LIKE A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS
Dialogues of policy, practitioner and academic knowledges
By Wenny Ho

Executive Summary

The think piece *LIKE A BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATERS: Dialogues of policy, practitioner and academic knowledges* deals with Cross-domain Knowledge Integration (KI) in International Development Cooperation (IDC). This is understood as processes of knowledge co-creation linking domains particularly those of policy-making, science and practitioners. The paper builds on pointers that emerged from a number of earlier workshops, but is mainly based on a literature review of different theoretical streams. Its focus is to tease out elements and principles that determine effective knowledge creation processes, especially in The Netherlands.

In general, IDC would benefit from a more rigorous analysis, a deeper understanding of what constitutes a claim that can be backed by empirical studies, and what are normative propositions with perhaps a high morality, but more limited validity. Development professionals need to strengthen their capacity to discern normative, value led statements from substantive arguments derived from evidentiary bases. The capacity to discern is especially important in the development sector as a key role in its reflexivity is assigned to remunerated consultants.

In the Netherlands, many development organisations have expanded and intensified their knowledge activities. A number of reviews have been fielded recently, which point to common areas that need improvement. Nevertheless, it would be a strategic move for the Dutch development actors to join hands and embark on a collective process of identifying and articulating strategic and overarching lessons learnt. This would strengthen the conceptual and methodological evidence base from which can be drawn and change in knowledge programmes can be leveraged to overcome weaknesses associated with the body of knowledge in development cooperation.

Important lessons can be learnt regarding knowledge co-creation and integration for development by analyzing how these processes are shaped in other sectors. The paper explored how knowledge and knowledge creation takes place in the sectors of Agriculture, Health, and Science, Technology and Innovation (STI). Results were then compared with knowledge processes in the development cooperation sector. There is an apparent move across sectoral streams towards knowledge co-creation as multi-level, multi-actor and multi-method approaches to unstructured problems in which boundary work and boundary spanning figure centrally.
In both the agricultural and health sector, a number of characteristics are identified that together seem to constitute a landscape that is conducive to knowledge integration and cross-sector fertilization. Further research is needed to draw more definite conclusions.

The agricultural sector can be characterized by a history of reinventing its approaches. For good or for bad, lessons learnt have led to new generations of programming in the sector. Some of these have led to exciting new initiatives. It is important to see these innovations in relation to the relatively closely-knit social tissue of the agricultural field, hypothesized to have led to an inbuilt 'reflexivity'. Four factors are held out that appear mainly to account for this.
There are a number of examples from the agricultural sector of innovative lessons and concepts that can broaden thinking about knowledge co-creation approaches. One

important lesson is that despite the unstructured character of a problem, and other daunting issues, there is the need for bringing in 'tried and tested' rigorous processes, tools and expertise in areas where lessons do exist, e.g. in stakeholder engagement, facilitation, and teambuilding.

Another lesson is that, even though an emergent approach is applied, a deliberate sequencing can be followed of *piloting*, *articulating* to strengthen theoretical understandings followed by *furthering practice* to achieve double loop learning. Further nodes of articulation for double-loop learning are then created by undertaking metastudies and developing meta-theories which support further theorizing. In this way, processes of learning are intertwined with the strengthening and expanding the existing theoretical and empirical base.

Further lessons show that investing in boundary actors, work, and objects contributes greatly to successful knowledge co-creation processes. However, this needs to be accompanied by strategies to tackle from the beginning the often large (and largely hidden) asymmetries of power felt or used by stakeholders.

The integration of the lay and scientific forms of knowledges as a negotiated process is a useful insight that emerged in health literature. Perceiving knowledge integration in this way opens the space for developing specific methodologies.

'What is knowledge' and 'who has knowledge' are studied in the research field of Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) Studies. This field has generated insights and interesting propositions which could strengthen knowledge integration approaches in development cooperation. One proposition concerns the construction of validity of produced knowledge. Constructing validity not as rooted in an objective reality, but in terms of plausibility and credibility, provides more robust criteria to assess knowledge for action in unstructured problems and situations. Plausibility and credibility therefore, offer important handles to judge and frame knowledge for IDC change processes. Unfortunately, such a view contrasts sharply with the current push for evidence-based knowledge production.

Another potentially useful concept is that of scale of governance for knowledge management. Other potentially enriching concepts and insights can be further explored. However, the high number of initiatives and concepts can blur understanding of what can be actually gained to strengthen knowledge for development and knowledge co-creation approaches in particular. An effective compass can be obtained by linking knowledge creation to a change frame.

The suggestion to enrich knowledge creation processes in development cooperation by browsing more systematically bodies of knowledge in widely divergent areas for new insights or innovative concepts needs to be bounded. To avoid getting lost in an apples-versus-pears discussion, development actors need to come to a minimum shared understanding of the main factors that influence knowledge creation in IDC. One influencing factor is, for example, that development cooperation functions as a set of loosely, sometimes near-accidentally coupled systems, which straddle many different knowledge domains and ecologies. A common minimum conceptual basis and shared sense of direction will furthermore strengthen the social tissue of knowledge co-creation processes, because trust and rapport between involved actors is deepened. In the end, this will enhance the effectiveness of interactions in knowledge co-creation processes.

The paper holds out a few suggestions of distinguishing traits that influence knowledge creation processes for development:
1. Firstly, the issue of entangled accountability chains in development cooperation complicates any investment in knowledge endeavours. Power dynamics that confuse

basic questions such as 'Whose knowledge counts', also taint understanding and structuring of accountability chains in knowledge programmes.

2. Secondly, public scrutiny demands straightforward and short-term communication products which do not align with the dynamics of knowledge co-creation approaches.

3. Thirdly, knowledge for development is set apart by the sometimes extremely dissimilar cultural, socio-economic and political backgrounds of actors involved, who furthermore differ widely in public visibility.

4. Finally, a fourth issue is the match or mismatch between available (financial and human) resources and the task at hand. As problem ownership is unrelated to, for example, funding flows, this creates continual frictions and disparities.

Proposals for the future

A number of proposals are put forward to bring a new dynamism in knowledge co-creation efforts. First of all, it is proposed that the sector needs to avoid further 'paralysis by analysis'. It is in the **'actionabilization' of concepts** that the sector needs to invest most as this is where the 'proof of the pudding' will be. Examples of helpful conceptual schemes are offered that help untangle a situation for ´actionabilization', such as the distinction between complicated, complex and chaotic.

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. Rather than embarking on a new knowledge trajectory 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 organising these **reflexive benchmarking** and **purposeful scanning exercises** beyond 'the usual suspects and subjects' in development cooperation could accelerate the pace of innovation and deepening in knowledge programmes.

The demand on development actors is to follow a more robust and rigorous or 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).

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 contextualised validation. In consequence, the proposed purposeful sampling strategies of useful concepts and approaches are to be followed by conscious and methodological articulation of verifiable contributions and applicability. Sturdiness of knowledge co-creation processes could be further enhanced by actors having the capacity to understand and judge the basis of claim-making.

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-organising capacity includes the management of relationships and boundaries in order to explicitly take account of the development knowledge system rather than purely organisational 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 organisational interests.

As sense-making plays a fundamental role in knowledge generation processes, knowledge does not simply 'travel'. In consequence, processes of knowledge co-creation which hinges on collective sense-making, intense processes of interaction and interpretation are indispensable. This requires that those engaged with knowledge work in development cooperation have a well developed self-awareness: a deeper consciousness of the own theory of change and alternative paradigms, of followed conceptual and methodological principles, their theoretical embedding, justification and possible alternatives forms the basis for effective interactive engagement in knowledge co-production.

Knowledge co-creation requires systematic boundary thinking and consistent organising and approaches such as transactional organizing, besides the strengthening of the institutional infrastructure. It is not clear whether so far, any organisation has been undertaking its efforts with a view 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 organisations or individuals), the building of new ones and their credibility. Identified actor or actors require more than the agility and flexibility to move between domains. They also have to fulfil the criteria of independence, authority, credibility, openness and humility, and be accountable to the different communities in the domains.

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 need that support.

Literature on knowledge management and development cooperation is littered with wordings that implicitly express problematic issues related to 'north'- 'south' relationships. In knowledge co-creation processes, where biases and power relations are rife, constant awareness is demanded from the different parties involved and intense efforts are required to flag the manipulation of knowledge, and carefully craft more balanced boundary work and objects.

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