulnerable. The Terms of Reference were more concerned with money, especially cost-effectiveness (value for money) which had not been a strong point in the project because of all the delays and over-spending.

For our own evaluation, we re-visited the villages a year later and found that the sub-committees were collecting money for water and ensuring repairs to the houses and water systems. This to us seems very positive”.

GROUP DISCUSSION: Do the students think that the Luarlila project scores well for relevance and sustainability? Could you give reasons?

4. FEEDING BACK INTO THE NEXT ROUND OF PLANNING

PLENARY: feeding lessons back into the next round of planning is a step on the Project Cycle: show where it fits in on the diagram on the wall.

GROUP WORK: Ask each group, what lessons would you want to feed back into the next round of planning?

PLENARY: The groups present their conclusions to the plenary. At an appropriate point, read out what they did in Luarlila:

“After our own evaluation, our NGO held a workshop to review “lessons to be learnt from Luarlila”. We invited two outsiders from other NGOs and one from an international donor. After two presentations, we split into groups and brainstormed. Several people had been asked to take the role of “Devil’s Advocate”. As a result we were more critical than we might have been of our beneficiary involvement and of our dealings with the funder. At the end of the day we had a number of “Lessons Learnt” written up on a poster in our main office, where they could be kept in mind”.

4.1 *Final Lesson: WRAP-UP*

PLENARY: You might want to get feedback from the students. Ask “If you were joining a team starting a project next week, how confident would you feel?” You might want to use this time to deal with individual concerns and active problems. You might want to know if students will be making plans, doing evaluations in the next months and if so you might want to visit and see how it goes.

- 1) Note on PRAs:
 - For more detail go to www.networklearning.org and download “*Information: its collection and use throughout the Project Cycle*”. (url: www.networklearning.org/books/collecting-information.html)
- 2) Notes on Fundraising:
 - Go to www.networklearning.org and then to NGO Skills: Money Skills. (url: www.networklearning.org/skills/money.html)
 - Download section D of “How to Build A Good Small NGO” which includes a section on Fundraising. (url: www.networklearning.org/books/build-ngo.html)
 - Any NGO which is concerned about their ability to manage financially should download Mango’s Financial Management Health Check (<http://www.mango.org.uk/resources/healthcheck.asp>). It will help them gauge how healthy their financial management is.