

Knowledge management to connect and strengthen people's capacities in Latin America

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Knowledge is becoming more and more important as driver for development, in developed as well as in developing countries. In 1998 the World Bank (World Development Report 1998) explicitly identified knowledge as one of the major factors for development. Development organisations are engaging increasingly in knowledge management due to their changing role in relation to capacity building, brokering, and advocacy. This tendency was particularly marked by the generalised adoption of the Millennium Development Goals:

In order to work towards these larger objectives, agencies not only need efficient internal coordination, but also increased ability to be responsive to the situation of the poor, and ability to influence debates and policy processes. (Hovland 2003:5).

The importance and complexity of knowledge management for development and development cooperation has been reviewed and assessed by Ramalingam (2005). His work shows a generalised recognition and effort of development agencies to engage in knowledge management, although comparison of the various institutional knowledge strategies shows great variety in approaches. Most initiatives are still at an early stage, but are most likely to be successful when addressed in an integrated and coherent manner, well connected with organisational dynamics and core business (Ramalingam 2005; World Bank 2003).

SNV, the Netherlands Development Organisation, has introduced knowledge development and brokering at the core of its strategy in order to enhance the effects and impact of its work with local clients on poverty reduction. SNV has about about 2300 local clients worldwide and some 500 in Latin America. Strategic impact focuses on two areas (SNV 2007): production, income and employment; and access to basic services.

In SNV Latin America (SNV-LA), one of the five regions where SNV is working, knowledge management was implicitly introduced in 2004 when five so called knowledge networks were introduced. While SNV-worldwide launched 21 knowledge networks in 2004, in SNV-LA four thematic networks were established on the following topics: Market Access for the Poor, Forest Management, Water and Sanitation, and Governance. In 2007 this number has risen to about 30 for SNV worldwide and seven in Latin America.

The networks are regarded as an institutional vehicle to knowledge development and brokering. They have developed as platforms for practitioners to share and develop

knowledge directly related to capacity strengthening in client organisations and the strengthening of local institutional structures for coordination and collaboration, focusing on poverty reduction. Each network represents a specific thematic expertise required within SNV to be able to serve clients with high quality capacity development services for impact on poverty. In the course of time, the roles and functions of the knowledge networks have changed according to changes of required expertise within the organisation and because of the growing and maturing role of knowledge within SNV.

This article describes the evolution of knowledge within SNV Latin America, starting with the organisation of knowledge networks and indicating how knowledge is now embedded in the organisation. Then, major results of networks are presented and the 'Market Access for the Poor' network is used as an example. Internal mechanisms and external partnerships will be discussed in relation to knowledge development, sharing and brokering. Finally, we will formulate a number of lessons learned and our expectations and intentions for the future.

Organisation of knowledge activities

Knowledge development and sharing has been institutionalised in SNV-LA by introducing knowledge networks as part of the regional organisation structure. SNV-LA has a physical presence with country and sub-national (portfolio) offices in five countries: Honduras, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia. Moreover SNV has extended its working area into Guatemala, Colombia and El Salvador.

A knowledge network, as it was introduced in SNV, is conceived as a community of advisors working within a specific expertise area. SNV networks began as internal networks and over time some have expanded and opened up to include colleague experts from other organisations.

The internal organisation of a network is discussed here by taking the knowledge network on 'Market Access for the Poor' as an example, which is representative of the other networks in SNV-LA. The network leader is responsible for overall coordination and may dedicate up to 50% of his/her time to knowledge management and development. The other 50% of his/her time is dedicated to advisory or knowledge brokering work with client organisations, SNV's primary process. This allows the network leader to directly relate and integrate knowledge management and development of the network to SNV's core business and daily practice. The network strategy and agenda is developed by a core-team. The core-team is formed by senior advisors from the countries SNV works in and their expertise is related to the network topic.

In practice, this has resulted in a structure that enables a network to feed knowledge into country strategy implementation, which in turn guarantees the link between country strategies and the knowledge agenda, the advisors and their practice with clients.

Network activities receive financial resources and time allocation for SNV advisors. Current participation in networks in SNV-LA varies from 25 to 90 advisors per network. Each advisor is member of one or more knowledge network. On average, 10% of staff time can be allocated to knowledge brokering activities. When knowledge activities require financial resources, these are allocated based on a proposal of planned activities, outcomes and budget.

To demonstrate the above organisational setting of the networks, the 'Market Access for the Poor' network is taken as an example. In 2004, this network comprised some 90 advisors working in all five SNV countries: Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Honduras. This number has remained stable over the years. The members of the network are advisors with specific market access knowledge (chain analysis, market linkages, financial services, business linking, fair trade, business development services, advocacy), as well as expertise in complementary fields such as water for clean production, effective public sector management in relation to economic development, forest products business development and enabling environments for connecting small-scale farmers and enterprises.

The focus of the 'Market Access for the Poor' network agenda followed knowledge needs of advisers and clients, and also evolved from experiences obtained in SNV's work over the years. When the network was started in 2004, clients were generally agricultural producers' organisations, membership organisations and local governments, all engaged in access to markets for small-scale producers. Currently, in 2007, the focus of the network has changed towards promoting links between private enterprises and small-scale providers, applying an Inclusive Business and Value Chain approach (www.inclusivebusiness.org), and promoting affordable goods and services. This strategic institutional change has implications for the network which needed to focus on the strengthening clients' expertise in inclusive business and value chain development.

Network knowledge activities concentrated initially on value chains. For example, a tool to carry out chain analysis was designed with a client and later promoted through the network. It took a lot of work by network members to promote and adopt the value chain focus throughout the region as a practice by SNV in the five countries because national SNV strategies were not, at that point, explicit about its implementation. Despite this, advisory services in chain analyses were provided in all countries to producers associations, membership organisations and local governments, mostly at the municipal level.

The expertise and lessons learned in chain analyses are now being used within a new approach to providing market access to poor people: Inclusive Business development. SNV uses this approach to advise large companies on how to link with, for example, small-scale producers and how to establish sound relations between the two. This shift in approach brought about a shift in client focus towards including national and international companies. Since this requires specific and additional expertise, in 2007 the network has been refocused from market access to 'Inclusive Business & Value Chain Development'. This also shows that a specific network is not there to stay

eternally, but should adapt according to what clients and the organisation need. Eventually, a network may cease to exist.

The above indicates that the relation between strategy and knowledge activities has not always been strong and clear in SNV-LA, since starting the networks in 2004. Networks have their own dynamics but, nonetheless, they provided input for strategy design. The strategy design and implementation process also provided input to the networks, but there was no clear relationship between vertical line management and the more horizontally organised networks. In order to improve this, it was decided that for each network, a country director should take management responsibility and should participate in the organisation and dynamics of the networks. This improved the relationship between strategy development and implementation, on the one hand, and knowledge development and sharing, on the other, to a certain extent. In order to further improve this relationship, a Regional Unit for Knowledge and Strategy was established at the end of 2006.

Another feature of the organisation of network and knowledge activities is the evolution of sub-groups within the 'Market Access for the Poor' network. Based on its success, organisation of networks by sub-groups was then also adopted in the other SNV-LA networks. While initially all networks started with a single layered structure, various specific themes required specialised knowledge and experts. In addition, it was found that knowledge activities focusing on knowledge products are best developed in smaller homogenous groups (up to 10 peers with very similar interests and needs). As a result, the 'Market Access for the Poor' network included several thematic sub-groups on topics such as coffee, financial services and biofuels.

Knowledge results to date

For knowledge activities to be most relevant and effective for improving personal and institutional service delivery and performance, as well as to leverage the impact on poverty reduction, they should generate concrete output that may be shared with partners and colleagues in order to be repeatedly applied with clients and partners.

For concrete and tangible evidence of results the 'Market Access for the Poor' network is again highlighted. This network led to:

- Reduced learning curve for advisors by sharing their experiences and lessons learned with clients in the region
Advisors are increasingly efficient and effective in acquiring knowledge and best practices in response to requests of clients for advice and information. Teamwork is established on a regional scale, because advisors now have access to their colleagues and to documentary materials on advisory practices and experiences.
- Methodological guidelines have been defined, used, shared and improved.
A methodological guide for chain analyses has been developed and published within the alliance with a client, the Ruralter Platform (Salazar Gonzáles and

van der Heyden 2004). A guide on how to connect small-scale farmers with large companies in Latin America is in use and will be published also by the Ruralter alliance. Specific tools for financial services and for Local Economic Development have been developed.

- Case-studies and best practices have been developed as reference material. An exploratory study on the possible implications and opportunities of the Kyoto Protocol for small-scale coffee producers in Latin America has been issued. Case descriptions on capacity building processes have been made on subjects such as fair trade bananas, bamboo chain development and on forest small enterprise development (see www.snvworld.org).
- A resource information centre on Inclusive Business and Dgroups has been developed. In SNV a great number of virtual working spaces have been created using Dgroups (www.dgroups.org) and also specific websites for knowledge sharing have been created and are in use (e.g. www.inclusivebusiness.org and www.ruralter.org)
- Presentations on innovations, new insights and experiences with clients in relation to poverty alleviation have been made on national and international events.
- Contacts and expertise networks have been institutionalised and strengthened to be used as broker for clients.
- Benchmarking exercises have been carried out for specific issues (for example financial services).

Tangible (as well as intangible) results have been obtained over the last four years of knowledge development, sharing and brokering in SNV, while at the same time lessons were learned on mechanisms and dynamics for knowledge management and how to improve them.

Mechanisms for knowledge management

In order to better coordinate and respond to knowledge needs within and outside the organisation, the Regional Unit for Strategy and Knowledge Development was started at the end of 2006, under the responsibility of a Regional Manager for Knowledge and Strategy Development. The purpose of creating this unit was to strengthen coordination of all activities related to knowledge development, focusing on effective strategy implementation for increased impact on poverty. Since mid- 2007, all networks are coordinated from this Unit, as the network leaders became part of the regional knowledge team that is managed by the Knowledge and Strategy Unit.

Building on the activities, results and dynamics of the networks and on knowledge needs expressed in the regional and national strategies, the unit for Strategy and Knowledge Development is focusing on the following areas of work:

- Mapping and modelling of context situation and trends relevant for SNV's work with regard to impact on poverty;
- Development and management of SNV's provision of products, methodologies and tools to clients for advisory and brokering services; and
- Systematization and documentation of the results of SNV-LA practice, for purposes of knowledge sharing and management, quality improvement, communication and publication

The Unit contributes to a closer link between knowledge development and strategy implementation, through more effective client engagements, quality standards for the advisory practice, an enhanced learning culture in the organisation and, ultimately, better services to clients and increased impact on poverty.

The networks play an important role as mechanisms for establishing constant mutual feedback between the regional unit and the field, providing advisors' input for knowledge products and needs, testing and improving of products in the field and last but not least, making knowledge sharing and learning part of SNV-LA's daily practice. The Regional Manager for Knowledge and Strategy Development is a member of the Regional Management Team of SNV-LA which safeguards the link between knowledge and strategy.

Another facilitating mechanism to knowledge development and sharing is a planned SNV portal that will allow for connecting and accessing knowledge resources as well as people, and will facilitate communication and collaboration in countries, regions (SNV-LA) and between regions (from SNV-LA to other SNV regions in Africa, Asia and the Balkans, and vice versa). While Dgroups has been an adequate and effective tool to introduce virtual working spaces, it is felt that SNV should develop virtual mechanisms and facilities that include a variety of electronic tools as well as procedures for institutional knowledge development. A portal with such characteristics is now being developed by SNV.

Further innovation in knowledge development, sharing and brokering mechanisms in SNV will be facilitated on a corporate level where innovative mechanisms tried out and established in other regions and other organisation are identified, shared and supported. Within a corporate knowledge management strategy, these experiences will be assessed and documented for cross-fertilisation in the organisation. For instance, the Learning Platforms in the SNV Africa regions have been successful in establishing practitioner-led research that has strengthened knowledge on specific themes related to governance (Klinken and Prinsen 2007). A Research & Development (R&D) agenda is being proposed with a corporate strategy on developing SNV as a learning organisation. In addition, local initiatives such as study groups and forming client-teams for knowledge brokering may be worthwhile to assess and share experiences.

Partnerships for knowledge development, sharing and brokering

Partnerships for knowledge development, sharing and brokering have been identified as an important mechanism to develop innovative knowledge in a joint effort to combine experiences, analyses and expertise, as well as to multiply the involvement of users of knowledge. To illustrate the experience with partnerships in SNV-LA, the experience of the Inclusive Business network within the Ruralter platform will be described as an example.

The Ruralter network is an Andean learning platform where different development organisations gather and join forces. Each member has a different role and complementary expertise. At the same time, Ruralter has a wide scope for the implementation of the knowledge products developed by the platform. As SNV can never cater for all these roles and experiences in its own organisation, working in partnerships is crucial

In collaboration with Ruralter, SNV-LA has produced three practical guidelines (see above in the results section). To show the function of working in partnership, each of the three guidelines has been developed in a similar way, according to the following sequence of actions:

- Identify within the platform a knowledge need, this is done by listening to clients, looking at the context, analysing own needs and gaps of members;
- Each year another topic is selected by its members;
- Experiences are analysed in the countries where the platform is working (Chilli, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia). This is done by case studies.
- In order to compare the case studies, a methodology is developed by members and by hiring specific consultants.
- The methodology is implemented in the countries and information is gathered and analysed at country level and later at regional level.
- The conclusions are diffused at national level by workshops and at regional level .
- The conclusions are translated into a practical guideline for fieldworkers which can be used by member organisations and can be promoted in the region as a tool to reduce poverty in a specific area.
- Financial support is needed and has been provided by members and by donors.

Knowledge development, sharing and brokering in partnerships is at the core of SNV's strategy and is currently being developing strongly, both in SNV-LA and in the rest of the organisation.

Lessons learned

Knowledge networks in SNV-LA have proved to be an effective and stimulating vehicle for knowledge development and sharing. Members of staff have been able to contribute to mutual learning and have obtained improved access to institutional intellectual capital based on knowledge and experiences gained by others in daily practice. As a result, clients have been offered higher quality services, advisory work could be carried more efficiently, and a tendency to work with multidisciplinary teams for clients or groups of clients has been enforced. At national and regional level, knowledge networks have proved to be of great value by pooling local experiences, results and achieved impact on a higher level. The networks have been able to organise groups of experts for specific tasks that could produce clear overviews, presentations and cases to be presented to external parties, such as donors, partners and the media.

The evolution of knowledge networks in SNV-LA from 2004 to date has generated the following lessons.

First of all, knowledge management and network agenda setting needs to be anchored at different levels of the organisation for success:

- in the strategy where knowledge development, sharing and/or brokering is identified as a need for the organisation, for instance to stay on the vanguard of practice, for presentation and positioning, for partnership development;
- in operational planning where both time and financial resources are allocated to knowledge management and to networks; and
- in primary processes or as in SNV in advisory practice where knowledge has a role to play in service/product delivery, team dynamics and quality of practice.

Secondly, organisation of a network has to be clarified; responsibilities have to be defined and handed over explicitly (particularly with regard to budget and time) and tasks should be defined in relation to output and expected impact. A network organisation will evolve over time according needs and possibilities of its members. However, in SNV-LA, it proved that within an overall network identity with general objectives, a working plan and a sub-division of thematic groups, is most productive and satisfying for members to be actively engaged. Periodic feedback of sub-groups to the network is important, as well as establishing a steering group (in SNV called 'core-group').

Thirdly, tools required to facilitate collaboration, sharing and discussion in the networks comprise a mixture of electronic tools, events and group work. The need for more advanced tools will gradually develop. In order to develop knowledge (and knowledge products), people must be facilitated to meet, discuss, present, share and have access to information and knowledge, which is done in a balanced mix of e-collaboration, workshops, presentations, exchange and virtual document and knowledge centre.

Fourthly, partnerships are key in knowledge management to achieve leverage of efforts and results, to improve quality by adding other experiences and foci, and to be able to directly share knowledge with peers and other organisations.

Remarks for the future: SNV a knowledge-based organisation

Acknowledging the conclusion that knowledge management in SNV-LA has been effective with regard to connecting practitioners, brokering knowledge for clients, knowledge sharing and generating knowledge products, it is also a learning process towards a fully institutionalised way of working, projected for 2008. Knowledge development and brokering will be increasingly pursued by directly involving clients and partner organisations, in order to enhance the use and impact of knowledge by client organisations. Reflecting this, a regional SNV-LA knowledge team will be consolidated over time, dedicated to the development of knowledge products and intellectual capital that will enhance SNV's provision of services to clients, the permanent analysis of regional trends in practice, and the quality assurance of that practice through monitoring and evaluation.

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Abstract

Knowledge development and brokering have been introduced at the heart of SNV's strategic plan (2000-2006 and 2007-2015; SNV 2000; SNV 2007) in order to enhance the effects and impact of its work with local clients (about 2300 word wide and 500 in Latin America). Knowledge management in SNV Latin America (SNV-LA) was implicitly introduced by SNV in 2004 when so called knowledge networks were started. Knowledge networks have developed as platforms for practitioners that share and develop knowledge directly related to capacity strengthening in client organisations and the strengthening of local institutional platforms.

This article describes knowledge development and brokering processes and activities of one of the regional SNV-LA knowledge networks (around the subject 'Market Access for the Poor'), with regard to: organising and focusing network activities on the results and impact of our practice; identification of knowledge products; developing institutional partnerships; tools for knowledge management; and lessons learned by SNV, by partners and impact on clients. The experiences in this network are representative of experiences of the other four knowledge networks in SNV-LA.

Based on the conclusion that knowledge management in SNV-LA (as well as SNV world-wide) has been effective with regard to connecting practitioners, brokering knowledge for clients, knowledge sharing and generating knowledge products as a result of collaboration and partnering, it is also a learning process towards a fully institutionalized way of working, projected for 2008. Over time, the regional knowledge team will be consolidated, dedicated to the development of knowledge products and intellectual property to enhance SNV-LA's services to clients, partners and the development sector.

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