

Aliss in Wonderland: The diary of an Acc Lab Supervisor

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.

My journey supervising the new funky bunch started when I first arrived in Tunisia country office at the end of 2019. We were all new and disoriented... well, for different reasons! I must confess that at that time I did not understand jack of what they are supposed to do or what their expertise is all about! "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast". Exploration? Experimentation? Solution mapping? "Speak English!" said the Eaglet. "I don't know the meaning of half those long words, and, what's more, I don't believe you do either!" What happened to 'normal' profiles and terms of reference of economists, social scientists, and engineers?!

Shortly afterwards, the launching ceremony took place. I wore my lucky earrings hoping that they would hide my confusion! All went well, but once the excitement wore off, I realized that no lucky charm would save me! Six smart and glowing eyes were recording my actions and reactions! Gosh, how can I live up to their expectations?! No pressure, they are also part of a strategic corporate #NextGenUNDP pilot... innovation... learning... network... yada... yada! "[I don't find it] funny... to come out among the people that walk with their heads downwards! I am doomed!

"Tut, tut, child!" said the Duchess. "Everything's got a moral, if only you can find it." Indeed, I have never considered failure as an option in my life. "[If...] it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!", so I went through a total immersion in 'wonderland' aka the world of innovation, system thinking and people-centric design. I got "Curiouser and curiouser!" and following many exciting discussions



that still mark my Friday mornings, the funky bunch and I found a way to communicate and understand each other... and I dare say celebrate our differences. It is then that my transformation started to take shape! "Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!" I forgot to tell you I am an engineer by qualification and training, yes, of the funky type of environmental engineers but still an engineer! This was way out of my comfort zone! However, I was lucky enough to have very exciting and excited colleagues who made our journey of mutual-discovery worthwhile.

The last year and a half were rich in learnings both in terms of substance and people management. It made me think a lot on how UNDP can be an incubator for the future and contribute to breakthroughs on the future of development: inequality, decarbonization, the 4th industrial revolution and new forms of governance. I will not dwell on the substance as many vibrant corporate fora are discussing it. However, I will share, and particularly with my fellow Acc Lab supervisors, few learnings hoping to make their immersion in wonderland quicker and more enlightening. Enjoy your journey!

1. Authorizing environment

Everybody recognizes the importance of onboarding, but how can you support when you initially do not have a clue? Regular HR onboarding was boring and daunting for the funky bunch- this is a fact. While they have participated in discussions and events organized by the global team, it was not enough to prepare them for life in the country office. It is, thus, important to “convert” the supervisor early on, as s/he would facilitate their integration and acceptance by the team.

Once onboard, performance planning and evaluation are another hurdle to overcome. After lengthy group and bilateral brainstorming sessions, we managed to decipher individual terms of reference and systematize group work. Having said that, by virtue of their profiles, approaches and line of business, the Accelerator Lab team thrives on flexibility and independence. They would need to manage their own schedule and thus have some control over the design of their jobs. So be prepared to adapt your supervisory style and skills accordingly. Our gentle persons’ agreement is 30-70; that is, 70 per cent of their time would be spent on frontier challenge(s) and the remaining 30 per cent on individual “pet projects”. They included data scrapping for municipal communication in times of COVID, signal mapping and sentiment analysis using social media piloted during CPD elaboration to gauge public priorities and concerns, among others. They very valuable for identifying our programmatic blind spots and adjusting to new realities.

The acceleration lab is innovation, but a “learning” innovation. The result of their initiatives is often unpredictable (it will be a new learning, d’Oh!). Their service providers and partners are often found outside traditional business clusters. So, to function well, they would need help sailing through UNDP policies and procedures. This would require more than a savvy programme assistant because their contracts and partnerships are too funky and often need collective intelligence to crack!

A final point on this, is the retention issue. The UN/DP brand might have been powerful to attract initially good candidates, but it might not be necessarily enough to retain them. The organization and consequently the CO would need to articulate an attractive employment value proposition to retain good candidates and ensure return on investment, which is a high risk. It should include necessarily flexibility and freedom of maneuver.



2. Ecosystem

Acceptance is tricky and particularly when it is perceived as an omen for change. The Accelerator Lab team would need to know well not only its ‘clients’ (UNDP team, national partners and perhaps eventually UN country teams), but also its suppliers and potential competitors (NGOs, innovation workshops, design schools, thinktanks, etc.) to design its value proposition and marketing pitch, mitigate risks (partnerships, service provision, expectations, etc.) and adjust its communication and knowledge management approach(es). The role of the supervisor is essential for supporting political economy assessment, joining the dots with the outer world, and articulating the ‘local’ business case.

3. Network learning and collective intelligence

Enlisting ‘learners’ is not intuitive. How to connect with the rest of the team? How to create a learning environment suitable for all? What rhythm to adopt for the network? It really



depends on the country office dynamics, systems, and people- mostly people. As our Administrator often says people change systems. My funky bunch interacted formally and informally to raise interest and curiosity in their work beyond the fancy launching. Empathy was an important ingredient in their interactions. Confinement and remote work did not facilitate the task, but their creativity, collegiality, and our persistence on 'leaving no one behind' paid off. The CPD was also a good opportunity to position their creative contributions in 'hefty' UNDP business. Hacking the CPD challenged the way we approach development challenges. It also revealed our programming and partnership blind spots.

During 2020, they generated a lot of interesting learnings, some of them are in the process of adoption and uptake; other fell through the cracks. We are currently exploring ways and options to systematize knowledge management and we are contemplating to kick-off a sense-making exercise to put the 'clients' at the heart of the knowledge management loop.

4. *Global vs. country office anchor*

I acknowledge it is not either or, but who decides on priorities? How can their workload be managed between global priorities, country office requests, working-out-loud, and networking without forgetting their own curiosity? This is a pending issue that would need to be decided during the

discussion on the lab's sustainability. One thing, I honestly believe, is that the lab should be part of the country office DNA for managing complexities and uncertainties and staying relevant.

5. *Learning vs. implementation*

One trap to avoid is the Accelerator Lab becoming the innovation hub or focal point of the country office. Having to respond to customized innovation requests, often of technological nature, would deter them from hacking development challenges and promoting system thinking. The acceleration lab is a "learning" innovation; this is its "raison d'être!" The supervisor would need to shield his/her funky bunch.

6. *My transformation*

Observing co-creation, collective intelligence, sensing, behavioral insights, and future thinking in action affected me personally and professionally. As a person, it made me aware of blind spots in my approach to challenges and why not opportunities. As a professional, it got me into the hacking business of UNDP programming and operations, and rethinking systems for ensuring UNDP remains a partner of choice. It made me think also about the team dynamics and how to make the best of all the wealth and diversity of expertise in the country office by shifting knowledge and power from the individual to the collective. It also made me think of how to foster the team's participation in a knowledge-based culture to develop capacities and capabilities outside formal learning settings. "It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then."

... And the journey continues, hoping, dear Azza, Mehdi and Nadia, your journey is as amazing and enriching as mine!

PS: The quotes are not mine, they are by Lewis Carroll, from his book Alice in Wonderland (1865).