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Action Learning and Action Research to alleviate poverty

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Action Learning and Action Research to alleviate poverty

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role played by action learning in a collaborative action research project to alleviate poverty in a city region in the UK. Researchers from two universities worked with 12 large anchor organisations to investigate procurement and employment practices that positively impacted inclusive growth within the city region, and therefore had a positive effect on poverty, and spread those practices more widely. A core group of representatives from the 12 participating organisations met in action learning sets to share the results of their investigations, to design a model of good practice, and to develop and support action plans. The paper summarises the results of the project, examines the different methodologies that were employed, and reviews the contribution made by action learning.

Keywords: action learning; poverty; action research; anchor institutions

Introduction

Action learning and action research were used in a collaborative project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to alleviate poverty in the Leeds City Region through the identification and spread of good practices in employment and procurement by large local organisations. Researchers from York St John University and Leeds Beckett University worked in partnership with representatives from 12 large organisations based in the City Region to explore employment and procurement practices that can have a positive effect on poverty, and to take action to spread these practices more widely.

The action research took an Appreciative Inquiry approach, with representatives of the 12 organisations seeking examples of good practices in their own organisation and in their supply chains, and then planning how to spread the practices more widely. Action learning was used within meetings of the representatives who, together with the

university researchers, formed a ‘core group’ to analyse and share findings, and to make plans to progress the project (Gold 2014).

The information on which this paper is based was gathered by the researchers throughout the life of the project, and beyond its official conclusion. Representatives of the 12 organisations contributed notes of their findings, and data from their organisations. The university researchers took detailed notes of meetings during the project, and of interviews with the participants at the project’s end.

This paper discusses how the employment and procurement practices of large organisations as anchor institutions can impact poverty in a region, and uses lessons from the project to suggest how action learning and action research may be used to achieve collaborative efforts to alleviate poverty.

Anchor Institutions and their potential

Large organisations that are committed to a location have become known as ‘anchor institutions’. By virtue of their size, they exercise an economic impact on the location, largely through their employment and purchasing practices. Examples include local authorities, hospitals, housing associations, universities and further education colleges.

Private sector organisations with headquarters in a locality may also be anchor institutions. Private sector organisations in the US that act as anchor institutions in social projects include media and utility companies, large corporations such as pharmaceutical and technological companies, and sports franchises (NCP, 2008).

Anchor institutions in the US have initiated regenerative ventures such as Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio (Howard et al. 2010), the Chicago Anchors for a Strong Economy (JRF 2016), and the Anchors in Newark procurement scheme (Zeuli et al. 2014). In the UK projects include the West Midlands Procurement Framework, projects with anchor institutions in Birmingham (CLES 2018) and Preston (CLES 2017,

2019), and work with and a range of case studies reported from the Cooperative Councils Innovation Network (2019).

Anchor institutions are ideally situated to use ‘place-based’ mechanisms (Breeze et al. 2013) working in alliances to achieve social value (Ehlenz, Birth, and Agness 2014) and boosting their local economy by using their large procurement expenditures to benefit local businesses, invest in deprived areas, and increase local employment (CLES 2017; Macfarlane and Collins 2014). The purchasing power of anchor institutions can be directed towards local businesses, or local benefits can be included in contracts that are placed with businesses located elsewhere. In this way, procurement can be used to boost the local economy, to generate inclusive growth (RSA 2017; LCC 2018) and to increase local employment.

Gaining employment and progressing in work is consistently identified as a significant factor contributing to inclusive growth and reducing poverty. However, a body of research shows that entering employment does not provide a sustainable route out of poverty if the quality of the work is not also addressed (Brewer et al. 2012). The continued prevalence of low-skilled, low-paid work in the economy, and employment where there is little chance for entry-level workers to move into better-quality jobs, contribute to the existence of in-work poverty (Lloyd, Mason, and Mayhew 2008). Jobs with few formal skills requirements, which offer little or no training, act as dead ends rather than pathways to progression. The concept of a ‘good job’ or ‘good work’ is closely associated with ‘job quality’ (Coats and Lekhi 2008; Parker and Bevan 2011).

Sweeney (2014) identified the characteristics of a ‘good job’ as relating to:

- Effort and reward: a person’s effort is reflected in the rewards they receive, and reward structures are transparent.
- Skills training: there are opportunities to use and to develop skills.
- Safe and secure: employees do not fear imminent job loss or a loss of job status.
- Autonomy and choice: employees have a degree of control over their work.

- Fairness and trust: employees are treated fairly, and employers act to build trust at work.
- Relationships: there are opportunities to build and maintain good relationships.
- Voice: employees have the right to be heard and to express their views.

Whilst anchor institutions might be expected to ensure the quality of jobs for the majority of employees, areas for improvement can concern workers in the lowest pay bands and part-time, agency or temporary workers. Workers in the supply chains of anchor institutions may not experience ‘good jobs’ and there is a potential for anchor institutions to influence this through ethical trading policies and contract requirements.

Establishing the project

The Leeds City Region is the largest of all UK core city regions outside London in terms of output and population: economic output was £62 billion in 2016, generating 5% of England’s output (LCREP 2016). There are more than 70 large anchors in the Leeds City Region, employing more than 200,000 people, and controlling expenditures of over £11 billion.

The university research team recruited 12 anchor institutions to take part in the project: four local authorities, two healthcare organisations, two further education colleges, one university, two third sector organisations and one private sector company (Boak et al. 2016; Devins et al. 2017). In each case the chief executive (or equivalent) was briefed on the project and agreed that the organisation would participate. Private sector organisations have participated in inclusive growth projects in the US, and attempts were made to engage more private sector organisations in this project, but without success. A regional economic strategy emphasising inclusive growth, or ‘good growth’ (LCREP 2016) – growth that benefits a wide range of people in the locality – together with individual institutional drivers to achieve social benefits attracted the 12 anchor institutions to the project (Devins et al. 2017).

A short 'statement of intent' was sought from the executive team of each organisation, setting out what the organisation aimed to achieve through participation in the project. Common themes within these statements of intent concerned self-assessment of current actions to reduce poverty, and improved performance in this respect, including through learning from good practice elsewhere. A senior manager from each organisation – either a member of the top management team, or someone who reported directly to that level, was sought to as a representative to the core group of the project.

The original plan was for the representatives to form two action learning sets to meet in groups of six, in Leeds and York, but following the launch event, where all the representatives met together, the anchor institution members asked that all future meetings should include both learning sets in a single session, the better to share good practice widely. Half-day meetings were scheduled every 5-6 weeks.

The issue of the alleviation of poverty can be seen as falling into the category of 'wickedness' where there are complex underlying causes, difficulties in finding simple solutions and little agreement on how to address what are considered as enduring and intractable difficulties (Spicker 2016). There cannot be quick solutions for such a difficulty; however, there is scope for progressive improvements. In seeking to respond to this challenge, we drew up approaches to collaborative engagement between academe and practice by use of what are called action modes of research (Raelin 2015). Such approaches place value on collective reflection in tackling complex and difficult issues such as poverty and the potential for producing knowledge which is considered useful and can be applied in practice and in doing so, can create change. We advocated a combination of action research with action learning and the use of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005).

Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to bringing about change that seeks examples of good practice and considers how they can be spread more widely, rather than identifying problems and attempting to solve them. After an area for research into change has been identified, the first stage of Appreciative Inquiry is to explore examples of good practice, to analyse what enabled them to work well, and to consider what can be learned from them. The following stages of the process concern imagining, where learning is shared collectively and re-organised thematically. This allows the consideration of possible changes as an image for a preferred future, followed by planning how to spread parts or all of the practice more widely. Using principles of Appreciative Inquiry, the core group members interviewed up to four people within their organisation, or its supply chain. The university researchers summarised published examples of good practices in anchor institutions elsewhere to provide more information for the core group.

Action learning took place in sets of 4-6 members within the core group, as members discussed their progress with gathering information and considered how the good practices they had identified could be spread more widely. The sets were facilitated by university researchers with long experience of action learning. This activity comprised the bulk of the time spent at the core group meetings. At the second and third meetings of the group, a model of factors that enabled good practice was developed from common themes across the examples. At the fourth meeting of the core group, members were asked to work in the action learning sets to develop and discuss individual action plans for their own organisation for the next six months, and undertook to discuss these plans with their senior management team.

The action learning sets also discussed how learning derived from the project might be implemented more widely. For example, one discussion revisited the model of factors that enabled good practice and considered:

- what might motivate an organisation to implement the model in relation to procurement
- different ways in which the model might be implemented to contribute to tackling poverty
- which organisations in the Leeds City Region could be encouraged to use the model
- how the model could be connected to existing sectoral networks

There were nine meetings of the core group in total. Guest speakers with expertise in aspects of social investment, payment of a living wage, and social change were invited to share ideas and experiences with the core group for three of the four final meetings, and these presentations formed a preface to discussions in the action learning sets.

Outcomes

Outcomes achieved in the course of the project included the identification of a number of good practices within the participating organisations and their supply chains; the development of a model of core components of an effective anchor intervention; some collaborative projects between participating organisations; the extension of good practices in the anchor institutions; and some reported personal development on the part of core group members.

Examples of good practices

Appreciative inquiry interviews found a number of practical measures to assist local small and medium sized enterprises in the supply chain, such as creating smaller lots within invitations to tender in order to increase opportunities for smaller businesses;

providing technical assistance and training relating to procurement processes; providing training on diversity issues to enable smaller businesses to meet tendering criteria.

The core group found some social requirements were included in invitations to tender. For example, tenders that require suppliers to create apprenticeships are reasonably common in construction contracts. One anchor institution issued an equality and diversity questionnaire with all invitations to tender: the responses were scored and this factor could comprise up to ten per cent of the overall score. That organisation also provided free equality and diversity training to suppliers and stated a clear expectation of requirements relating to diversity at both the tendering stage and during contract delivery, with assessment of performance forming an integral part of the annual review of the contract.

Two of the local authority anchors provided examples of how they implement the Ethical Care Charter (Unison 2015) which highlights the importance of good terms and conditions and the allocation of the same homecare worker(s) wherever possible for the delivery of quality homecare services. The Charter emphasises the importance of employee benefits such as the payment of statutory sick pay, travel time, travel costs and other necessary expenses such as mobile phones.

One collaborative intervention between anchor institutions sought to reconnect people most at risk of exclusion from the labour market with employment opportunities. The organisations arranged for the provision of advice, guidance and support by a dedicated worker. Services provided by relevant intermediary bodies were coordinated to meet a variety of social, economic and health related issues. The anchors participating in the project offered work placements to help the long term unemployed back into work. In-work mentoring was made available to support individuals through periods of difficulty and to ensure continuity of employment.

Core group members also identified a number of capacity-building initiatives and meet-the-buyer events designed to encourage the wider use of apprenticeships, payment of the living wage, and other aspects of good work in the supply chain.

The model

The model developed by the core group (Figure 1) identifies the key components of an effective anchor institution intervention in employment or procurement practice. The model is based on more than thirty examples of good practice identified by core group participants in the initial stages of the project. The examples of good practice in Leeds City Region organisations were supplemented by case study evidence, gathered by the research team, of successful anchor institution interventions elsewhere. The examples were introduced and discussed in action learning sets, and the model was developed through collaborative discourse and thematic analysis.

INSERT FIG 1 ABOUT HERE

Leadership: leadership is needed at all levels in order to identify opportunities to promote inclusive growth and social value, and to align people and resources to achieve results.

Collaboration: developing and using partnership working across departmental, organisational and sectoral boundaries to design and deliver interventions. Collective action is a powerful means of achieving inclusive growth.

Shared value: three overlapping elements of shared value are: *Social value* – identifying and acting on opportunities to achieve social as well as economic value; *Market making* – supporting local businesses to identify and take advantage of procurement

opportunities; *Extending the benefits* – supporting inclusive growth through good jobs in the organisation and in the supply chain.

Testing and learning: monitoring and carrying out constructive evaluations of interventions, adjusting where necessary, and spreading knowledge of good practice.

Collaborative projects

The potential to realise shared value through collaboration manifested itself in several ways during the project. For example, following discussions in the core group, three organisations co-operated in a Help the Aged initiative in West Yorkshire that focused on reducing loneliness. Two participating organisations collaborated to set up an in-project secondment, linked to the West Yorkshire Low Pay Charter. One organisation also set up a cross-city conference to raise awareness of opportunities for other stakeholders to use procurement to encourage better jobs in the City Region.

At the end of the project, almost a half of the core group participants reported an increased awareness of the potential and added value associated with wider collaboration. One core group member said that their CEO had been initially sceptical of the scope for collaboration across such diverse organisations, but had seen the value of the exercise and became supportive of it.

The project was thought to have built a legacy for further cross-anchor institution collaborations and developments. Six core group members continued to collaborate after the end of the project through a ‘procurement sub-group’, agreeing to meet as an action learning group on a regular basis to review practice and share experiences. The group considered key questions relating to keeping expenditure local and influencing other groups in the local government and health sectors. There was considerable discussion on how to include social value criteria in invitations to tender.

Extending good practices

One of the original aims of the research project was to facilitate the adoption of new practices to encourage anchor institutions to make a stronger contribution to the local economy, and a majority of core group participants reported one or more outcomes associated with this aim. The Appreciative Inquiry, examples of good practice, action learning sets, and core group discussions all played a role in knowledge exchange and in helping to build a commitment to change. Some relevant project outcomes identified by core group participants included:

- Better awareness of the potential for achieving social value as a result of the Appreciative Inquiry mapping of policies and practice. The mapping of procurement expenditure was seen by some core group members as crucial in raising awareness among senior managers of the potential for using procurement to leverage greater local social and economic impact.
- Increased awareness of the potential for differentiating recruitment, pay and benefit structures to better reflect the needs of workers in low paid, entry level jobs. By the end of the project, several anchor institutions were considering introducing or extending the targeted recruitment of workers in entry level positions. One organisation had come to recognise the scope for differentiating recruitment marketing; another was proposing a review of support staff non-wage benefits to explore how to optimise the value of the employment package to lower paid employees. Two anchors had introduced a commitment to pay the living wage for their own staff during the course of the project; for one this was a direct result of the Appreciative Inquiry conducted during the project. Two other organisations were exploring the opportunities to redesign jobs to reflect higher pay and progression opportunities for those entering lower paid jobs.
- Raised aspirations in the organisation to engage with social value concepts and to use them to promote better work. At least two anchors were using knowledge acquired through the project to inform strategic reviews, and another was using it to inform the refreshment of corporate strategy, where early discussions on realising wider social objectives through procurement had started with stakeholders. Others had seen a stronger connection between strategy, human resources and procurement around 'good work', which was reported to have built confidence in challenging 'the ways things are usually done within individual directorates'.
- The project was reported to have stretched senior manager thinking by providing the framework for 'good jobs' to reconsider their expectations of procurement. In four organisations, there had been an introduction of social value requirements in modified or new procurement practices, with one of these

stipulating that all suppliers of outsourcing and other contracts would be required to pay the living wage and provide evidence to that effect as a condition of contracting. One organisation had introduced a social value question into their Pre-qualification Questionnaire, and in another organisation a requirement was introduced embracing the Unison Code of Ethical Practice in parts of their social care contracting.

Personal development

Personal outcomes were reported by nearly half of the core group participants and centred on greater confidence from a wider understanding of the issues and better practice, and from making contributions to knowledge exchange. Some felt their confidence had increased in tackling specific development needs around, for example, procurement, including better understanding of legal and compliance constraints. Confidence gains also related to having widened their experience in multi-partner projects, with one core group member saying they were now better placed to play a more active role in co-creation with other anchor institutions in the city region and in other external networks.

Discussion

Action modes of research through Appreciative Inquiry within action research were methodologies for achieving the positive outcomes of this project, and action learning provided the vehicle for the delivery of a process. In action learning sets of representatives from anchor institutions, participants were able to work with the methods involved in Appreciative Inquiry to provide data for shared learning and the creation of knowledge that is actionable, as shown in figure 1. Crucially, we hope that the model can become of value and use to others. Poverty is not an easy fix as recent reports have found. For example, Barr et al. (2019) highlight how national averages high the high levels of economic inactivity with respect to employment and payment in

various regions and cities in the UK. It therefore becomes essential to take a longer view to tackle poverty in such regions. This project makes a start, but only a start.

The efforts required to engage participants were to some extent underestimated by the research team during the design of the project. In most instances multiple meetings and conversations were required in each organisation to engage internal champions and the senior leadership team. In several instances the university researchers were unable to navigate organisational gatekeepers and start a dialogue with the senior leadership team. Champions were necessary to 'sell' the project to multiple internal stakeholders, and they often required direct support from the research team to clearly articulate the nature of action research and its benefits. The prevailing context of austerity, where economic justifications for the allocation of resources and finding the space for 'yet another change initiative' were key factors influencing the propensity of organisations to commit to engage. In addition, the open-ended nature of the outcomes of action research did not sit easily with assessments of value based on the achievement of clear, predetermined project outputs and return on investment which appear to be prevalent in many large organisations. Nevertheless, 12 organisations were willing to embrace the opportunity and make commitments to the project, establish a statement of intent, contribute to the core action research group, and make progress towards taking learning forward in the organisation.

In sustaining such an effort, collaboration must underpin the way forward which implies, based the Latin origin of the term, the working together for some agreed purpose. Wood and Grey (1991, 146) suggest that 'collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem do engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain'. Such a process requires a degree of facilitation and given the likelihood of participants

holding differing concerns and interests, collaboration must allow a convenor to bring people together to help create mutuality.

Collaboration based on the action modes of research, which was convened by the team from the universities and the core group representatives through action learning, uncovered and shared examples of good practices in employment and procurement from the anchor institutions in the Leeds City Region and elsewhere. These examples were then used to identify potential aims and outcomes that could be achieved from further action, and some evaluation of these further actions had already been carried out by the end of the project, as described in the previous section.

The collaborative nature of the research, and the expectation that good practices would be shared by participants, may have been an obstacle to recruiting more private sector organisations to the project. Discussions were undertaken with two anchor institutions in the retail sector, but issues about revealing competitively sensitive information were a factor in them deciding not to take part.

An original aim of the university researchers was to help the core group representatives and the senior management teams of the participating anchor institutions to establish project groups within each organisation, which would work along action learning principles, to progress the plans drawn up by core group representatives. The establishment of a core group drawing organisations together from a range of sectors and geographical locations was an ambitious element of the project. Those that engaged shared an aspiration to build relationships across sectors and spatial areas and to share practice. However, rivalries between localities, commercial sensitivities, tensions between organisations both cooperating and competing in the same and different spaces all surfaced in the core group discussions and provided an insight into some of the complexities at play in seeking to develop a collaborative approach to

poverty alleviation. The notion of ‘good work’ and its social, economic and health related benefits was a concept around which the core group could coalesce in pursuit of solutions to the wicked problem of poverty.

The project design envisaged active, systematic implementation spreading into all 12 participating organisations. In the event, progress was achieved in more organic and piecemeal ways, with awareness being raised within the organisations, and some actions being undertaken by those with responsibility for aspects of employment and procurement. Some new organisational arrangements came into being, with the creation of cross-institutional collaborations, but the ambition of creating project groups to drive change within each participating institution was not generally realised. This was due to a number of complex and interrelated socio-economic, cultural and project-related factors. For example two organisations found their initial statements of intent relatively simplistic and over-ambitious. One of these organisations refined the goals but the other ostensibly withdrew from the project reflecting afterwards that ‘with hindsight we did not really get to grips with it’. Others noted timing-related issues, where action-oriented developments associated with the project were contingent on influential organisational and regional strategies still in development. Others drew attention to the resource-based and cultural challenges of working across boundaries at different levels both within and between large organisations. Most participants reflected that whilst the early project focus on setting intent, Appreciative Inquiry and good practice had provided some momentum and pressure on participants to respond in a relatively short timeframe, translating what was learnt from the process required considerably more time than initially envisaged, especially in the multi-layered and complex organisations participating in the project. A frequent early outcome was recognition of the added-value of collaboration across the region associated with poverty-related intervention.

During the project timeframe several of the participants in the core group modified their procurement practices including selection guidance and evaluation criteria and worked towards harmonising procurement processes.

The action research is thought to have built a legacy for intra-organisational collaborations and reinforced the value of co-production in initiatives to promote good work and innovation to achieve greater social-value. Tangible outcomes emerged beyond the project timeframe for several of the participating organisations in areas of procurement and employment and a Leeds Anchor Network has been established to maximise the local benefits of their procurement and employment policies (Leeds Anchor Network 2019). Several participants in the core group subsequently collaborated on the development of employment to support good work and promote inclusive growth in the region, and this resulted in a number of changes to policies and practices (Devins et al. 2019).

Action learning was a central part of the design of the project. Within the action learning sets in the core group, participants shared information, discussed meanings and implications, and supported and challenged one another in making plans for further actions. The process worked well, facilitated good exchanges of ideas and information, and provoked participants to consider new ways in which their organisation could address issues relating to poverty.

The action learning processes did encounter challenges, however, in particular concerning stability of group membership in the second half of the project. Levels of motivation over the course of the project varied. For a number of participants this had intensified through the focus on action research and increased senior management attention as the results of the project became tangible. However, just over half of the participants found it difficult to sustain attendance at core group meetings. For most

this was not an issue of diminishing interest but of intense personal work-pressures, delegation, or consequences of re-organisation of responsibilities. The volume and range of work pressures on such senior managers as made up the core group were considerable. In some models of action learning the propensity to withdraw is seen as a legitimate and at times inevitable outcome to be accepted by the facilitators. However in this instance the facilitator actively encouraged continued engagement. One-to-one updates, briefings and clear communications were important elements of project management that sought to encourage continued engagement, with varying degrees of success. One participant noted that non-attendance at the core group ‘was down to us, other work pressures and staffing.....I can’t see what more the project could have done to keep us involved’. From the fifth meeting onwards, some core group members were replaced by alternate organisational representatives and, as Edmonstone and Flanagan (2007) found in their project, there can be a loss of focus and momentum when new members of action learning sets need to be included into an established group.

In addition to action learning set discussions, the core group meetings were also used by the university researchers to provide information from elsewhere of relevant activities of anchor institutions and cross-organisational action to reduce poverty, and to feed back to the group members aggregated information from their organisations. These inputs were designed to be informative for group members, and also energising – surfacing information and ideas about progress and potential, and engaging the whole group in discussions.

This project sought to tackle the complex issue of poverty through a collaborative underpinning, the use of action modes of research, and delivery through action learning. The knowledge generated in this project leads us to offer the following recommendations for anchor institutions:

- map procurement spending to assess how much remains within the region and how much goes outside of it;
- consider shifting 5 to 10% of current expenditure on the procurement of goods and services to competitive suppliers in the region: in the case of the anchor institutions in this project, such a shift could add hundreds of millions of pounds to the regional economy each year;
- test the framework set out in Fig. 1 to embed social value into procurement and employment activities;
- increase the supply of apprenticeships by securing one apprenticeship for every £1 million of expenditure;
- send collective market signals relating to the importance of good work;
- collaborate with local suppliers to build capacity to bid for public procurement opportunities.

Conclusion

Anchor institutions in a region can have an impact on poverty by virtue of their size, their expenditure on goods and services, and the number of people they employ. Where anchor institutions have a social purpose as part of their mission – such as is found in local authorities, healthcare organisations, educational establishments and third sector organisations – they have institutional drivers to collaborate to explore and expand good practices. Where private sector organisations have a sense of social responsibility for a locality – as was the case with the transport company that took part in this project – they may also be motivated to join such a collaboration.

This project focused on alleviating poverty, an issue championed over many years by its sponsor, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. However, a similar approach could be taken to tackling other complex and difficult social issues. This project aimed to take action within a particular region, and was aligned with activity elsewhere that is designed to build inclusive growth in a locality, but similar processes could be used to bring together participants from much wider geographies.

Change in large, complex organisations is challenging and commitment to a collaborative project such as this is best achieved with the backing of the most senior managers in the organisation, who are in a position to provide leadership and initiate new actions. Collaboration might seem from the outside as easier than is actually the case and it often takes considerable time and perseverance for new ideas to take root and provide a platform for action and embedding practice.

An Appreciative Inquiry approach to collaborative action research can discover good practices that are enlightening, thought-provoking and uplifting. In this project, the members of the core group learned from good practices from within the participating organisations and elsewhere.

Action learning offers a positive, supportive dynamic to this kind of collaborative research, enabling researchers to share, reflect, create, and develop ways in which to make progress.

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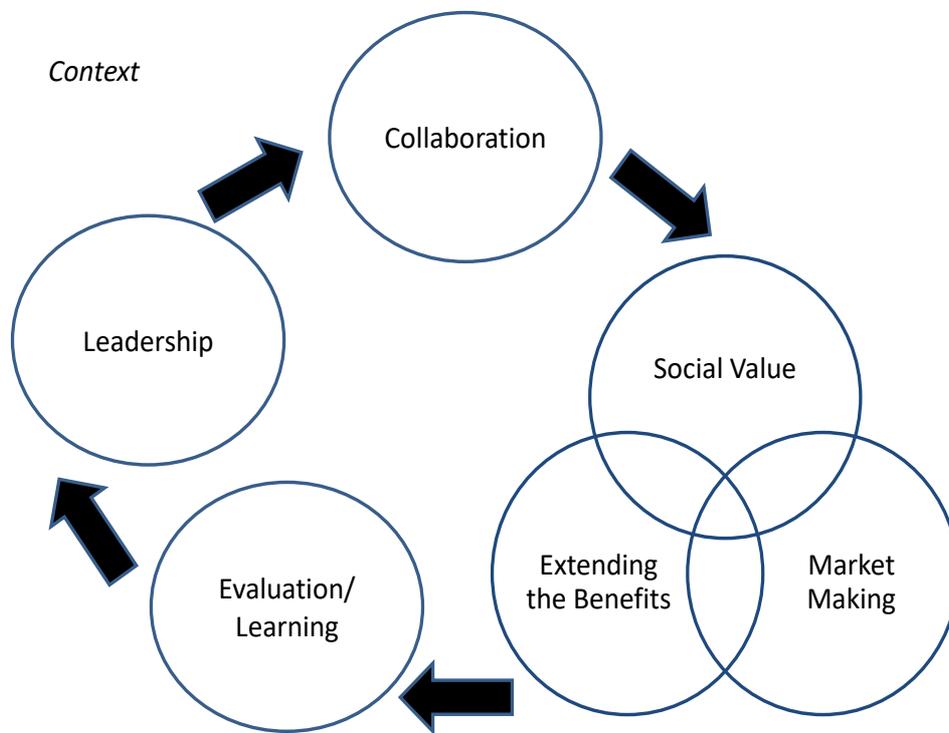


Fig 1 Core components of an effective anchor institution intervention in employment or procurement practice.