## COMMUNITY NOTE

# The state of the art on knowledge integration across boundaries: key findings and emerging future issues

Wenny Ho[a]*, Josine Stremmelaar[b] and Sarah Cummings[c]

*[a]Independent; [b]Hivos; [c]Knowledge Ecologist*

This Community Note summarizes the background and findings of the two day seminar 'The state of the art of knowledge integration across boundaries' which took place in Utrecht, the Netherlands, in January 2012. One of the impediments to development approaches is commonly felt to be the fact that the different knowledge domains of researchers, practitioners and policy-makers are not working together to create new knowledge for development. Hence cross-domain knowledge integration – understood as processes of knowledge co-creation linking domains particularly those of policy–making, science and practitioners – has received increased attention. This seminar aimed to tease out elements and principles that determine effective knowledge creation processes.

## Introduction

A two-day seminar on 'The state of the art on knowledge integration across boundaries' was held on 23–24 January, 2012 in Utrecht, Netherlands, hosted by Hivos[1] and IKM Emergent.[2] Its focus was to further thinking on knowledge integration and co-creation. A think piece 'Like a bridge over troubled waters: dialogues of policy, practitioner and academic knowledges' by Wenny Ho (2011) provided stepping stones to for rich discussions and energetic exchanges. Some key resulting insights and findings that kept surfacing are described below. Findings from the seminar, including films and interviews from the event, can be found on the website, 'Linking knowledge domains'.[3]

## Background

Across the International Development Cooperation (IDC) sector, knowledge is increasingly being acknowledged as a key resource to achieve effectiveness. In recent years, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the Netherlands and beyond have developed knowledge-related programmes, and in some cases, established or further expanded organizational units specialized in knowledge sharing and learning. It is however not clear whether they amass to a real change of the knowledge landscape.

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*Corresponding author. Email: howws@wxs.nl

particularly those of policy-making, science and practitioners – has received increased attention. This workshop aimed to tease out elements and principles that determine effective knowledge creation processes.

Central to the seminar were the results of research on effective knowledge creation processes undertaken by Wenny Ho. This research has its roots in both Hivos' and IKM Emergent's interest and experiences in how knowledge integration occurs and how it can be facilitated. Hivos Knowledge Programme[4] is a practitioner-academic collaboration aimed at developing knowledge on issues imperative to the work of civil society organizations (CSOs) and the development sector at large. To achieve its goals Hivos works closely with CSOs and academic centres worldwide. IKM Emergent argues that development is a knowledge industry and the interaction between these domains is needed at a fundamental level if development issues are to be resolved.

**Conclusions and recommendations of the think piece**

The think piece put forward a number of proposals to bring about a new dynamism in knowledge co-creation efforts and these proposals were discussed at the seminar. The proposals comprised:

(1) The sector needs to avoid further 'paralysis by analysis'. It needs to invest most in putting concepts into practice as this is where the most change will probably be seen. Much conceptual and methodological clarity regarding knowledge co-creation and knowledge integration already exists that can be built upon and further enriched with insights gained in the development sector. Across different sectors, a consensus on the contours of a framework is emerging, not necessarily of detailed steps to follow, but of the broad guiding principles.

(2) Rather than embarking on a new knowledge activity as if it were a journey to an unknown land, it is more fruitful to arrive at a collective understanding of the current state of the art and jointly define where and why development cooperation processes may diverge from what has been built so far in other sectors. Regularly organizing these *reflexive benchmarking* and *purposeful scanning exercises* beyond 'the usual suspects and subjects' in development cooperation could accelerate the pace of innovation and deepen understanding in knowledge programmes.

(3) Development actors need to follow a more robust and rigorous methodical approach to knowledge processes. To achieve that, they need to be able to *differentiate and systematize*: systematize under what circumstances knowledge integration approaches provide added value, and why; and differentiate between the possible contribution of convergence and divergence, when diversity is enriching, and when a common stand or collectivization is required, and of what elements (e.g. values, approaches, resources).

(4) To further build a theoretical and empirical body of knowledge co-creation for the development sector, knowledge produced by the sector needs to be *able to withstand the scrutiny* of stakeholders including scientists. This is a must in knowledge co-creation where credibility of the knowledge produced is a fundamental asset. Concepts cannot be simply adopted from other sectors, but require systematic and contextualized validation. In consequence, the proposed purposeful sampling strategies of useful concepts and approaches should be followed by conscious and methodical articulation of verifiable contributions and applicability. Thorough

knowledge co-creation processes could be further enhanced by actors having the capacity to understand and judge the basis of claim-making.

(5) Processes of creating knowledge about knowledge co-creation can be stimulated by intensifying multi-stakeholder interactions and joint sense-making. This requires systematically and continuously *strengthening the inbuilt reflexivity* of the development cooperation sector, enhancing its capacity to change itself based on acquired self-knowledge. In transactional organizing, the task at hand is the centre of organizing, around which the key actors are identified and included. Their self-organizing capacity includes the management of relationships and boundaries in order to explicitly take account of the development knowledge system rather than purely organizational interests. Such an approach could be helpful to move beyond de-politicized knowledge sharing, and strengthen platforms for collective interpretation and sense-making that supersede organizational interests.

(6) As sense-making plays a fundamental role in knowledge generation processes, knowledge does not simply 'travel'. In consequence, processes of knowledge co-creation which hinge on collective sense-making, intense processes of interaction and interpretation are indispensable. This requires that those engaged in knowledge work in development cooperation have a well developed self-awareness or a deeper consciousness of the own theory of change; alternative paradigms; and conceptual and methodological principles, and their theoretical embedding.

(7) Knowledge co-creation requires systematic boundary thinking and consistent organizing and approaches such as transactional organizing, besides the strengthening of the institutional infrastructure. It is not clear the extent to which organizations have been undertaking efforts to consciously *strengthen systemic synergy*, *complementarity and connectivity* also at the conceptual and methodological level. An institutional analysis of the current landscape is therefore proposed. This would include the identification and strengthening of existing nodes of transcription and translation (boundary organizations or individuals), the building of new ones and enhancing their credibility. Actors that have thus been identified require more than the agility and flexibility to move between domains to grow into the job. They will evolve and mature guided by criteria of independence, authority, credibility, openness and humility, and be accountable to the different communities in the domains.

(8) Given that working in development 'for the poor', by definition, implies working with differential power bases and relations, understanding knowledge co-creation processes as negotiation and politics requires an awareness of expected and unexpected effects, and where possible, a strategy to strengthen the power bases and capacities of those who most need that support. Literature on knowledge management and development cooperation is littered with wordings that implicitly express problematic issues related to 'North- South' relationships. Biases and power relations are an intrinsic part of knowledge co-creation processes which requires a constant awareness from the different

## The outer space of knowledge integration

While the focus of the think piece and the seminar was on KI processes in the 'sector' of IDC, the sector itself was not subject of analysis or discussion. Nevertheless, a number of important issues were raised that, although outside the direct firmament of KI, need to

be taken into account as they influence KI processes and the way these relate to changes sought:

(1) *Changes in and debates about Aid and International Cooperation:* scenarios are changing quickly and deeply. The focus of the think piece and the seminar was not to analyse them, but these changes are important to consider (see no. 2);

(2) *Knowledge for change*: development processes are change processes. Knowledge integration in itself only gauges meaning when it is embedded in the *for what* – what is it supposed to contribute to? Without the embedding KI becomes an empty buzzword. For KI to be connected to change, understanding external changes is crucial;

(3) *For-profit sector*: several participants pointed out that business was not involved or participating. However, other participants indicated that as the drivers are fundamentally different, there is only so much that can be learnt from or gained from joining forces with business actors. Relevance of the knowledge produced is the yardstick rather than their involvement *per se*. Also, as the sector is extremely diverse, gains and costs of engagement difficult to understand when not further specifying who and what;

(4) *Who is 'we'*: it was pointed out that 'we' can be a cover-up, as there are also issues of competition and divergent interests, and as well as the trend to form alliances. There can also be contesting parties which can make KI processes volatile and even conflictual.

**Evidence, rigor and robustness**

Evidence-based and rigorous working for KI is to be understood as the opposite of ad hoc approaches: make sure that whatever you produce or approach you follow, that it is up for scrutiny, and that it builds on available knowledge.

Suggested rigor and robustness criteria for KI processes that have already been tried and tested:

- Transparency
- Validity
- Reproducibility/traceability
- Relevance

These are 'normal' scientific standards. The question is how to apply them when there are different stakeholders. With triangulation, divergence of opinions is not a problem, but a source of richness.[5] The creation of intermediate products can enhance transparency of the process. With negotiated knowledge resulting from KI, an issue is furthermore the *acceptability* of 'alternative' knowledges, and its context specificity, and how that influences issues of validity etc.

The construction of evidence and robustness can be build into the approach followed by:

- Being on the look out for comparable contrary cases to strengthen 'evidence'
- Challenging saturation and avoiding a premature closure

- Articulating intermediate understanding and checking that against 'other' perspectives
- Also, building in ways for triangulation: for methods, data, cases, findings and contexts and context-specificity (e.g. through analytical induction that is checking against available data and realities)
- Continuously checking against values for early detection of possible clashes between desired and (unconsciously) applied paradigms.

**Enablers**

There exist many disconnecting drivers in the IDC, e.g. different timings and cycles and frames, evaporation of knowledge, divergent interests, disconnecting business models. Nevertheless, in the seminar a great number of enabling pointers and starters were put forward. Here, overarching ones are listed:

- Change in mindset: think not disconnect, but connect
- Undertake 'pre'-research: preparation is key – build time for piloting
- Create space for collective experiences and joint efforts, e.g. joint travels, multi-stakeholder platforms
- Exchange people, create positions and support people to travel across boundaries
- Create and expand a list of enabling conditions
- Make use of technological innovations for transparency and accountability
- Start where you are, and build from there (structures, relations, conditions, etc.)
- Snowball process, also in deepening understanding of what happens
- Start together: there is a tremendous need for brokers, bridging and boundary workers, people who can contribute to the fluidity between domains
- Make sure to budget time and other resources for brokering, boundary work, collaborative efforts
- Step away from fixed ideas regarding (prescribed) roles and focus on what you can contribute
- Marry different approaches (but be knowledgeable about methodologies and paradigms underlying approaches)
- How to address power inequalities: prepare before interacting, have separate groups before mixing, etc.
- What drives a process is not a methodological problem, but a political one: unconsciously and unintentionally one tries to drive a process. Sometimes, the issue is not about being transparent, having different agendas or participation, but about situations when there are contradicting interests with trade-offs that are unknown, irresolvable and immeasurable. Participatory methodologies cannot resolve fundamental power dynamics, although they can help to make maximum use of available space

**Issues for the future**

Apart from those mentioned in the think piece, a number of issues emerged that need further deliberation and reflection.

(1) One important issue is the need to elaborate and enhance a Theory of Change of KI. So far, we are not clear nor document rigorously the link between KI and change.

(2) We need to work towards creating 'morphed' organizations, that is organization for the future that can support a landscape vision on KI.

(3) Shifting contexts also create opportunities: how can we understand them and make best use of those spaces?

(4) How can we be more strategic in our choices regarding KI1?

(5) How can we start developing new paradigms together? In which direction the current needs to change?

(6) What is the balance between self-reflection and connecting with others (both happen too little)?

## Notes

1. www.hivos.nl
2. www.ikmemergent.net
3. http://linkingknowledgedomains.wordpress.com/
4. www.hivos.net
5. There is a whole theoretical stream of evaluation approaches that focus on this, e.g. narrative evaluation.
6. A number of pointers are already presented in the think piece, and will not be repeated here.

## Notes on contributors

Wenny Ho is currently independent. She previously worked as accountability advisor for Action Aid International and as monitoring and evaluation advisor for the Europe region of Action Aid International. She has also worked as senior policy advisor to the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs with main focus on strengthening research and knowledge systems. She also has experience working with FNV, the main Dutch confederation of trade unions, for Oxfam-Novib, Finnida and the FAO in posts ranging from advising on organizational development, strategic planning and institutional development, gender and agriculture, on social forestry. Originally trained as a forester, she holds a PhD in International Relations and Change Management from the University of Amsterdam.

Josine Stremmelaar is coordinator of the Knowledge Programme at the Hivos based in The Hague, the Netherlands. She is former Executive Manager of the International Institute for Asian Studies. She has a Master of Arts in Non-Western History at the VU University of Amsterdam. Her interest lies at the intersection of the knowledge landscapes of science, practice and policy, and how this dialogical relationship can contribute to development.

Sarah Cummings is one of the Editors of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*. She has been working with the IKM Emergent Research Programme (www.ikmemergent.net). For more information, see www.knowledgeecologists.org.

## Reference

Ho, W., 2011. Like a bridge over troubled waters: dialogues of policy, practitioner and academic knowledges. The Hague: Hivos; Bonn: IKM Emergent, European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI). Available from: http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Publications/Pubs/Like-a-Bridge-over-Troubled-Waters. [Accessed 31 January 2012].