The owl and the dove: knowledge strategies to improve the peacebuilding practice of local non-governmental organisations

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Introduction

“Am I doing this thing right?” and, more fundamentally, “am I doing the right thing?” are questions most people ask themselves from time to time. And, indeed, they should: asking such questions leads to learning and improvement. In peacebuilding, they are particularly important, as the potential price of doing the wrong thing is high and renewed fighting could ultimately be the result. However, these questions are not easy to answer. Doing so entails an open mind and a willingness to question previous decisions and ideas and even admit mistakes – something which in a context affected by conflict is particularly difficult because of the implications this may have. More practically, it is hard to obtain the knowledge needed to answer the questions in a satisfactory way. This would require research, reflection and exchange, all of which are difficult in a conflict-affected and resource-deprived context. In addition, not all actors have equal influence in discussions over policy directions, nor are all able to decide for themselves whether they can do research or take time for learning. Structural factors, such as the policies of donor agencies, shape the extent to which peacebuilders can develop and share their knowledge.

This study aims to map these elements and find out how peacebuilders can become more effective learners. It centres on two elements: knowledge, embodied by the owl in the title, and peacebuilding, symbolised by the dove. The dove represents the range of activities by civil society organisations that aim to end and prevent violent conflict and establish and sustain peace in the societies in which they work. It also represents an aim, an overall goal of these organisations and the people working in them: the goal of peace. The owl is the knowledge – experiences, lessons learned, research outcomes – that may improve the efforts of peacebuilders and bring them closer to their aim of peace. Knowledge can be an end in itself, but in this context it is considered primarily as a means to an end: peace. In order for peacebuilding work to be successful, it is important that it is based on existing relevant knowledge – knowledge, for example, about the context, the actors and their cultures, the capabilities and constraints of people and communities, and the effect of particular working methods.

An approach currently dominant in development – a field of which, when it comes to funding flows and the practical organisation of work, peacebuilding is often a part – sees development almost as a service industry, producing a set of measurable deliverables. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were agreed upon by the United
Nations (UN) member states in 2000, are a good example of that approach. However, reality is less easy to grasp. In essence, development is about helping develop capabilities of people to use such facilities. In that sense, development is really about knowledge. This does not only include the knowledge of development workers coming to train local people. It is at least as important to mobilise the knowledge of locals. Development “is a process which cannot happen, […] unless it is based both on a good understanding of the particular socio-economic reality that the ‘development’ is intended to change and, just as importantly, on an appreciation of the perceptions of local populations as to their options in that reality. Without such ‘knowledge’, interventions fail, as we have seen time and time again.” (Powell 2006: 519, emphasis in original) The decisive factor then becomes to “successfully link […] the range of knowledge components necessary to achieve your aim” (ibidem).

In countries affected by conflict both the need to find locally appropriate solutions and the difficulty in obtaining and using these are even more profound. In ‘postconflict’ countries large-scale violence has ceased but the underlying grievances, contradictions and structures that caused the conflict are usually still present. As a result the threat of renewed warfare looms large. Peacebuilding organisations employ a wide range of activities to prevent this from happening by addressing the causes of conflict, working for reconciliation and stimulating the development of peaceful structures and institutions. But they do so in difficult circumstances. Local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in conflict-torn countries find themselves in rapidly changing contexts. This calls for flexibility and the capacity to learn from one’s actions. Indeed, as the potential cost of making mistakes is high – it may even cost lives – the need to ‘get it right’ is particularly pressing. Learning from one’s own work and from the experiences of others is therefore a priority.

The characteristics of violent conflicts have changed significantly since the end of the Cold War, as is reflected by the term ‘New Wars’ (Kaldor 2006). Better learning about this new and changing context of conflict, and about the strategies that do and do not work as organisations work to transform this context, is needed. A recent study found that “NGOs best equipped to deal with security threats were those which […] had a strong analysis of the context” (Goodhand 2006: 107). Similarly, another study of nine successful South Asian NGOs showed that “the success of these NGOs was in part attributable to their willingness to embrace new learning and invest in developing their capacity as ‘learning NGOs’” (Hailey and James 2002: 398). However, learning is difficult in conflict
settings. NGO staff work in a context of urgency, have action-oriented working styles, and as a result often find it difficult to create time and space for reflection and learning. In conflict-torn societies, competition and distrust hamper knowledge sharing, and the content of knowledge itself is often contested. In addition, structural inequalities constrain the opportunities for learning and reflection that local Southern NGOs (SNGOs) have: the low research capacity of Southern knowledge institutions, a lack of recognition of indigenous knowledge, and the imposition of Northern policy priorities as part of the way the funding of NGOs is organised. All these issues contribute to a lack of opportunities for Southern peacebuilders to systematically reflect on the place of their activities in the wider spectrum of peacebuilding, to analyse the effect of their interventions and ask whether they are doing the right thing, to study the needs and priorities of beneficiaries and collect existing ideas and methodologies of peacebuilding, and to document and share lessons learned. Given these difficulties, this study explores ways in which peace practitioners may learn and reflect.

The knowledge strategies of organisations are a relatively new field of analysis, which originated in the business sector in the early 1990s, reflecting an increasing emphasis on the ‘knowledge economy’. Some years later, the development sector began to take up the issue as well. However, this body of thinking remains largely confined to internal learning mechanisms and knowledge flows inside organisations in the global North. From a study of British development organisations, Ramalingham (2005: 26) concludes that these organisations’ “focus on internal knowledge work belies the fact that [they rely] on activities in the South as a key source of their most valued knowledge, and that eventually, all knowledge that is ‘value generating’ must by necessity be tied back to a level of [knowledge sharing] with those in the South. […] Learning between agencies, between agencies and Southern partners, and between agencies and beneficiaries, is a clear gap in the knowledge and learning strategies [of international development organisations]”.

In order to contribute to filling that gap, *The Owl and the Dove* focuses on the knowledge processes in which local peacebuilding organisations engage as they work in postconflict settings in the global South. It further develops the theory on knowledge and learning in the field of development and peacebuilding, adding elements relevant to peace NGOs in the South. Like the field of organisational learning, peacebuilding and postconflict development are relatively young fields of study. Drawing these together leads to a new picture of the specific characteristics and challenges of knowledge and learning in conflict
settings. This study also uses the outcomes of over a hundred interviews with primarily Southern peacebuilders and analyses case studies of initiatives aiming to improve the knowledge base and processes of these actors and their organisations.

In response to the difficulties that constrain their learning, Southern peacebuilders identify a need to find ways that better enable them to extract, use and disseminate their own implicit knowledge and the knowledge that exists in the communities in which they work. This would make more locally relevant knowledge available in conflict areas and achieve a more equitable balance between Northern and Southern contributions to the development of theory in the field of peacebuilding. In line with this, the much-used concepts of ‘capacity building’ and ‘knowledge transfer’ are conceived as two-way processes. In the study ideas and initiatives are examined that aim at achieving this. The aim of the study, then, is to shed light on the difficulties and opportunities for NGOs in conflict regions in their efforts to become more effective in peacebuilding processes through their participation in learning and knowledge sharing processes. The book centres on the following research question: What are the challenges and opportunities Southern peace NGOs are confronted with in accumulating, mobilising and disseminating the knowledge that is needed to make optimal policy decisions, carry out activities in an effective way and adjust to continuously changing circumstances?

In order to address this question, this study maps the structural factors that shape the possibilities for learning and knowledge exchange and analyses past and present initiatives in this light. Lessons learned from knowledge experiments are documented and placed in the context of theories about knowledge management, learning and networking. The study focuses not on the ‘hardware’ of technical knowledge management solutions, but on the more difficult ‘software’, or people, side of the story. This reflects the current shift in focus in thinking about learning and knowledge exchange from technological solutions to the human and social constellations that make learning possible.1

The research question posed above leads to a number of more specific questions.

- What is the role and place of local NGOs in contemporary peacebuilding processes, and what does their position in the wider field of actors and processes mean for the knowledge on which they base their work and the learning they engage in?

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1 See 3.2.2.
• What forms does knowledge of peace and conflict take?
• What are general characteristics of organisational learning processes, and how can these be applied to Southern peace NGOs? What characterises the learning processes of Southern peace NGOs?

Theory and conceptualisation

Relevant theoretical discussions that are drawn upon revolve around the following concepts.

• Civil society and peacebuilding. A few recent publications look at the roles that civil society organisations play or potentially may play in the prevention or transformation of violent conflict and the building of structures for a sustainable peace (Barnes 2006, Kaldor 2003, Goodhand 2006, Anderson and Olsen 2003). One of the findings from this literature is that civil society and NGOs\(^2\) often neglect to think explicitly about the way in which their projects go together with those of others and contribute to the wider aim of sustainable peace. The reasons for this are usually not analysed in any depth. Based on conversations with NGO staff, this study explores some of these reasons, such as inter-organisational competition and the lack of funds for analysis and long-term planning. It also asks whether organisational learning strategies have the potential of improving NGOs’ reflection on their place in the wider field.

• Knowledge and types of knowledge in development and peacebuilding. This literature distinguishes between explicit, readily available knowledge, and tacit knowledge inside people’s heads (Sauquet 2004). Other discussions relate to distinctions between academic and practitioner knowledge and between external and indigenous knowledge (Rip 2001, De la Rive Box 2001, RAWOO 2000). Applying these types of knowledge explicitly to the field of peacebuilding, and examining the implications for learning processes, has not been done so far. This book will do so in chapter two.

• Learning and cycles of learning. Theories about learning emphasise the learning cycle that was described briefly in the introduction, and distinguish between superficial and deeper learning processes, whereby deeper learning requires questioning the assumptions and theories on which one’s entire

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\(^2\) See chapter one for a discussion of the terms ‘civil society’ and ‘NGOs’.
mode of operation may be based (Boonstra 2004, Argyris 2004a and 2004b). Chapter three looks at these processes and connects them to the learning processes of NGOs.

- **Knowledge management and organisational learning.** There is a large body of literature in these fields (Sauquet 2004, Nooteboom 2002). Most of this literature originates in the field of business and business studies. However, recently publications have begun to appear that look at organisational learning specifically for the international development-oriented sector (Ramalingham 2005, 2006; Britton 2005). So far, these publications have almost exclusively focused on Northern-based organisations, and a gap in the literature exists both when it comes to organisational learning by SNGOs, and knowledge interactions between Northern and Southern actors. Chapter three signals this gap, while the remainder of the study contributes to filling it.

- **Bridging research and policy.** In the development sector as well as in other fields of work a body of literature has come into existence about ways to bridge the divide between researchers and policymakers (Court and Young 2003, Carden and Neilson 2005, Stone 2002). However, this literature is somewhat limited as it mostly starts from the angle of the researcher and focuses on influencing policy with one’s findings. It also largely leaves out the practitioner: the person who implements policies and from whom new research findings often originate. This study aims to fill that gap by adopting the perspective of practitioners and looking at their knowledge needs, the way they use available knowledge, and the knowledge they have to offer. Most explicitly this is done in chapter five.

- **Knowledge sharing.** Publications on knowledge sharing ask, for example, what the best strategies are for bringing out and sharing tacit knowledge, or what the restraints are that keep people from sharing openly (O’Dell et al. 1998, Ballantyne 2001, Baud 2002). These publications are relatively few. Interview findings regarding knowledge sharing among Southern peace NGOs are used in chapters five, six, seven and eight to provide further empirical data that develop the thinking about knowledge sharing. These data also shed light on the particular difficulties that knowledge sharing encounters in a context of conflict, distrust, and few resources.

- **Networking.** One prominent and much-used knowledge sharing tool is networking, although the aims of networking may be somewhat broader than knowledge exchange alone: action-
oriented networks work together to implement programmes or influence policy, for example. The literature on networking analyses various forms of networks and collects lessons learned on what works and what does not (Stone and Maxwell 2005, Van Deventer 2004, Benner et al. 2004). Much of the literature treats networking as a technical and neutral activity, while the study of North-South and Southern peace networks in chapters six and seven shows that it is in fact an activity shaped by politics and conflict.

- **Capacity building.** Capacity building has become a buzzword in the development sector, although many people are unclear about what it actually means. Most definitions include some element of knowledge transfer, making the concept relevant to this study. Some publications exist, mostly from the development sector itself, that attempt to clarify the concept and define strategies for capacity building (James and Wrigley 2006, Groot and Gerwen 2004). However, a gap exists between the conceptualisation and the actual practice of capacity building. Most agencies strive for optimal ownership of peace and development strategies by Southern partners, and conceptualise capacity building in this light. But the reality of the funding and accountability chain means that genuine ownership and partnership often do not exist. Thus, in chapters three and four this study compares the theory and practice of capacity building and asks whether capacity building programmes are interactive learning processes, or one-way knowledge transfers. In doing so, the concept of capacity building is placed more explicitly in the context of thinking about learning and knowledge transfer.

- **Discourse and knowledge systems.** Publications in various fields shed light on developments in discourse, the dominance of some discourses over others, and the ways in which this shapes knowledge recognised as ‘valid’. At an even deeper level, the literature about different knowledge systems in different parts of the world, and the ways in which particular systems have gained ground over others, provide a background for current-day inequalities in who generates knowledge and what knowledge is recognised (Hilhorst 2003, Mawdsley et al. 2002, Mudimbe 1988, Grasdorff 2005). This book (particularly chapter four) discusses the implications of these important discussions for donor-recipient relations and the knowledge and learning strategies used by local peace NGOs.

- **Donor regimes.** Related to the discussion about discourse, a body of literature on donor relations and the way these shape the
radius of action of SNGOs also sheds light on the ways in which power and knowledge are intertwined in practice (Edwards and Hulme 1996, Ferguson 1994, Krieger 2004). This issue emerged from the interviews with SNGO staff as vitally important in order to understand their knowledge and learning processes. Bringing in this literature, and further adding to it using the findings from the interviews, serves to highlight the political dimension of knowledge processes in the world of peacebuilding. This is significant because in the knowledge and learning literature mentioned earlier, these processes are often described as ‘flat’ (rather than hierarchical) and ‘neutral’ (rather than political). Chapter four discusses these issues.

**Approach**

As none of the sources have a *direct* bearing on the subject of the study, the approach chosen for the treatment of the theory is that of an explorative or heuristical analysis. In such an approach, a model is created from various theories and concepts. This model is not used as a fixed framework that is applied to the data, but it continues to evolve throughout the study according to the empirical findings. Information gathered in interviews alters and furthers it. In this way, theory and empirical findings reciprocally influence one another and lead to the gradual development of new theory.

The research question is operationalised by taking local peace NGOs and networks in developing, conflict-affected countries as the main unit of analysis. The focus on indigenous NGOs in the South is important, as their experiences constitute a gap in the literature on the knowledge processes of NGOs. These organisations are studied using a variety of methods. A central place is given to interviews with strategically placed staff members of these organisations – mostly NGO directors or programme coordinators. In addition, conversations with, and publications by, representatives of international NGOs that engage in cooperation with, and capacity building of, Southern partners, serve to complement the picture painted by SNGO staff.

The reason why, in addition to individual NGOs, NGO networks were also analysed relates directly to the nature of the issues under study. Interactive learning and knowledge exchange by NGOs often takes place in networks – or at least, networks are set up with knowledge sharing as their aim. Thus, networks constitute an interesting unit of analysis when looking at the knowledge strategies of NGOs and processes. Several
networks were studied in detail: the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) and its regional NGO networks in Southeast Asia, East Africa, West Africa and Central Asia, and two national-level networks in Sierra Leone and Liberia that are part of the West African GPPAC network, which is called the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP). In addition, various other networks were encountered and studied in less detail. In many cases, NGO staff members were interviewed both as representatives of individual NGOs and as members of one of the networks, and were asked questions on their organisation’s knowledge processes as such, and their participation in networks.

The main regional areas in which interviews have been carried out are West Africa (Liberia and Sierra Leone) and Southeast Asia (the Philippines and Cambodia). These regions were chosen because of several factors. First, the spread over two continents makes it possible to compare between very different regional and cultural contexts and increases the applicability of findings. Second, the four countries have all experienced civil war and witness the proliferation of peacebuilding initiatives, making them suitable for a study of Southern peace NGOs. Third, civil society peacebuilding work in all four countries includes knowledge strategies such as networking and joint learning from practice. Particularly in the Philippines and the West African countries many peace networks are active, while in Cambodia an action research programme is being implemented. These initiatives provide material for the third and fourth Parts of this book, which focus on the knowledge and learning strategies of Southern peace NGOs.

In addition to these two focus regions, travel in the context of other projects made it possible to conduct interviews in East Africa and Central Asia. In Nairobi, Kenya, during a visit in the context of a consultancy project, peace NGO staff from Kenyan, Sudanese, and Rwandese organisations were interviewed for this study. The visit to Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) was undertaken in the framework of a review of GPPAC (the case study in chapter seven) and did not cover the range of issues discussed with interviewees in the aforementioned regions. That said, the Central Asian interviews yielded relevant results beyond the GPPAC case study alone, particularly with regard to knowledge exchange and networking, and the experiences of local peace NGOs with regard to these strategies. These insights have been particularly useful for chapters five and six, which deal with knowledge sharing and networking. They also have broader implications for other chapters, as issues such as the role of civil society in
peacebuilding (chapter one), donor relations and capacity building (chapter four) were discussed.

**Structure of the book**

**Part One** sketches the context of peacebuilding, including the background and nature of current-day wars, and the role of NGOs in that context. In addition, Part One discusses the role of knowledge and learning processes in peacebuilding. It does so by drawing on the various bodies of literature outlined above. *Chapter one* addresses civil society, knowledge, and peacebuilding. The chapter looks at the nature and roles of civil society organisations (CSOs) working for peace. It pays attention to the concepts of civil society and peacebuilding, gives an overview of the range of CSO activities, and places these in the broader perspective of peacebuilding as an overall aim. *Chapter two* looks at the concept of knowledge and relates it to the peacebuilding field, addressing different types and sources of knowledge. Exactly what kind of knowledge are we talking about in this study? What knowledge do peacebuilders need for improved practice? *Chapter three* outlines various processes, actors and relationships that contribute to, or form part of, the learning processes of NGO staff, and zooms in on the knowledge strategies of NGOs as they appear in the literature. All this leads to a first rudimentary model of the knowledge processes of peace NGOs. The remainder of the book uses the outcomes of conversations with staff of Southern peace NGOs as well as case studies and additional literature to refine and further develop the model. This process is guided by a number of additional questions emerging from Part One. At the end of Part One the methodology used in answering these questions is outlined.

**Part Two** introduces the element of inequality and North-South differences and interactions into the picture more explicitly. *Chapter four* looks at structural factors that shape and constrain knowledge generation, access, and dissemination of Southern peace NGOs. Developments in discourse, inequalities in the extent to which different types of knowledge are recognised, and the role of donor agencies in determining the knowledge that is used and produced all shape the extent to which Southern organisations are able to generate and disseminate knowledge. Developing the ability of NGOs to do research and to consciously learn from practice emerges in this context as a capacity building priority. Having outlined the structural framework in which Southern peacebuilding organisations operate, in *chapter five* the book moves on to analyse the knowledge strategies these organisations
engage in practice. Chapter six zooms in on networking as a particular strategy peace NGOs use to improve their knowledge base as well as their contribution to the knowledge of others.

**Part Three** of the study presents two case studies that further illuminate the interaction between the strategies addressed until then. In *chapter seven*, building on the discussion in chapter six of networking as a tool for knowledge exchange, a global network of peacebuilding CSOs is analysed: the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC). In *chapter eight*, a practitioner-oriented Master programme is described that is offered in several conflict-affected regions with an intensive interaction between the regional programmes: the action research-centred Applied Conflict Transformation Studies (ACTS) programme.

Combining the findings presented and discussed, the concluding chapter revises the model of knowledge processes, actors, and relationships drawn up at the end of Part One, further developing it into a new model that may serve as a tool for analysis and improvement of the knowledge, learning, and knowledge exchange of Southern peace NGOs. The chapter discusses ways to overcome the structural inequalities that limit the learning of Southern NGOs and their contribution to global discussions about conflict and peace, giving a number of recommendations to various actors involved.

Although the field of peacebuilding in developing, conflict-torn societies presents a number of specific challenges that increase both the urgency of learning and the difficulty of doing so, the processes that are elaborated in this study have a wider bearing than on the peacebuilding field alone. Many of the findings and recommendations are relevant to NGOs working in other sectors as well.

**Use of terms: North and South**

Throughout the book, the terms ‘North’ and ‘West’ are used almost, but not entirely interchangeably. In discussions on donors and recipients of development aid, I use the terms ‘North’ and ‘South’. Here, the ‘North’ also includes a country like Japan. ‘North’ and ‘South’ may be considered synonyms to the terms ‘developed world’ and ‘developing world’. In discussions on culture, the term ‘West’ is used as opposed to ‘non-Western’ regions and cultures. Here, ‘West’ refers more specifically to Europe and the United States.