The owl and the dove: knowledge strategies to improve the peacebuilding practice of local non-governmental organisations
Verkoren, W.M.

Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 3. Processes, actors, relationships  
Knowledge and learning in NGOs

Thinking back to the 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? - this study has so far looked at the role and place of local NGOs in contemporary peacebuilding processes and the forms that knowledge of peace, conflict and development takes. Now, it will turn to the characteristics of organisational learning processes and see how these can be applied to Southern peace NGOs. This discussion is based, first, on publications about learning and organisational learning processes: an extensive body of literature that mostly focuses on the business world. Second, this chapter incorporates recent thinking about knowledge processes in NGOs; thinking which, as we will see, focuses mostly on Northern development organisations.

Organisations working in circumstances of conflict find themselves in rapidly changing contexts, calling for flexibility and the capacity to learn from their actions. Many NGOs look for new ways of working and networking in cooperation with partners. If the quality of work of NGOs in conflict situations is to be maintained and improved, the learning capacity of these organisations and their employees deserves attention. Processes of learning in and by NGOs also come to the fore in discussions around monitoring and evaluation and increasingly have to be demonstrated when NGOs apply for funding from donor agencies. However, the daily circumstances of NGO staff present difficulties: they work in a context of urgency, have action-oriented working styles, and often find it difficult to create time and space for reflection and learning. In such a situation, how do NGO employees find ways to learn and reflect, and to connect this to their work?

Section 3.1 looks at learning processes in general, addressing different levels of learning and briefly paying attention to what characterises learning in circumstances affected by conflict. 3.2 focuses on organisational learning processes. Next, the chapter turns to learning processes in development and conflict NGOs, with section 3.3 addressing the rise of the concept of learning in the development field, 3.4 discussing theory on the knowledge strategies of NGOs, and 3.5 discussing the fact that little attention is paid in the literature to Southern organisations. Next, two bodies of thinking are examined that do shed
some light on knowledge flows involving SNGOs: capacity building (3.6) and networking (3.7). Section 3.8 concludes the chapter.

Sections 3.9 and 3.10 serve to conclude Part One and to set the stage for the remainder of the book. In 3.9, the main findings from Part One are combined into a model of knowledge processes, actors and relationships that exist in and around peace NGOs. This model is used as a starting point for the analysis in the rest of the book. In Parts Two and Three it will be developed further based on the findings presented there. In 3.10, the research methodology used for the study of Southern peace NGOs in Parts Two and Three is outlined.

3.1 Learning processes: Retaining and using knowledge

One of the most influential sources of thinking about knowledge and learning has been the private sector – firms, business schools, think tanks and consultancy firms, particularly in the US, Europe and Japan – which began to recognise the importance of the retention and exchange of knowledge for competitiveness during the 1980s, resulting in many experiments and publications and the coining of the term ‘knowledge management’. Over the past decade, knowledge and knowledge processes have received increasing attention from the development field as well. The recognition that learning is of critical importance is growing among international peace and development NGOs, as is the recognition that a lot needs to be done to improve the capacity for learning. Evaluations pay more attention to the issue than some years ago. The 2002 evaluation of the co-financing programme of NGOs of the Dutch government concluded that the learning capacity of Dutch NGOs and their partners was insufficient. More specifically, the evaluators wrote that two types of knowledge were required: more specialised thematic knowledge and more in-depth knowledge about local contexts. (Stuurgroep Evaluatie Medefinancieringsprogramma 2002: x and xii) In response, during the past decade there have been a lot of activities in many of the multilateral and bilateral development agencies concerning knowledge and information management. The World Bank was the first development organisation to explicitly adopt, and systematically tackle, the goal of becoming a knowledge agency. (King 2005: 73)

This section maps the main theories and discussions on knowledge processes that take place in and around organisations. Various, partly overlapping knowledge processes can be identified: knowledge identification (finding out or realising what relevant knowledge is
knowledge retention (preventing this knowledge from disappearing); knowledge transfer (from one individual to others or from one organisation to others); knowledge reception (being at the other end of the transfer); knowledge exchange (the whole process of transfer and reception); knowledge processing (translating the received knowledge so that it can be used); and knowledge implementation (using the received knowledge, thereby changing behaviour and actions). Learning could be conceived as a concept that sums up all these processes, as it includes everything from the identification and adoption of new knowledge to its integration into practice, leading to behavioural change. Organisational learning (3.2) is a concept that applies this to organisations, focusing on the conditions that optimise learning in organisations and learning by organisations. In addition to the processes listed above, one could also identify consciously developed mechanisms that aim to facilitate these processes, in particular knowledge management (3.2.2). Before explicitly linking these concepts to the NGO sector, I will first elaborate these concepts as such.

3.1.1 Defining learning

A common definition of learning is “knowledge acquisition or acquisition of new behaviour” (Smid and Beckett 2004: 406). This implies that learning does not necessarily have to lead to new behaviour. I might gain knowledge about twelfth century French literature that I cannot apply directly to my daily actions.41 In Argyris’ definition, by contrast, learning is a much more practical and intentional act, designed to improve daily behaviour: “[l]earning is the detection and correction of error. Error is any mismatch between intentions and implementation. Learning occurs when these features are connected to effective action. The evidence in learning is that we can implement what we learned.” (Argyris 2004b: 29) This is not to say that it is impossible for behaviour to change towards less effective action: people do not always know what it takes to be more effective, and so they experiment. Another possibility is that people act irrationally, for whatever reason. In conflict situations irrational behaviour is in fact quite common.

As this study concerns itself not with learning for intellectual enrichment, but with learning for more effective action, a definition that includes Argyris’ element of the improvement of action will be useful. “When someone’s head is filled with knowledge, but his behaviour does

---

41 although I could argue that this new set of knowledge unconsciously helps shape my world vision and thereby indirectly my behaviour
not change, he has not learned anything in the eyes of his colleagues” (Wierdsma and Swieringa 2002, cited in Smit 2006). Even though a perfect match between intention and result is impossible, practice-oriented learning springs from a desire to function better and obtain better results. This desire may come not only from a mismatch between intention and implementation: even when I achieve my intended results, I might change my aims and intentions and set even higher standards. In order to achieve these, learning is also necessary. When people suspect that they could act more effectively, they may go searching for the knowledge that enables them to do so42. At the same time, learning may also be less intentional. It may result not from a conscious decision to look for knowledge that could improve action, but simply from learning by doing. People may think they are doing an excellent job until they happen to come across a piece of evidence that increases their knowledge and enables them to change their behaviour for even better results. People learn unconsciously all the time through daily action and interaction.

According to Smid and Beckett (2004: 409), in traditional mainstream thinking about learning daily practice is not considered a source of learning. Learning is more seen as something extra, a ‘cost’. This school of thought assumes that there is a period of learning, followed by a period of non-learning, followed again by a period of learning, etc., rather than continuous learning-in-action or experiential learning. Traditionally, then, the thinking has focused on learning moments when people are actively spending time on learning. In this line of thinking, when the moment designated for learning ends, people go back to everyday practice. Recent theory, in contrast, focuses on continuous learning or learning by doing. This study includes both. Conscious learning with the aim to acquire new knowledge may complement continuous learning from practice.

In a session in November 2004 with Dutch practitioners and researchers from the field of conflict and development43, the participants were asked what had been their most important learning moments, whether planned or coincidental. The following moments were mentioned:

- during consultations around policy formulation
- during longer periods in the field44

42 I write “they may” rather than “they will” because in reality it often happens that there is no time or space for this search and therefore it does not take place.
43 Electronic Boardroom session with Dutch NGO representatives and academics, organised by the author in Amsterdam on 29 November 2004.
44 A 2003 study on learning processes inside the NGO Cordaid study confirms this: “[m]ost eye-openers occurred in the field when an intervention triggered unexpected outcomes.” An example of
• during seminars, lunch meetings
• from local knowledge
• personal contacts in the margins of meetings
• learning in response to concrete challenges

From this list it appears that a combination of spending time with partner organisations in different regions and discussions with people inside and outside the organisation creates a learning environment. This is confirmed by a study of learning activities inside the Dutch NGO Cordaid which showed that staff considered discussions with partners around evaluation and the organisation of regular workshops particularly conducive to organisational learning (Van Dijkhorst and Hilhorst 2003: 6). From these sources, then, interaction emerges as a key concept for learning. The chances to learn something increase when people encounter others, from different organisations, other regions, or different types of institutions. Thus, I add interaction as an element to my definition of learning. For the purpose of this study, then, learning is the conscious or unconscious acquisition of new knowledge that makes possible more effective action and/or better results. This knowledge may be gained in daily practice, during designated learning moments, or by combining knowledge gained in those two different settings. Interaction with others plays an important role in learning. The process of learning includes not only knowledge acquisition but also implementation: changing behaviour for better results.

3.1.2 Schools of thought about learning

There are five theoretical schools of thought about learning: behaviourism, the cognitive school, pragmatism, constructivism, and situated learning. Behaviourism claims that all organisms learn in similar ways and have universally shared association mechanisms. Training programmes should aim to understand these mechanisms and use them in their teaching methods. In this view, the learner is rather passive. Student development takes place through training programmes which aim to impart pre-established information, practical skills and basic competencies. Learning is a one-way process: the learner’s role is to receive knowledge. Behavioural change is the central aim of these programmes, and the only indication that learning has taken place.

such an unexpected outcome mentioned by a few staff members of Cordaid was that “getting people around the table for an unrelated subject, sometimes led to reconciliation of groups of people living in conflict areas.” (Van Dijkhorst and Hilhorst 2003: 8)

45 This section is based on Sauquet (2004) and Keursten (2006).
Behaviourism is not of much value for this study, which focuses on learning as an active and interactive process of exchanging knowledge for better practice.

According to the cognitive school, the human mind works as a logical system of information processing. Like all systems of information processing, the capacity of human cognition is limited. Experiences may be interpreted incorrectly and have no learning value. Problem framing constrains the interpretation range and may implicitly orient decision-making. Cognitive theories underscore the need for a better understanding of people’s ‘mental models’ and the wise use of limited cognitive resources. The cognitive school distinguishes between thought and action. For efficient practice to occur there must always be a precedent of intelligent thought. People have pre-existing thoughts and beliefs that guide their actions. Knowledge is a commodity that exists separately from action. It circulates through an organisation as information does. Knowledge is available and can be managed like any other resource. It is not knowledge itself but the capacity of individuals to adopt it that is limited by mental models and suboptimal problem framing.

According to Sauquet, the central premise of cognitivism that action must be preceded by thought is flawed. Instead, intelligence is embedded in practice and people learn by doing. The idea that knowledge can be managed like information is also mistaken and lies at the roots of the limited success of the, until recently extremely popular, notion of knowledge management (see 3.2.2). What is nonetheless interesting in the cognitive school is the attention paid to problem definitions, images and mental models that frame the understanding individuals have of reality and that shape their actions and learning processes. As we will see in the next section, for learning in the most profound or ‘deep’ sense to take place these frames have to be recognised and questioned.

A third theory, pragmatism, tones down the effects of training by focusing on learning by doing. Learning occurs as one tries to solve practical problems. A problem arises and confusion is the result. To make sense of a situation the individual frames the problem using pre-existing knowledge. This is followed by hypothesis formulation, inquiry, and action to correct the situation. The pragmatist school is quite relevant to this study as it sheds light on practice-oriented learning cycles and has influenced learning concepts such as single- and double-loop learning (elaborated in the next section). However, it neglects the importance of the knowledge of others (whether knowledge made
explicit in theories or tacit knowledge shared through interaction) in shaping and complementing people’s practical learning experiences.

A related school of thought, constructivism, focuses on personal interpretation of information as central to learning. People learn by giving meaning to their experience and to other information that they come across. In this way they construct, rather than acquire, knowledge. Constructivism draws attention to the central importance of interpretation and giving meaning to processes of learning. The approach is also useful because it shows that much knowledge is subjective and context-specific, characteristics that our earlier discussion of tacit knowledge, and more specifically, conflict and peace knowledge, also made clear.

Finally, situated learning focuses on the context of the learner and thereby presents a social understanding of learning. The concept of situated learning can be understood as complementing individual cognitivism, pragmatism and constructivism by introducing the social context. The social context determines the way ideas and concepts are incorporated. As knowledge develops in a specific context, it is difficult to transfer it to another context or to establish best practices. The social environment shapes expectations of how things should be done, leading to different solutions in different contexts (see also 3.1.3 on interactive learning). The situated learning approach draws attention to characteristics of the social environment that may promote or inhibit learning. Such characteristics may for example be trust, openness, power, competition, caring, and mutual interest or attractiveness. Changes of context may also play a role in learning. While continuity in one’s environment may help a process of experimentation and adaptation, a change of setting may shed a completely new light on a problem and thereby lead to genuine innovation. Comparing one’s situation with those of others in a process of knowledge sharing or interactive learning brings in new perspectives.

Depending on the circumstances, each of the approaches described may provide inspiration to people looking to stimulate learning processes. Behaviourism may be helpful in standardised processes in which pre-defined, routine behaviour is required and outcomes are predictable. Cognitivism may provide leads where the use of available, formal knowledge plays a role. This may be the case with medical diagnoses, economic analyses or legal questions. Pragmatism may help with definable problems from practice, where continuous improvement, individual problem solving and experience building are central aims. Constructivism and situated learning fit groups that are jointly looking
to develop new solutions in complex situations in which ambitions, context and approaches are not fixed but are themselves in development. These approaches offer solutions to questions that cannot be solved through ‘more of the same’. The latter situation clearly matches the peacebuilding field the best. This means that the learning processes that this study looks at may be best understood in the light of constructivist, interactive approaches. That said, elements of cognitivism and, particularly, pragmatism also play a role in different aspects of a learning process. In line with these considerations, the book treats learning as a social process in which people develop meaning and competence (constructivism) through action (pragmatism) and interaction (situated learning). Finding better ways to access previously documented information (cognitivism) plays a role in these processes as well, to the extent that this information does not constitute an end product but gets fed into processes of experimentation, interaction and sense-making.

3.1.3 Learning cycles

At the risk of introducing too many concepts at once, it may be useful to distinguish between exploitative and explorative learning (Nooteboom 2002: 41). Exploitation, also known as first-order learning, refers to learning to do existing things better. In this type of learning one tries to correct error through practice, in order to better match outcome with intention. Exploration, also known as second-order learning, goes beyond learning to do existing things better. Instead it searches for new things, using a new perspective. This type of learning does not occur as a result of experience, but of reflection upon experience. “Exploration means stepping back from practice and thinking about what you were doing in the first place” (Turel 2005: 27). Intentions, and the values underpinning them, are reconsidered and changed in explorative learning. The following figure explains the process of second-order learning.
The figure shows that second-order learning has its basis in concrete experience. Reflection on this experience (how am I doing? Why? How are others doing in comparison?) abstracts the information derived from this experience. In the next phase, this information is compared with other information or used for experimentation in practice. The conclusions drawn from this are used to improve action. A Liberian NGO worker gave an example from practice:

“At each phase of the processes in which they work, practitioners need to ask themselves whether they are doing the right thing and how things can be done better. At each phase, new stumbling blocks arise. One learns by dealing with these stumbling blocks. For example, in Lofa county there is one village where two ethnic groups did not speak to one another. After some time it became clear that they were not opposed to each other as such, but that politicians in Monrovia had fuelled and managed tensions in order to promote their own interests. People were willing to reconcile as long as their leaders in Monrovia agreed with it. In response, our organisation decided to engage these politicians and bring them to the village in question.”

According to Kolb (1984), most people have a preference for one or more phases of the learning cycle. This is related to their individual learning style. Some people have an activist learning style: they prefer doing. Others prefer reflecting: a reflective learning style. Still others are most comfortable conceptualising, and have a theoretical learning style. Finally there are those who prefer to learn by trying out new ways of working: a pragmatic or experimental learning style.

---

46 Kolb 1984
47 Interview with staff members of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 14 February 2006.
Some theorists add a third mode of learning, which they call third-order learning. In their view, the three types of learning can be conceived as follows.

- **First-order learning**: the passive internalisation of a pre-given set of knowledge, or improvement of actions based on an acquired store of knowledge and experience.

- **Second-order learning**: trial-and-error reflecting while acting - through an interactive process of asking questions, reflecting, and adjusting while acting. ‘Am I doing things right?’

- **Third-order learning**: “reflection-on-reflection-in-action”: reflecting on one’s own manner of thinking, acting and learning, and the underlying assumptions. ‘Am I doing the right thing?’ This also includes questioning the validity of the tasks and problems posed by the context, which may lead to a transformation of that context. Third-order learning is particularly relevant to the processes this study looks at. After all, chapter two concluded that reflection on assumptions and openness to other ‘mind frames’ are necessary elements of cross-cultural learning.

Third-order learning adds another cycle of reflection and learning to the one portrayed in Figure 3.1 above: the cycle of self-reflection and the questioning of underlying values. What is my own personal role in this cycle? What implicit assumptions and experiences do I bring to this learning process, and do they lead to any distortions? Should my assumptions be modified? Because third-order learning adds another cycle, it is often referred to as double-loop learning. In double-loop learning, the values and assumptions underlying my actions are reflected upon and tested simultaneously with the reflection and testing of the actions themselves. In chapter eight, where the concept of action learning is discussed, the two loops are visualised and elaborated (see 8.3).

Engeström gives a more elaborate typology of types of learning based on the distinction between first-, second- and third-order learning.

---

### Table 3.1: Five types of learning according to Engeström 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of learning</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conditioning</td>
<td>Learning by reward and punishment to react in a certain manner, passive internalisation of pre-given culture.</td>
<td>Surface-level, first-order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imitation</td>
<td>Copying readily available correct behaviour in the context.</td>
<td>Surface-level, first-order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trial-and-error</td>
<td>Finding out how correct solutions can be produced even when they are not readily available in the context for copying.</td>
<td>Surface-level, second-order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigative</td>
<td>Reflect upon a problem, give hypothetical explanation of principles behind successful solutions. Test of hypothesis and modification according to the results.</td>
<td>Deep-level, second-order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expansive</td>
<td>No limited or pre-defined contents and tasks, questioning the validity of tasks and problems posed by the context, transform the context itself, externalisation of novel cultural practices gains priority.</td>
<td>Deep-level, third-order</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1.4 Learning in conflict

In situations affected by conflict the need to learn is high, or, put differently, the risk of not learning is great. Not learning from the mistakes of oneself or others may cost lives. The context changes rapidly, and what seemed like common sense yesterday may no longer apply today. For organisations working in conflict-affected settings, flexibility is needed, which requires the capacity to adapt in response to experiences and changes — in other words, to learn. Therefore, conflict may stimulate learning. In a dire situation, people may become more creative, simply because they need to be considering the limited means they have at their disposal. Learning in conflict is not theoretical but solution-oriented; knowledge can lead to survival. At the same time, learning in conflict may be regressive or defensive rather than forward-looking: ‘we have to learn how to prevent this from happening again’.

While conflict may stimulate learning, it may at the same time inhibit it. People working in conflict often have little access to knowledge sources outside their immediate locality. In addition, the role knowledge plays in conflict (see 2.2.2) may mean that people resist learning. “Resistance seems to occur when learning does not resonate with an individual’s reality. Motivation and incentives are also important considerations.”

---

49 Smid and Beckett 2004: 409
In general, people like knowledge that confirms their views and may be uncomfortable with knowledge that makes them question their ideas and actions. In conflict, this may play a particularly strong role. Group identities harden, ‘truths’ become a way to legitimise actions, and admitting that there are other ways to look at reality risks making one’s own behaviour seem flawed, or even criminal. In the case of organisations that are in the business of peacebuilding, admitting to flawed views and behaviour could even mean taking responsibility for failing to save human lives.

What we can draw from these reflections is that in conflict settings, learning at the tactical level (in order to do something better) is stimulated, while deeper-level learning, which involves questioning one’s views and actions altogether, is difficult.

### 3.2 Organisational learning

#### 3.2.1 Principles of organisational learning

As we will see in chapter five, SNGO staff do not engage in isolated learning, but stress the role of interactions with others. In this context, the concept of interactive learning, “learning by doing in interaction with others” (Boonstra 2004: 15-16), is worth addressing. It consists of cyclical processes of interaction in which people can learn at the first, second and third levels described above, and can renew their assumptions and action repertoires. Interactive learning is based on the following principles, which organisational uses.

- organisations are conceived as feedback systems
- individuals have room for self-organisation
- people strive for transparency in interactive patterns in order to understand and adjust underlying assumptions, and to jointly chart, recognise, and clarify relationships
- room is made for multiple constructs of reality
- there is a reflection on interrelationships between actors, constructs, and contexts of actors
- there is a shared sense-making of events
- there is room for interaction and reflection on personal actions and underlying assumptions to make room for learning processes (Boonstra 2004: 15)

---

50 Resistance to learning can take various forms: ignoring, devaluing, diverting, cultural apologism, and withdrawal (Taylor et al. 2006, 22).
The importance of stimulating, retaining, sharing and using the knowledge of individuals inside an organisation is now widely recognised. This type of knowledge processes is called *learning in organisations*. Another, more difficult concept is that of *learning of organisations* or organisational learning. Individual and organisational learning are connected. When an individual joins an organisation he or she has to internalise knowledge about the workings and routines of the organisation. At the same time, the body of organisational knowledge that is internalised by the new member constantly changes, because members bring their own knowledge with them, which may become part of organisational routines. (Huysman 2004: 70-71)

An individual learns, then, by internalising organisational knowledge and combining it with his or her own experience in a community of practice. This learning can occur in practice, as first-order learning, or through reflection: second-order learning. What is adopted by the community of practice may subsequently be objectified into the knowledge of the organisation. The changed organisational knowledge is again internalised by organisational members. In this way organisational change or innovation is implemented. (Turel 2005: 31) This kind of process takes place at all levels of the organisation. Each change is accompanied by discussions among organisational members as to the value of the change. However, individuals learning in an organisation do not necessarily lead to organisational learning. To illustrate this, Wiersmsma and Swieringa (2002, cited in Smit 2006: 9) use the example of a soccer team. Even if the best eleven players of a

---

*Huysman 2004: 75*
country are playing in a team, this does not automatically mean that this team wins from teams with lesser players. The team has to learn to do things differently together. That does not mean that organisational learning can take place without individual learning, however. If nobody can play soccer, the team will certainly lose.

A popular way to look at learning in organisations is that it takes place through communities of practice: small groups of people who have worked together for some time. They are not necessarily a team, task force, or division. What holds them together is a common sense of purpose and a need to know what the other knows. There are many communities of practice within an organisation, and most people belong to more than one of them. In an attempt to institutionalise such a process, many organisations have established more or less formal ‘communities of practice’ which regularly exchange knowledge around specific themes. This has happened in corporations as well as organisations that focus on development – the World Bank is a notable example.

Organisational learning thus involves exchanges between staff members, so that people can learn from the experience of others when they try to implement a project. In that sense one may discern a demand side and a supply side of knowledge. The demand side is eager to incorporate the lessons learned by others into the design of a particular activity, while the supply side may have such knowledge to offer. On the demand side, several processes may take place: scanning (finding out who in the organisation has relevant experience to share and getting in touch with them), interpretation (adapting what others have learned to one’s own context) and putting the knowledge in practice (starting a new cycle of organisational learning). The problem here is that people on the demand side often do not actively seek the knowledge of others. This can make organisational learning initiatives, often started by management, quite artificial. On the supply side, processes include joint sense-making of experiences, generalisation (determining what part of knowledge is relevant to others and translating lessons into more general terms), and dissemination (face-to-face or through codification). Bringing the demand and supply sides together may be done by a person playing the role of a broker. This may be a trainer, external advisor, or internal learning officer. (Smit 2006: 11-13)

Learning can take place at different organisational levels. It has been said that at the management level, strategic learning takes place while among employees actually implementing activities, tactical learning predominates. While tactical learning is confined to improving the
effectiveness of daily dealings and activities through practice, strategic learning concerns itself with basic questions about the goal of the organisation and ways to achieve it. It takes the form of broad, long-term planning and may include ‘third-order’ questions about to the aims and identity of the organisation. (Turel 2005, drawing on Minzberg) This distinction between organisational levels and their specific types of learning is rather stylised; reality is more blurred. Of particular importance for organisational learning is the interaction among different levels. For example, strategic learning at management level is unlikely to occur without signals coming from operational levels that organisational strategies might be improved. However, this interaction among levels is often problematic. In many instances, organisational levels speak different languages. For example, in larger NGOs the management tends to speak in conceptual, generalised terms while operational staff tend to emphasise the context-specificity of knowledge and do not often generalise beyond the regions or thematic areas in which they work.  

Taking all these issues into account, the questions that much of the organisational learning literature concerns itself with are, first, how to create optimal opportunities for learning at all levels of the organisation, and between levels of the organisation (creating a learning environment). Secondly, organisational learning revolves around finding ways to ensure that organisational learning is not merely first-order, but second- or third-order (building an organisation’s capacity for self-reflection and self-renewal). Various suggestions are made to achieve these goals. Publications by Boonstra and Britton mention a number of organisational characteristics that promote learning, thereby summing up much of the literature about this issue. They write that the dynamics of an organisation increase and make room for learning and renewal if it has the following characteristics.  

Atmosphere and culture:

- There is openness to new ideas and challenges.
- Feelings and assumptions regarding renewal can be discussed.
- There is an atmosphere of safety in which to express and manage uncertainties.

52 Van Dijkhorst and Hilhorst (2003: 7) and MBN Werkgroep Kwaliteit (2006: 7). This issue also came to the fore in discussions during the course mentioned in note 36.

Leadership:
- There is supportive leadership, which places learning high on the agenda.
- Time and money is made available for learning processes.
- The leadership communicates the importance of learning to organisational members, and recognises and rewards their contributions to learning processes.
- Conceptual clarity is provided about what is meant by organisational learning and what kinds of activities contribute to it.

Individual competencies:
- The development of individuals’ learning competences is supported. These competences include reflection on practice and on one’s own role, interpersonal communication skills, and networking and relationship building.
- Staff members have the capacity to think creatively (rather than being skilled in focusing in depth on a single subject or having a very bureaucratic background)

Organisational structure and processes:
- There is space and time for reflection and discussion about actions and lessons learned.
- Many actors with different points of view (inside and outside of the organisation) interact.
- There is a high degree of interactions between actors and differences between them are made visible.
- There is transparency and access to information; information and feedback circulate rapidly.
- Room is created for processes of self-organisation and employees have the flexibility to experiment.
- Learning is integrated into the planning and evaluation cycle.

How can one see the extent to which organisational learning takes place? According to Britton, 
“Indications of a learning culture can be seen when colleagues are confident to express their thoughts and feelings and share their knowledge; when colleagues ask questions of one another, listen to each other and constructively challenge each other’s assumptions; when mistakes are rarely repeated; when long-standing colleagues are not cynical about their work and when problems are exposed and dealt with without blame. At an organisational level, a learning culture would be indicated when there is a sense of progression in new
initiatives and when the organisation’s leadership recognises and prioritises learning as an aspect of good practice.” (Britton 2005: 17)

3.2.2 Knowledge management

The concept of knowledge management is somewhat difficult to separate from organisational learning and knowledge exchange, as the term knowledge management is used with various, quite different meanings, some of which overlap significantly or entirely with other concepts. One definition of knowledge management is that it is a way of “getting the right knowledge to the right people at the right time and helping people share and put information into action in ways that strive to improve organizational performance” (O'Dell et al. 1998). This definition in fact covers all organisational endeavours to share knowledge and learn, and does not tell us much about the unique characteristics of knowledge management, if there are any. What is interesting however is that the definition equals knowledge with information.

That leads us to an issue that is often mentioned in critiques of knowledge management (at least in its original form), namely that it focuses too exclusively on information retention and accessibility through technological means such as databases, web communities, newsletters, intranet, and document management systems. This technology of developing organisational memory can be important as a means to an end, but it has its limits; it focuses on the retention but not the use of knowledge. Technical knowledge management solutions also assume that all knowledge is objective and can be codified, leaving out tacit knowledge entirely. Indeed, knowledge management emerged in part as a response to new information technologies and was characterised by a great faith in the potential of these technologies to retain, circulate and use knowledge within an organisation in order to enhance competitiveness. In this sense the traditional concept of knowledge management (and its popularity until recently) is based on the cognitive school, which assumes that knowledge can be managed just like any other resource. However, the cognitive school has its limitations in that it separates thought from action (see 3.1.2). As a result, knowledge management became little more than information management. (Sauquet 2004: 377-378)

This original form of knowledge management did have its value: it helped organisations keep better track of what they know, to retain their organisational memory, and to make it accessible. It also led to the
development of more effective forms of communication. What it did not do, however, is think about the application of knowledge. Nor did it lead to the generation of genuinely new ideas. (Britton 2005: 7; Keursten 2006: 4) In more recent years, therefore, literature on knowledge management has broadened its focus, recognising the importance of tacit knowledge and the limits of information technology. This “second generation knowledge management” (Britton 2005: 8) no longer solely focuses on its original strategy of top-down standardisation and codification of data, but includes bottom-up strategies to preserve, share and use tacit and explicit knowledge from all layers of the organisation. (Ballantyne 2001)

Thus, the knowledge management field is moving beyond technical means for knowledge retention toward a focus on the people that are central to organisations and on the development of processes that help them share and use their collective knowledge (Britton 2005: 8). This has brought the concept of knowledge management closer to that of organisational learning. In fact, in many cases it is impossible to separate the two concepts, and they are often used interchangeably.

3.2.3 Scaffolds: knowledge institutions and other external actors

We will see later on that Southern peace NGO staff emphasise the importance of interaction for their learning processes. The literature on organisational learning recognises this as well. This section builds on the brief discussion of interactive learning in 3.2.1 and focuses on the role of other people in the learning of individuals and their organisations. Smid and Beckett (2004: 409-411) look at the limits of individual learning and the opportunities for more extensive learning presented by others. They see a distance between the performance a student is capable of on his or her own, and the performance (s)he can attain in collaboration with a more knowledgeable or skilled colleague. This colleague then functions as a ‘scaffold’. A ‘scaffold’ does not necessarily have to be an individual. It can be anything in the environment of the learner, including the structure of an organisation and the room and opportunities it creates for individual learning. The organisation itself then is also a ‘scaffold’. It can also be a training course that contributes to the understanding and individual has of his situation. Scaffolds, then, are people and structures that help direct and shape the development of the individual learner. As critical outsiders with fresh perspectives, scaffolds may ask the difficult questions (‘why are you doing this and not something else?’) that help a learner move beyond first-order learning towards second- or third-order learning.
Formal education may serve as a scaffold supporting and deepening someone’s learning from practice if it stimulates him to relate the theories to his own experience. In line with this, Smid and Beckett (2004: 410) distinguish between a “teaching curriculum” and a “learning curriculum”. In a teaching curriculum, along the lines of the behavioural school described in above, support for learning consists of presenting knowledge and facilitating internalisation. This may function as a scaffold but the knowledge may not stick because it is not related to the personal experience of learners. In a learning curriculum support means to use the conflict arising between the activity of the individual learner and existing thinking - the basic principle of a ‘Socratic dialogue’ - and to enhance development by inviting the individual and collective production of new analytical frameworks.

Smid and Beckett (2004: 411) conceptualise organisational learning as follows. The point of departure is an activity in the real world. To test efficiency, people experiment with this activity. Others may imitate it, attempting to adapt it to their own situation. In this context, exchanges with others over work methods and effectiveness play an important role. In this way, knowledge and rules of thumb are developed. Aided by a third party (who functions as a scaffold), it is possible to develop activities at a deeper level, creating new individual and collective competencies that enable innovative practices. The third party provides an external view that enables the individual to step back from practice and reflect. From this perspective, interaction with an external partner may lead to a better process of reflection and learning. One such partner could be a university, which can provide third party support focused on the learning process. Interaction with an academic partner also creates “transferable competencies”: a person’s skills and knowledge are recognised and objectified through a degree or diploma that is recognised by others. (Smid and Beckett 2004: 411)54

3.2.4 Organisational learning tools

Many different tools have been developed for organisations in order to improve their learning capacity. This section briefly mentions some examples to give an idea of the kinds of measures that are taken. Tools that may stimulate organisational learning include the following.55

54 We will examine this in chapter eight.
55 The list of tools is based mainly on NHS 2005 and Ramalingham 2006. As discussed, most organisational learning and knowledge management text books emphasise that these tools will only work in a learning environment (see 3.2.1). They are unlikely to be effective unless the
Knowledge audit: as a starting point to introducing organisational learning tools, a qualitative evaluation may be held of the knowledge needs, assets, and flows may be held: what are the gaps between knowledge needs and assets? Does knowledge flow from those who have it to those who need it? What obstacles exist? The outcome may be a knowledge map: a visual representation of the organisation’s knowledge assets and flows.

White pages are like a staff directory but include details on people’s knowledge, skills, experiences and interests. They aim to enable staff to gain access to the tacit knowledge of others.

After Action Review: a discussion to draw lessons from a project or activity after it has taken place.

Exit interviews held with employees who leave an organisation in order to capture the knowledge they have accumulated about “what it takes to do the job”, so that colleagues and new personnel may learn from this.

Best practices: a practice widely used also in the NGO world is the identification and sharing of best practices – processes or methods that have proven effective in achieving objectives.

Communities of practice: many organisations have formalised the idea of communities of practice described earlier in this chapter. Thematic groups are formed that regularly exchange knowledge. According to the knowledge management literature, such communities should have voluntary membership, a specific focus, and no definition of tangible results.

Action learning sets are more action-oriented communities of practice that come together for shared reflection and feedback in several stages of the learning cycle described in section 3.1.3. Members of the action learning set constructively challenge one another’s assumptions and perceptions, which may lead to new understanding that can be tested in practice. After that has been done, the set meets again in order to discuss the results, explicitly formulating learning points and adapting theories of action before a new cycle of action learning begins.

Peer assists: a formal process in which a team working on a specific activity calls in other teams to ask about their experiences and insights for the benefit of the project at hand. The demand-driven nature of peer assists has advantages over knowledge strategies that focus on the supply-side of making organisational culture is one of learning and sharing, the leadership of the organisation genuinely supports and promotes learning, and there is sufficient ‘social capital’ – trust and relationships - within the organisation.
knowledge available without a concrete purpose. People on the supply-side may be more willing to take the time to share their experiences when it is likely that their knowledge will be used for a specific purpose.

- **Storytelling** may be a way to share knowledge in a way that is less dry and technical than with other tools. Stories show the relevance of information in-context. Storytelling is an ancient activity and is still prevalent in many non-Western parts of the world.

- **Thinking hats**, a technique developed by Edward de Bono (2000), enable groups to look at an issue from different points of view and thereby come to more creative insights than otherwise might be the case. Participants in meetings are assigned different thinking hats. The person wearing the white hat looks at the issue in an objective manner, focusing on facts and numbers available. The person wearing the red hat looks at problems in an emotional way, using intuition, judgments and suspicions. The black hat is a negative hat that focuses the wearer on risks and possible negative effects of an activity, while the yellow hat is positive, optimistic and constructive. The green hat is creative and seeks alternatives. The wearer of the blue hat, finally, keeps track of process and discussions – this is the person chairing the meeting.

- **Knowledge centres** are instituted in many organisations. Such centres do not only perform a library function but also create directories that may help staff members find whoever possesses tacit knowledge on a particular topic.

- **Technological tools** such as databases and intranets are usually used to support all these organisational learning methods.

Returning to the distinction made in chapter two between tacit, explicit, and implicit knowledge, we may now categorise these tools according to their aims. Do organisational learning tools aim to create, store, or share knowledge? And do they aim at tacit, explicit, or implicit knowledge?
Table 3.2: Categorising organisational learning tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Tacit</th>
<th>Explicit</th>
<th>Implicit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Create</td>
<td>(Action) research Workshops Thinking hats</td>
<td>Knowledge audit</td>
<td>Staff exchanges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Store</td>
<td>Knowledge audit Exit interviews White pages Monitoring and evaluation Best practices</td>
<td>Knowledge centres Database Intranet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share</td>
<td>Training Communities of practice Storytelling After action reviews Peer assists</td>
<td>E-mail Publications</td>
<td>Storytelling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows that the majority of tools discussed in the knowledge management and organisational learning literature aim at the creation, storing or sharing of tacit knowledge. The reason is probably that tacit knowledge is more difficult to create, store and share than explicit knowledge and therefore much of the attention is focused on this category. Little attention is paid, however, to creating, storing and sharing implicit or cultural knowledge. This is unfortunate because cultural knowledge is likely to be very important for our field of analysis: knowledge processes of Southern peace NGOs.

### 3.3 Development of learning in development

In the second half of the nineties, the development sector began to see the relevance of such knowledge strategies to its own activities. Unlike for the corporate sector, for the development sector organisational efficiency is not the only aim. In order to work towards their larger development objectives, development 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 World Bank pioneered the application of knowledge management in the development community. In 1996 the Bank announced its intention to become “the Knowledge Bank” and in 1998 it entitled its World Development Report

---

56 Adapted from Ramalingham 2005: 5
“Knowledge for Development” (Ramalingham 2005: 8). Like the corporate sector, the World Bank’s approach was meant to improve its own business processes. Internal measures included building communities of practice and developing an online knowledge base and directory of expertise. However, in line with the aims of the development sector, the Bank added an external knowledge sharing approach aiming at interaction with the wider development community. This sharing approach was based on the principle that knowledge is the foundation of equitable and sustainable development – a principle increasingly gaining ground. (Kalseth and Cummings 2001: 168)

The World Bank external knowledge sharing approach consisted of the creation of two knowledge networks, the Global Development Network (GDNet) and the Global Development Gateway. GDNet is research-oriented, aiming to enhance the quality and availability of policy-oriented studies (Clark and Squire 2005). The Development Gateway aims to be an internet portal website on development issues. However, the Gateway has been criticised for appearing to be a neutral and independent resource whilst its content is controlled by the World Bank. (Kalseth and Cummings 2001: 169-179) Given that some consider the Bank’s knowledge agenda to be overly narrow, neglecting socio-cultural differences and the links between local development issues and the wider political economy (Mehta 2001, cited in Hovland 2003: 8), this would be quite problematic. Leaving aside the discussion on the content of the World Bank’s knowledge networks, another point of criticism has been that World Bank knowledge policies are still considered to be too internally oriented. Indeed, in 2000 the Bank itself concluded that “[k]nowledge work at the Bank must be more firmly rooted in client demand. While shifts have occurred, the approach remains too internally focused and supply oriented. This undermines impact, client ownership and capacity building, learning from the outside world, and skews priorities” (World Bank 2000, cited in Kalseth and Cummings 2001: 170).

The World Bank’s pioneering focus on knowledge strategies was soon followed by others in the development sector, mainly those based in the North, such as donor agencies and international NGOs. The latter have become particularly active in the knowledge and learning field in the last few years. Particularly in the United Kingdom, independent think tanks and training institutes, such as the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) in Oxford and the London-based Overseas Development Institute (ODI), publish on the issue and stimulate the discussion. Academic institutions like the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) of the University of Sussex contribute to the field as well,
as does the NGO network British Overseas NGOs for Development (BOND). In the Netherlands, the umbrella organisation of development organisations PSO increasingly focuses on organisational learning as a capacity building strategy. In addition, government agencies acting as donors of NNGOs have begun to emphasise organisational learning capacity as a funding prerequisite57.

As with the World Bank, however, the learning activities of development and conflict NGOs have so far remained largely internally focused. Little attention has been paid to learning in interaction with partners in the South. Nor has there been much regard for the particular knowledge and learning challenges faced by Southern organisations. A recent study by Ramalingham of the knowledge strategies of bilateral, multilateral and non-governmental international development organisations found that “the majority [of their staff members] identified the need to address internal issues first, before looking at external issues” (Ramalingham 2005: 26). It may be questioned whether this is the right order, as it means that the knowledge strategies and processes adopted are based on the needs and inputs of Northern, not Southern, staff. Ramalingham (2005: 33) confirms that “there was no sense of how the tools might need adaptation in the context of Southern realities, and how they might add to or compare with existing approaches such as capacity development or participation”. Indeed, when the staff members interviewed for his study spoke of external knowledge strategies they referred mostly to disseminating knowledge from within the agencies to outside actors; only few mentioned the need for information flowing from outside to inside the organisation (Ramalingham 2005: 26).

3.4 The learning strategies of Northern NGOs

3.4.1 Characterising the organisational learning of NNGOs

While the learning of SNGOs and their interaction with partners in the North thus remain under-researched (and under-practiced), a number of publications has recently appeared on the learning processes of Northern-based development and peace NGOs, looking for characteristics that distinguish their knowledge processes from those that take place in corporations58. One issue emerging from them is that NGO staff tend to characterise themselves as having an activist working

---

57 For knowledge and learning policies of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, see MBN Werkgroep Kwaliteit (2006: 2) and Heres and Bieckmann (2007: 9).
style. Thinking and doing are somewhat separated, and doing receives most attention. However, NGO staff members are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of reflection on, and drawing lessons from, their work.

In 3.1.1 a number of learning moments as seen by NGO staff were recounted. They implied that, like their Southern counterparts (see 2.3), NGO staff members primarily learn in interaction. However, procedures set up in NGOs to promote organisational learning often consider knowledge more as an object that can be transferred from one person to another, rather than something that is created in interaction. The organisations have difficulty moving from cognitive information management to people-centred learning processes. A recent study of NGOs concludes that the “widespread and tangible outputs of knowledge and learning work tend, thus far, to be based on improved information systems, rather than improved processes or changed behaviours” and that as a consequence, their learning structures are “more supply-led than demand-driven”. A tendency was noted among these organisations to “point to information systems as the ‘end product’ rather than specific processes for knowledge and learning”. (Ramalingham 2005: 14-15) The study warns that this trend may end up contributing to “the increasing prevalence of ‘information graveyards’.

In the final analysis, IT systems cannot be relied upon to create relationships that are at the heart of effective [knowledge sharing]” (Ramalingham 2005: 31).

There are, however, some more positive experiences of NGOs to note. The United Kingdom (UK) government’s Department for International Development (DfID), the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam) UK, and Pax Christi Netherlands have experimented with regular reflection weeks, in which staff do not travel but withdraw and reflect together. Another tool has been developed by Action Aid, which has replaced country office reports with annual “participatory reviews and reflections” in which programme beneficiaries participate. The reviews record achievements, discuss challenges and constraints, and reflect on what works and why. Reporting on these reviews and reflections is “light” according to Action Aid, the format is left open and creative methods of reporting are used.\(^{59}\)

Some NGOs – such as the Dutch development organisation Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos) – employ specialised learning officers in order to perform the role of broker.

connecting the demand and supply sides of knowledge. Whether this has led to improved organisational learning is not yet clear, at least not based on the limited information available to me. One may speculate that employing a specialised officer in itself is not enough. It runs the risk of making learning the responsibility of one rather than all, and giving employees the sense that they do not have to worry about learning. Instead – or in addition to employing a learning officer – each staff member has to become aware of his or her own function in making knowledge available to others, as well as asking others for theirs. This requires a learning culture.

Thinking back to the theory of learning presented earlier in this chapter, some questions arise with regard to the learning processes of NGOs: are they generally tactical (first-order) or strategic (second- or third order)? How much interaction takes place between organisational levels? Do NGOs generally have a learning culture? In the literature not much information can be found about these questions. Upcoming chapters of this book will contribute to answering them, at least for SNGOs (see chapter five in particular). However, at this point a few general points can be made. First, in many NGOs learning is intertwined with reporting and accountability towards donors. This makes it is difficult for NGOs to learn at the second- or third-order level. Where first-order learning is merely about realising tactical and operational improvements to a given project, these deeper levels require considering whether a project has been the right one to start with or even whether an organisation is doing the right thing at all. Discussing these questions immediately risks losing the funds that have been allocated to a project. (Van Dijkhorst and Hilhorst 2003: 7)

Second, studies about organisational learning in NNGOs suggest that in many cases, individual learning does not yet lead to organisational learning. “Information is acquired through studies and evaluations, but the conclusions are not followed up or disseminated to the appropriate places in the organisation”. (Van Dijkhorst and Hilhorst 2003: 6) Part of the problem is that interaction between different organisational levels and departments is difficult in NGOs. The different departments and levels often speak different ‘languages’ and are to different extents tied to the context in which they work. Many organisations have for example established thematic departments, but their communication with regional and country departments remains a challenge.

---

60 Van Dijkhorst and Hilhorst (2003: 7) and M&B Werkgroep Kwaliteit (2006: 7). This issue also came to the fore in research done by participants of the course mentioned in note 36.
On the positive side, compared to other organisations NGOs tend to be relatively informal and have little hierarchy, which may make inter-level interaction actually easier (Van Dijkhorst and Hilhorst 2003: 6). However, while a ‘flat’ organisation like Hivos is in principle conducive to free interaction and sharing, in practice informal personal networks may predominate in such an organisation and make it difficult for newer, younger staff to participate fully. This suggests that it is necessary to find a balance between too much and too little structure when it comes to supporting organisational learning.

3.4.2 Organisational characteristics affecting NGO learning

In section 3.2 a number of organisational characteristics were listed that foster a learning culture. They included openness to new ideas and challenges, a supportive and facilitative leadership that rewards learning, the development of the learning competences of individuals, space and time for reflection and discussion, a high degree of interaction between actors with different points of view, transparency of information, an atmosphere of safety in which to express doubts, flexibility for employees to organise and experiment, and the integration of learning into the planning and evaluation cycle. In addition to these characteristics that apply to all organisations, a number of factors conducive to organisational learning have been mentioned that are more or less specific to NGOs working for development and peace. As we saw in section 1.4.2, by their very nature NGOs tend to be flexible, adaptive and innovative, at least compared to governmental and intergovernmental institutions. Related to this, characteristics of NGOs that stimulate learning include:

- exposure to the outside world, close relationships to beneficiaries and communities so as to stay in touch with reality,
- direct pressure from grassroots groups and social change leaders to keep looking for new solutions to desperate problems, and
- willingness to surface, identify and cope with issues of power, inequality and differing agendas. (Taylor et al. 2006: 28)

Although these are important potential advantages, knowledge processes in NGOs are complicated by a number of obstacles. In particular, an often-mentioned obstacle to learning and knowledge exchange is work

---

61 According to one study, this is the case for the Dutch NGO Hivos (MBN Werkgroep Kwaliteit 2006: 7).
pressure and a lack of time. NGO staff see the importance of knowledge sharing and are willing, in principle, to engage in exchanges, but time is money, and knowledge exchange and learning are often considered an extra cost to the organisation. Maintaining regular cross-organisational contacts, making space for reflection, and participating in discussion meetings can be time-intensive and costly, and the benefits from an investment in knowledge are vague and ambiguous. This is inevitable: the whole point of learning is that the outcome will be new and unknown. But donors increasingly emphasise ‘direct-impact’ activities and pressure NGOs to minimalise resources not spent directly on projects. Particularly organisations that are dependent on project financing find that there is very little room to take a step back from the daily practice of project management and reflect on lessons learned.

The situation is compounded by the fact that for people working on conflict there is always a sense of urgency and a need to respond to rapidly changing circumstances. The limited time available makes it particularly necessary to fall back on the experience of others, and the quickly changing circumstances demand that there is a continuous updating of knowledge. In addition, the issues dealt with are often political in nature, adding politics to the pressures that bear upon staff members and managers. More so than in the private sector, the work of managers in the public sector, be it governments or NGOs, is to a large extent politics- and therefore incident-driven (Noordergraaf 2000: 262). Table 3.3 summarises the contradictory pressures that the staff of international NGOs face.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EFFICIENCY</th>
<th>LEARNING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Urgency: act quickly</td>
<td>• Adapt to local circumstances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Apply standard procedures</td>
<td>• React in a flexible way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Concentrate on large scale</td>
<td>• Give local staff larger role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>projects</td>
<td>• Take political situation into account</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Keep gender and environmental impacts in mind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Show experimental attitude</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3: Contradictory pressures on the staff of NGOs

Additional complicating factors for the organisational learning of NGOs include

• The island culture of organisations: in the decentralised organisations that NGOs often are, staff members are confined

---

62 Out of ten people interviewed at Cordaid by Van Dijkhorst and Hilhorst (2003: 7), seven mentioned “time constraints due to workload as a major obstacle”. See also MBN Werkgroep Kwaliteit (2006: 8).
to one project or region and do not interact much. In addition, the geographical distance between headquarters and field offices often leads to information gaps. At the same time, the geographical range of NGOs may be an advantage in that it may enable them to connect knowledge coming from the local all the way to the international level.

- The target groups of NGOs (variously called ‘beneficiaries’ or ‘stakeholders’) are not the same people as their donors. While most NGOs feel they should be accountable to their beneficiaries, in practice they tend to be accountable primarily to their donors. This is true for both NNGOs and SNGOs. It complicates knowledge flows, something that will be elaborated in chapter four.

- There is usually a high need for success stories to legitimize the existence of NGOs. Indeed, with increasing pressures to show results, a shift has taken place in the public relations strategies of NGOs. Instead of presenting miserable people in precarious situations (which could portray the message that development efforts have little effect), they increasingly try to show successful examples of aid. This emphasis on success stories makes it difficult to pay attention to learning from mistakes. More fundamentally, as discussed earlier, admitting mistakes may mean taking responsibility for failing to save human lives.

- Finally, cultural differences within organisations may be more salient for NGOs than for corporations, because NGOs often have their headquarters in one continent and their field offices in another. Those that do not tend to work with local partners in developing countries. Cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings and since people reason from very different contexts the transfer of tacit knowledge becomes even more difficult than it normally already is. Cultural sensitivity and implicit knowledge transfer are necessary, and this may present problems.

3.4.3 Improving organisational learning by NNGOs

The Dutch development organisation Hivos writes in its 2003 Knowledge Sharing Strategy: “An oft-heard obstacle to knowledge sharing is work pressure and a lack of time. For this reason, knowledge sharing must be included in the normal policy cycle and integrated into the regular work schedule.” (Hivos 2003: 4) How can this be achieved? For one thing, making contributions to knowledge exchange and
learning could be made part of job descriptions and performance appraisals. A recent Economist publication about innovation puts it as follows:

“It is not enough to have original thinking. It must be recognised, valued and put into practice. […] A lack of innovation usually indicates that managers at all levels lack the awareness or motivation to spot the potential of the ideas floating around their organisation. They may see original thinking as a threat and therefore discourage it.”
(Syrett and Lammiman 2002: 37-38)

As characteristics of an innovative organisation the Economist publication mentions a diverse workforce, opportunities for casual exchanges, and an encouragement to share information. These facets should be reflected in personnel policy as well as the shaping of organisational structure and routines. Overall, organisational flexibility is vital: management needs to be open to changes in direction as a result of learning and suggestions from staff. In the present field of analysis, this bears also upon the donors: demanding rigid planning and strictly holding aid recipients to their earlier plans may limit flexibility and learning, in a double way: it restricts the time available for reflection, and it limits the leeway to change course and procedures as a result of learning.

Also of significance for fostering learning despite countervailing pressures is the work culture of an organisation: its rules, habits, interaction styles, symbols, values and world view (Boonstra 2004: 3). Adjustments to organisational routines can create space for changes in work culture, but these latter changes eventually make the difference. “Research […] provides further support for an emphasis that is less on devising management systems to ‘control’ learning or to ‘manage’ knowledge, more on finding new ways to encourage people to think creatively and feed their thoughts back into the organisation” (Kessels and Harrison 2004: 2). As we saw above, a culture that stimulates learning is one that fosters an atmosphere of safety in which to discuss feelings, uncertainties and assumptions. Trust, a cooperative (rather than competitive) culture, the rewarding of knowledge sharing, and an atmosphere tolerant of mistakes are a part of this (Sauquet 2004: 382-3).

3.5 The South as a gap in the literature

The review of the growing amount of literature on organisational learning by peace and development NGOs reveals an important gap in both the literature and the organisational activities it describes: they
hardly deal with Southern organisations. A number of quotes are given here that make this gap painfully clear. King (2004: unnumbered) notes that

“as the new ideas about multilateral and bilateral bodies becoming knowledge agencies and learning organisations […] began to circulate in the late 1990s, it was plain that they were sourced very much from the corporate sector in North America and Europe. There was, accordingly, a powerful tendency for the emphasis to be on the capture, synthesis and more cost-effective utilisation of the agencies’ enormous existing knowledge bases rather than on the generation of new knowledge.”

Hovland’s (2003: 12) annotated bibliography of organisational learning in the development sector concludes (abbreviating the term knowledge management to KM) that

“Northern NGOs have so far implemented KM to alleviate their own information blockages – based on the same rationale of efficiency and profit as corporate businesses – rather than using KM to address key questions of how they can contribute to knowledge development in the South. […] Can KM/learning increase the responsiveness of Southern and Northern institutional processes to the situation of the ‘beneficiaries’? Can KM/learning help to connect the voice of the poor with the institutional knowledge of development/civil society organisations?”

Indeed, the earlier-mentioned study of learning in Cordaid found that “[l]earning processes of [Southern] partners is something that Cordaid says it considers, but people admit that more attention could be paid to this” (Van Dijkhorst and Hilhorst 2003: 9-10). According to Ramalingham (2005: 26), this situation is particularly striking given the nature and mission of development organisations, which base their knowledge on their work in the South. Northern development organisations’ “focus on internal knowledge work belies the fact that all the [studied] organisations relied 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].”

Dutch development policymakers Wiedenhof and Molenaar (2006: 11) explain why their internal focus does not help learning by development agencies:
“[k]nowledge management is often perceived as an internal corporate concern […]. When it comes to learning and knowledge production, it really makes not much sense to focus on internal processes. Like any other form of learning, organizational learning takes place in context. For an organization to fulfil its mandate, it needs to interact with its environment. This interaction is the prime source for learning relevant lessons. Internal processes for sharing such lessons and anchoring knowledge within the organization are of secondary order only.”

Therefore, in the words of Taylor et al. (2006: 29), it is important to “create mechanisms inside organizations for incorporating the voice of the constituencies, or ‘consumers’ as a way to ensure learning practices that allow groups to be in touch with the realities/ problems faced by our constituencies and the ‘real’ world outside the organizations.”

However, there are two bodies of literature that do pay attention to knowledge flows involving SNGOs – even though they do not directly discuss organisational learning strategies. These are capacity building (3.6) and NGO networking (3.7).

3.6 Capacity building: from knowledge transfer to mutual learning?

Although it is usually not connected to thinking about NGO organisational learning, there is one set of literature – mostly from NNGO sources – that does address knowledge strategies of NNGOs vis-à-vis their Southern counterparts: the literature on capacity building. For that reason, the concept of capacity building is discussed in this section. In the next chapter, we will compare the theory of NGO capacity building to the practice encountered in the field.

Capacity is knowledge that enables a person to do something. It is a skill or competence. But capacity also includes a structural aspect – the context in which a person operates allows him to exercise his competence. Capacity building is a development strategy based on the adagio ‘give someone a fish and he eats for a day; teach someone to fish, and he can feed himself for a lifetime’. It aims to assist people and institutions in developing countries to develop their capacities so that they can create their own welfare, build their own peace, and run their own government. Capacity building aims to make development processes sustainable as they become less dependent on external money and knowledge.
As mentioned, capacity development needs to take place at the level of both agent and structure. “Learning is the key ingredient […]. There is, however, a limit to what an individual or organization can achieve through informal learning” (Lopes and Theisohn 2003: 22). This is where the structure, consisting of institutions, regulations, and social relations, comes in. Because of the structural aspect of capacity building (the need to create the space for people to exercise their abilities), capacity building can also be a political process as it may be necessary to change power structures. “Capacity building is fundamentally a human process of development and change that involves shifts and transformations in relationships and power”. (James and Wrigley 2006: 6)

The UNDP distinguishes the following levels of capacity and capacity building:

- At the level of individuals, capacity building strategies at this level include training programmes, science and technology transfer and development, and increasing internet access.
- At the level of institutions, which “offer continuity and act as repositories of knowledge and experience, reducing dependency on single individuals, while enabling access to accumulated knowledge” (Lopes and Theisohn 2003: 23), strategies focus on improving organisational structures and procedures, improving management, and building organisational learning capacity.
- At the level of the society as a whole, “especially a country and its governance”, capacity building strategies largely focus on strengthening governments and making them more accountable. “The importance of this level of capacity was not fully appreciated until quite recently. Capacity development efforts focused mainly on individual skills and institutions, tacitly assuming that other factors – usually described as externalities or an enabling environment – would sort themselves out. But experience has shown that externalities such as corruption, governance systems or conflict-prone attitudes […] have impeded – and even brought down – many capacity development initiatives.” (Lopes and Theisohn 2003: 24) In addition to government-oriented strategies, societal capacity building may also include civil society development and the strengthening of legal institutions.

The UNDP (Lopes and Theisohn 2003: 26) has identified core capacities for development at the individual, institutional and societal levels, including:
1. to be guided by key values and a sense of purpose
2. to define and analyse their environment and their own place in the greater scheme of things
3. to define the issues and reach working agreements on purposes or mandates
4. to manage and resolve conflicts
5. to formulate strategies
6. to plan, and act on those plans
7. to acquire and mobilise resources
8. to learn new skills and approaches on a continuous basis
9. to build supporting relationships with other parties
10. to assess performance and make adjustments
11. to meet new challenges proactively, by adjusting agendas, approaches and strategies.

Lopes and Theisohn (2003: 26-27) further note that “all of them are underpinned by fundamental abilities. The formulation of policies and strategies, for instance, calls for more than a structured mind and writing skills. First, it requires a vision of the ultimate goal. Then it demands a whole range of capabilities and mechanisms relating to leadership, engagement and dialogue. Knowledge of the stakeholders and the management of a meaningful process including large groups of people are important, as are the facilities to table tricky issues, negotiate, mediate between divergent interests and manage forms of conflict resolution.” What is also interesting in the UNDP’s list of capacities is the importance of a learning capacity for development, as shown particularly in capacities 8 and 11. Indeed, “[l]earning lies at the heart of capacity development, since it entails a conscious approach to change” (BOND and Exchange 2004: 2).

There are various approaches to capacity building. For example, an instrumental approach holds that “capacity building is about improving project implementation, results and accountabilities” while a transformational approach focuses on shifting relationships and power dynamics. “Those who believe that capacity building must deliver quick, measurable results and can be achieved through the simple transfer of skills, will favour a more instrumental approach. Those who believe that capacity building requires a change in power relationships will take a transformational approach.” (James and Wrigley 2006: 4) We will see in the next chapter that in the practice of North-South peacebuilding and development partnerships among NGOs an instrumental approach is usually taken.
The concept of capacity building is closely linked to that of local ownership. According to most writings about the concept, capacity building needs to be a demand-driven and participatory process and cannot be driven by external interveners. As is illustrated by Figure 3.3, capacity building should “help people and organisations to find their own solutions, involving those that it is meant to support” (Groot and Gerwen 2004: 4).

Figure 3.3: Local solutions to local problems

Ideally, then, capacity building should involve several steps:

- Participatory problem analysis, involving target groups and partner(s)
- Participatory context and organisation analysis
- Shared strategic choice for capacity building of one (or more) organisations
- Results-based and coherent intervention plan
- Tailor-made interventions
- Tailor-made monitoring and evaluation system focusing on accountability and learning
- Sufficient implementation capacity among partner(s) (Groot and Gerwen 2004: iv)

Such a locally-owned process includes building on existing capacities rather than inserting completely new ones. This would make solutions

---

63 Groot and Gerwen 2004: 2
more applicable to the local context and more supported by those who will implement them. In order to make this principle clear, the UNDP prefers to use the concept ‘capacity development’ which emphasises that capacities already exist and are merely supported to develop further. Figure 3.4 below illustrates the difference between capacity building and what the UNDP calls organic capacity development. If imported capacities do not build on existing ones, then they will not be relevant and miss their target. The reason for this is that

“[t]oday we know that knowledge cannot be transferred. It has to be acquired, learned and reinvented. And it encompasses both the deep pool of local understanding that is the very foundation of learning, and the wealth of global information that can be reconceived to meet local needs. When adaptation fails to happen, however, there is no ownership and likely no lasting capacity development.” (Lopes and Theisohn 2003: 4)

Organic capacity development, on the other hand, is conceived as an interactive process of knowledge sharing with local actors in order to find out what their capacities are and help develop them by strategically inserting knowledge where it is needed. Although local stakeholders play a leading role, the role of the external facilitator is very important. External actors may provide structure, introduce an external perspective, share learning from other organisations and knowledge institutions, inject energy, reduce tensions that may arise among stakeholders in the process, and ensure that an organisation does not get caught up and distracted by other activities. (James and Wrigley 2004: 20)

![Figure 3.4: Organic capacity development according to the UNDP](image)

---

64 Lopes and Theisohn 2003: 10
Theoretically, then, a good capacity building strategy uses participatory techniques and is embedded in the specific local and organisational context. Its approach is people-centred but also pays attention to systemic elements. (James and Wrigley 2006: 12-14) The implications for development practitioners who aim to build capacities include “a need for facilitation expertise, being flexible rather than working to standardised procedures, and creating opportunities to reflect and transform – that is, learning how to learn from experiences” (BOND and Exchange 2004: 3)

3.7 Networking for peace by NGOs

In chapters six and seven we will see that networking is a common strategy among Southern peace NGOs. In recent years some publications have seen the light that discuss networking as a strategy for NGOs active in peacebuilding. This section gives an overview of some of the main insights of these publications. In the sixth chapter, these insights will be combined with other findings about learning and knowledge sharing by SNGOs to form a list of characteristics that influence the success of networking for peace by NGOs.

3.7.1 Networks and peacebuilding

A network is “a loosely structured form of cooperation, in which coordination is done through a horizontal exchange of information, lacking a clear hierarchy. It is composed of communication links between individuals or groups. The network notion stresses these linkages and allows participants to exchange information and attach meaning to it, thus transforming information into knowledge.” (De la Rive Box 2001) The members of a network can be individuals or organisations “that are working toward a common goal, or whose individual interests are better served within a collective structure”. (Van Deventer 2004: 1)

Some observers consider networks to be particularly suitable to deal with issues of conflict and peace:

“Networks are becoming a favored organizational form wherever a broad operational field is involved (e.g. where links are being made between different regions, or between grassroot to international levels), where problems are so dynamic that rigid structures are not

---

65 Earlier versions of this text have been published in Verkoren 2006a and 2006b (see literature list).
suitable, and where loose ties are preferable to formal organizational bonds. All these features are well known in areas of violent conflicts.” (Van Deventer 2004: 1-2)

A 2001 conference on lessons learned by peacebuilding practitioners formulated the importance of networking in the following way. The conference participants concluded that “[n]etworking has a large role to play in pulling together an expanding, but dispersed field”, and went on to state that

“[t]he field of conflict prevention and peace building is expanding rapidly. [...] However, the field is dispersed over a great number of mostly small organizations. In order to pull all these efforts together and identify gaps in the field, the sharing of information and cooperation is becoming more and more important. [...] Networking can help to avoid a duplication of activities. Also, a broad network is the best guarantee against one-sided approaches to the complex issues involved in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.” (Galama and Van Tongeren 2002: 34)

Another advantage of networking noted during this conference was that it facilitates complementary partnerships, which are necessary in order to deal with the lack of resources in the field of peacebuilding (Galama and Van Tongeren 2002: 34). Other observers agree that complementarity is an important element of networks, which may profit from the diversity of their constituencies (Benner et al. 2004: 197).

By networking, participants can advance the work of their individual organisation and also promote the wider field of the network. Collaboration in networks may expose organisations to new ideas and knowledge, enhance and deepen critical thinking and creativity, and help avoid competition and duplication of activities. Being a member of a network may also add to the credibility and influence of an organisation, and lead to new business opportunities. Networks may also enable individual organisations to address global problems through joint action, based on the realisation that none of the organisations involved can address the issue at stake by itself. Such joint action may also strengthen the outreach capacity of the field as a whole. (Åhäll 2006: 4-7; Galama and Van Tongeren 2002: 34; Benner et al. 2004: 196-197) A Dutch NGO supporting networks in the South for example feels that networking is an important tool to strengthen civil society and social capital in developing, conflict-affected countries. In addition, networks may strengthen the voice of particular marginalized groups – such as the
Bangsamoro in Mindanao - , thereby helping to correct structural inequalities underlying conflicts.66

The light structure of networks may allow them to respond quickly to new situations and take new initiatives without going through a heavy bureaucratic process. (Åhäll 2006: 4-7; Galama and Van Tongeren 2002: 34; Benner et al. 2004: 196-197) As an organisational form, networks provide more flexibility and openness than more formal organisations. This means that they are able to adjust in the process of cooperation. As a result, at least in theory, network structures can facilitate constant learning from success and failure. (Benner et al. 2004: 196)

3.7.2 Categorising networks

A common type of network is a knowledge network. According to Stone, a knowledge network has two main functions. First, it coordinates the communication and dissemination of knowledge, acting as an intermediary between intellectual communities in different places. It provides “a space for discussion, setting agendas and developing common visions regarding ‘best practices’, policy or business norms and standards”. This helps to avoid duplication of effort and synchronises ‘communication codes’. It enables the network to speak with a collective voice, leading to its second main function: it can have a greater ability to “attract media attention, political patronage and donor support than an individual or single organisation”. (Stone 2005: 93)

Research on knowledge networks has often focused on scientific networks. However, in practice, and particularly in the world of conflict and development, academics do not monopolise knowledge networks at all:

“for a variety of reasons – such as government cutbacks and funding formulas founded on tuition incomes – universities and their research institutes are rarely in the vanguard of identifying or prioritizing ‘global issues’. Instead, major think tanks and leading NGOs with their own innovative policy departments […] are taking greater prominence […]. Hence, the growing salience of national to global knowledge and policy networks.” (Mbabazi, MacLean and Shaw 2005: 157)

Knowledge exchange is an important function of peace networks. Many networks, however, combine their knowledge exchange function with

66 Conversation with staff member of a Dutch development organisation. The Hague, The Netherlands, 19 April 2006.
other, more action-oriented functions. In the field of peacebuilding this often means joint lobby and advocacy, research projects or the joint fundraising for, and implementation of, programmes on the ground.

Networks can be categorised in various ways. The following dimensions are discussed in this section: the degree of cooperation and organisation, the focus and objective of a network, and issues related to network accountability and exclusiveness.

**Degree of cooperation and organisation**

One way to categorise networks is according to their organisation. At one extreme of the organisational spectrum, an organisation may look like a spider web: a strong centralised network consisting of a central board and secretariat, surrounded by circles of members in various levels of involvement from full to partial membership. In this type of network the secretariat coordinates the exchange of knowledge and selects and edits knowledge based on standards of quality and focus. Strong centralised networks are usually found in formalised environments in which sufficient means can be generated to pay for the relatively high coordination costs. They tend to be exclusive in that not everyone can become a member.

At the other extreme is the fish-net or cell-structured network, which often exists in societies with weak institutions or threatening contexts. Such a network is characterised by a low level of organisation and coordination. It is inexpensive but depends heavily on the commitment and activity of its members. (Van Deventer 2004: 7-8) The advantages and disadvantages of either approach are summarised in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Decentralised network</th>
<th>Structured network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pros</strong></td>
<td>Ownership of decisions by members</td>
<td>Systematic coordination &amp; consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility: participation in activities is elective</td>
<td>Increased capacity building potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lower cost as less is spent on coordination and secretariat</td>
<td>Enhanced visibility/strength of network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Clearer lines of accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cons</strong></td>
<td>Small and less 'noisy' members not heard</td>
<td>Expense of running a secretariat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agenda of individual organisations may take over the network</td>
<td>Frustrations linked to more complex procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rights and responsibilities of members may be unclear</td>
<td>Need to select a location: risk of regional bias</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3.4: Comparing decentralised networks with structured networks*

---

67 Robert 2006: 4
Activities, focus and objective\textsuperscript{68}

Another way to distinguish between networks is to look at their activities and objectives: do they limit themselves to the knowledge exchange component or do they also engage in collective advocacy or project implementation? The degree of cooperation is often related to the activities of the network. Some activities, like joint lobby or campaigning, require more cooperation and organisation than, for example, knowledge exchange.

The focus is another distinguishing facet of networks. The case described in the chapter six shows that it is difficult to be sufficiently focused without becoming too exclusive. There is a balance to be struck when it comes to how narrow or broad the content area is on which a network focuses. If the area of discussion is too narrow

- it will not stimulate a broad enough flow of information
- the interaction may be less creative since creative ideas often result from the combination of hitherto disparate elements
- a too narrow content would only attract the ‘usual suspects’ who already know each other well; little cross-fertilization would take place.

If the subject matter is too broad (‘Conditions for peace on earth’), then

- the interaction remains too vague and becomes uninteresting for serious people,
- it attracts, on the contrary, people with lunatic ideas, and
- it becomes very difficult to arrive at common products which bind the group together.

Some networks have a very specific objective. They may have been created to prepare a specific event or the next annual report, to elaborate a new strategy, or to coordinate a specific project. Common products could be joint publications containing lessons learned or recommendations, joint projects or programmes, the organisation of an event, a broadening of the network, or the start of a new one in a different field or region. Aiming for such a specific outcome can make a network more attractive and active, as participants feel they are working towards something concrete that will serve their interest. Being too specific about the intended outcome of the exchange, on the other hand, severely limits the creativeness of the process and the possibility for arriving at unexpected conclusions.

\textsuperscript{68} This section is based in part on an earlier publication by the author with Gerd Junne (Junne and Verkoren 2005).
Many networks are created for the exchange of knowledge and experience per se. But there is always an implicit assumption that this exchange will lead to better results, if not through joint activity, then through the improved functioning of the individual participants who are enriched by the exchange. Networks working toward a specific outcome often function well, because they have a clear focus, their activity is time-bound, and the participants have an obvious common interest. The problem is often that the knowledge generated during the project is not captured or passed on to colleagues in the participating organisations or other people. There is also little exchange with other networks or organisations with similar activities. For such an exchange, the network should be broader, but as a consequence, the objective then becomes more diffuse.

Van Deventer (2004: 6-7) draws attention to the fact that the two dimensions described so far – activities/objectives and organisation – are often interrelated. Networks formed with high expectations on the benefit side (ranging from merely gaining information to increasing the impact of activities, obtaining resources and gaining collective legitimacy) are likely to carry out more pro-active functions (ranging from knowledge exchange to advocacy and collective interventions) and, as a result, need a higher degree of institutional formalisation.

**Accountability and exclusiveness**

As chapters six and seven will show, networks face various issues of legitimacy, accountability and ownership. As networks are relatively fluid and consist of many different actors, it is difficult to hold them accountable for their actions and the way they use the resources of donors and participants. “Networks as diffuse, complex and weakly institutionalized collaborative systems are [not] directly accountable to an electoral base”. (Benner et al. 2004: 198) It can be difficult to establish in how far those representing the network really take into account the views of their members. As networks develop, devising formal structures for representation and governance is often necessary in order to deal with these issues, even though such structures may limit the looseness and flexibility that set networks apart from other organisational forms.

A specific issue that has been raised in the literature regarding networking initiatives is their exclusiveness. Often, they have not spanned the North-South divide. According to King many development agencies have been more concerned with “improving their own capacity rather than with improving the quality of engagement with the South”. The first circle of sharing is usually within the organisation, the second
is with other players in the North, and only in third place are the 
Southern partners and other groups outside the North:

“it could be suggested that the new assumptions of ‘genuine 
partnership’ between North and South would have made it mandatory 
to start the explorations of knowledge sharing with the primary actors 
in the so-called recipient countries. […] [Instead,] a good deal of the 
initial knowledge management and knowledge sharing in the agencies 
has actually taken place behind the protection of an intranet, 
reinforcing the view that it is the agency’s own staff development that 
is the primary objective.” (King 2005, 72-75).

Even when networks do cross the North-South border, or when they are 
South-South networks, exclusiveness can be an issue. Unequal access by 
different parties that could benefit and contribute may be the result of 
different organisational capacities, including time issues but also things 
like access to internet. It may also be a consequence of politics, 
particularly in conflict areas where some organisations or individuals 
may not want to engage with others because they are considered to be 
allied with one of the conflict parties.

Inclusiveness and the broadening of a network are not necessarily 
positive, however. In chapter seven we will see how members of a 
global civil society network complain that their network is too inclusive 
and broad. A balance needs to be found between a certain critical mass 
to start a lively, sustained interaction, while avoiding the exclusion of 
important actors. If the group is too small, chances are that

- there will be little exchange, because there are too few people to 
  participate. The positions of participants will be known quickly 
  and cease to be surprising, so that the interest of members in 
  participating will decline rapidly.
- if only people with a similar background participate, opinions 
  may not differ sufficiently to generate creative ideas.
- if only a small fraction of the potential constituency participates, 
  people will turn to other forums where these people do meet.
- the network may lose legitimacy due to unequal access. (Junne 
  and Verkoren 2005)

On the other hand, the community can also be too inclusive. By asking 
too many people with different backgrounds to join, communication 
may falter. The reasons are that

- chances increase that individual contributions are beyond the 
  interest of the majority of members.
- people hesitate to engage themselves because they do not see a 
  common denominator which brings participants together.
the larger number of people may generate so many messages that they will no longer be read by the other members of a community. A community would then drown in its own flow of information, if not skilfully channelled into different subgroups and discussion threads. (Junne and Verkoren 2005)

The issue of exclusiveness also relates to the extent to which a network provides access to other networks. If a Southern, grassroots network is able to link up with international networks, and to provide access to formerly inaccessible policy forums, this can be a vital function for its members.

3.8 Concluding remarks

Learning is what makes people improve practice and avoid repeating past mistakes. At the level of an organisation, learning takes place when the organisation changes work methods or objectives as a result of experience or knowledge encountered. Knowledge and learning processes of NGOs and their employees take place in a cyclical way and are closely related to action. NNGO staff members primarily learn in interaction – with colleagues as well as external actors.

The most profound kind of learning takes place when a person (or organisation) questions his own unconscious bias, assumptions and world views. Such ‘third-order learning’ is particularly relevant for our field of analysis as it supports cross-cultural interaction and learning. At the same time, it is precisely such deep learning that is difficult in conflict-affected situations, in which questioning one’s views and the actions that have been based on them can be quite painful and costly. Interaction with others may help a person or organisation move towards deeper levels of learning. Outsiders can provide an external perspective that is needed in order to step out of one’s thinking world and reflect on it. In this way, outsiders act as learning ‘scaffolds’. Formal education may also serve as such a scaffold if it builds on the practical knowledge and experience of the learner and relates these to theories.

Various issues complicate the learning of NGOs, including work pressure and a lack of time. To an extent these obstacles are of such a nature that they will never be fully removed. However, two types of efforts could help limit them. The first is working to gain recognition of the fact that in the long term learning and efficiency are not contrary but mutually beneficial. The second effort is trying to devise organisational
structures and foster organisational cultures that limit these problems and stimulate learning. Trust, a cooperative (rather than competitive) culture, the rewarding of knowledge sharing, and an atmosphere tolerant of mistakes are a part of this.

Implicit, cultural knowledge is an important but problematic category of knowledge for NGOs, which cooperate with people across cultures and knowledge systems. Not much thinking has so far been done about ways to create, store and share cultural knowledge. This gap is probably related to the lack of attention the knowledge strategies of NGOs pay to North-South (and South-South) knowledge processes. There are, however, two bodies of thinking that do take Southern organisations into account: capacity building, which addresses knowledge flows between NNGOs and SNGOs, and networking, which focuses particularly on exchanges among SNGOs. Regarding capacity building, theory developed by the UNDP and others stipulates that it should not be a one-way knowledge transfer process from North to South but should be based on Southern ‘ownership’ and build on existing indigenous knowledge.

Literature on networking by peace NGOs suggests that networks are an organisational form potentially suitable for peacebuilding due to their flexibility and capacity to bring together the large number of small organisations that make up a scattered field. Networks may be more or less centrally organised and narrowly focused depending on the degree of cooperation they desire and on whether they prefer inclusiveness and diversity over clearly demarcated objectives and activities. Their governance structures need to pay attention to accountability, which is often a difficult issue given the loose organisation of networks and the fact that they include many different members.

For both capacity building and networking, we will see in upcoming chapters how activities in the field compare with the theory presented in this chapter. In that and other ways, this book aims to contribute to filling the gap in existing theories when it comes to knowledge processes involving Southern NGOs, thereby also contributing to thinking about cross-cultural knowledge processes as part of North-South exchange.
3.9 Concluding Part One: Towards a model of processes, actors, and relationships

In chapter one we saw that Southern peacebuilding NGOs in conflict-affected regions focus mostly on the local, community level. This is also where they have a clear added value compared to other actors. However, the chapter suggests that the relevance of their work would increase if in addition to their micro-level work they paid more attention to the bigger picture of building a peaceful society, reflecting more explicitly on the role their activities play in this big picture and whether they complement with those of other actors. The difficulty of doing so is related to a lack of space and capacity for research, reflection and ‘third-order’ learning about whether the organisation is doing the right thing. This is tied to a model of civil society support on the part of donors that treats local NGOs more as service providers, or implementers of international policy, and less as independent political actors. As a result there is not much incentive to reflect and little space to address the larger, political features of conflict and peacebuilding.

Chapter two showed that conflicts are characterised by competing ‘knowledges’ and interaction around different visions and interpretations of reality is part of peacebuilding. When local NGOs organise community dialogues or peace education projects, such exchanges are part of these activities. Their own knowledge – the ideas and concepts on which they base their actions – develops mainly through action and interaction. Joint learning through exchange with people in- and outside the organisation is emphasised as a way to increase the understanding of NGO staff and the relevance of their actions. When such interactions involve people from different cultural backgrounds, as is often the case given the large role of Northern donor agencies in shaping the practice of local NGOs, they are complicated by the fact that different knowledge systems meet. Oral traditions have to adjust to written ones and different definitions of how knowledge is generated, and what constitutes valid research, interact. The question is whether implicit, cultural knowledge on the part of all involved could help improve such interactions.

The third chapter suggests that a ‘third-order’ willingness to question one’s own assumptions and ideas could potentially facilitate cross-cultural learning, namely. This would lead to more openness towards the knowledge and views of others. However, it is difficult because of conflict (which stimulates tactical-level learning but not deeper reflection about whether one has been doing the right thing) and also because of structural inequalities among the actors involved in
exchange, particularly between NNGOs, acting as donors, and the SNGOs that receive their aid. Chapter four analyses these structural issues. Capacity building and NGO networking represent two bodies of thinking and activity that may contribute to overcoming them. Parts Two and Three examine the way they function in the field.

As is clear by now, interaction emerges from Part I as a major element of the learning processes of NGOs. In order to map the various actors that engage in these interactions and the way they relate to one another in processes of learning and knowledge exchange, Figure 3.5 provides an initial typology of the knowledge processes, actors and interactions that feature in and around Southern peace NGOs. It is explained below.

**Figure 3.5: Knowledge flows in and around Southern peace NGOs**

The light blue box represents the Southern peace NGO. Inside this box an ideal-type cyclical learning process takes place, as introduced in section 3.1 on learning and 3.2 on organisational learning. The cycle in this model has been adapted to the project cycles of NGOs, in which
conscious planning plays an important role. The black arrows inside the blue box show where the organisation – or parts of it – moves from one learning step to the next in a project cycle. The process may start at any point in the cycle. (Often it starts with the introduction from the outside of abstract concepts and generalisations, such as peacebuilding methodologies developed elsewhere.) Next, these concepts are analysed and related to the circumstances and aims of the organisation, followed by a planning phase in which the newly adapted ideas are concretised into a programme or project. That programme or project is carried out in the next stage, which provides an opportunity to test the ideas in action. Finally, organisational members reflect on their experience and draw lessons from it. These lessons make up new abstract concepts to be analysed and adapted in a new cycle of learning, and the process starts all over again. As was discussed in this chapter, this organisational learning cycle is facilitated by a learning culture: an organisational environment that creates the optimal conditions for learning.

However, these organisational learning processes do not occur in isolation. Various actors interact in and around them. Such interaction with external people is important as it has the potential of stimulating deep, reflective learning, something that is important both for innovation and for learning and exchange across cultures and knowledge systems. This is particularly relevant given that deep (third-order) learning is hampered by conflict or its legacy, which makes it difficult for people to question their assumptions and the actions they have based on them. In Figure 3.5, a number of potential external counterparts are portrayed that interact with SNGOs and thereby exchange knowledge. The remainder of this study will analyse these interactions in more detail.

For people working in peace and development NGOs, the beneficiaries of their programmes represent one important actor in these interactive learning processes. In addition, interaction is likely to occur with colleagues from other NGOs in the same area. This may happen informally, during joint activities, or in networks. Often joint learning and interaction by staff members from different NGOs is consciously stimulated during training workshops provided by international or large local NGOs. Staff members of international NGOs that fund the activities of Southern organisations also interact with their local partner NGOs, typically around project proposals, reports and evaluations, thereby feeding into the planning stage. In addition, through capacity building activities they may contribute abstract concepts. The arrow reflects that, according to the theory, capacity building activities should consist of two-way knowledge flows.
These international NGOs act as donor agencies towards their Southern counterparts but are themselves recipients of donor money as well, interacting with Northern government agencies, foundations, and intergovernmental agencies around the policy of these donors. These Northern donors in some cases also interact directly with the SNGOs that are at the centre of this analysis, for example though their embassies in Southern countries. Besides, they interact with the governments of the countries in which SNGOs are based, for example as providers of bilateral development aid. These Southern governments in turn interact with NGOs in their country. These interactions may be through consultations or networking around policymaking or as part of the lobby and advocacy activities of NGOs. Knowledge institutions, such as universities and research institutes, play a role as well. We have seen in chapter three that they may function as scaffolds that support deep learning.

The above is a schematised, hypothesised sketch of actors, processes and relations. The remainder of this study sets out to establish how these processes function in reality. In doing so it addresses a number of issues that are raised by the relations and processes outlined above, and that the theory presented so far has not yet dealt with. We have seen that the literature on organisational learning by NGOs hardly touches upon organisational learning in SNGOs and about North-South knowledge interactions. Part Two aims to contribute to filling these gaps. Specifically, it looks at a number of research questions that Part One has raised:

1. What factors constrain and support the learning of these NGOs?
2. How do power differences, donor relations and North-South dynamic influence the knowledge that is used and the learning that takes place?
3. What do the knowledge and learning processes of local peace NGOs look like, what are their strengths and weaknesses, and what are difficulties and gaps in their learning practice?
4. Given the structural reality in which they operate, what initiatives are undertaken to improve the learning processes of local peace NGOs? What can we learn from these initiatives?
5. To what extent do these initiatives facilitate cross-cultural, ‘third-order’ learning?
3.10 Research design and methodology

The research approach and design has been the combined result of inputs from practitioners in the field of peacebuilding and of a literature review. At the start of the research process, a meeting was organised with Netherlands-based experts of peacebuilding and learning processes. The purpose of this meeting was to make the research focus and design as relevant as possible to the interests and needs of the peacebuilding field. In an *Electronic Boardroom* session\(^69\) that combined face-to-face and chat room discussion to record literally what was contributed by the participants, a discussion was held on the priorities and questions for the study. The seventeen participants were Dutch NGO staff and researchers working on conflict and peace and with a special interest or expertise in knowledge processes. This session contributed to the first research design.

3.10.1 Spread and representativeness of NGOs visited

The table below gives an overview of the NGOs whose staff were interviewed for this study. The main criterion for selecting NGOs was that they were local organisations with peacebuilding as their mission. In addition, a spread in size, geographical base, and focus area of the organisations were aimed at. As the table shows, this has been achieved relatively well.\(^70\) The NGOs were contacted in several ways. First, the Dutch donor organisations Inter-Church Development Organisation (ICCO) and Catholic Organisation for Relief and Development Aid (Cordaid)\(^71\) suggested partner organisations and other contacts. Second, the networks analysed provided lists of member organisations. Finally, people interviewed suggested additional contacts.

In the table, the organisations have been divided into several categories:

- **Scope:** whether an NGO is local or national; regional; or global in scope.
- **Base:** the country in which the office is based.
- **Size:** the number of paid staff members.
- **Focus:** the areas of work on which the NGO concentrates.
- **Rural/urban:** whether an NGO has its office in a national capital, a provincial capital, or a small town.

---

\(^{69}\) Amsterdam, 20 November 2004 (see sources).

\(^{70}\) See below for some qualifying remarks.

\(^{71}\) ICCO and Cordaid are two of the four largest development NGOs in the Netherlands.
Finally, the table gives the total number of people interviewed and the total number of NGOs they represent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall:</th>
<th>Focus:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of people</td>
<td>Reconciliation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interviewed(^{72})</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of NGOs</td>
<td>Networking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Total number of NGOs</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reconciliation</strong></td>
<td><strong>76</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Networking</strong></td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dialogue</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Scope:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local / national NGO</th>
<th>Peace education</th>
<th>25</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional NGO</td>
<td>Training (community) mediators</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global NGO</td>
<td>Human rights / justice</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Base:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>Youth</th>
<th>19</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sudan(^{74})</td>
<td>Research</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda(^{71})</td>
<td>NGO development</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghana</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>Representing a particular group</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberia</td>
<td>Church organisation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Lobby and advocacy</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>Early warning for early response</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyrgyzstan</td>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajikistan</td>
<td>Peace zones and civilian peacekeeping</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazakhstan(^{76})</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan(^{77})</td>
<td>Rural/urban:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Based in national capital(^{78})</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Size:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff less than 5</th>
<th>15</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff less than 10</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff less than 25</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff more than 25</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3.5: Categories of NGOs visited**

\(^{72}\) In many cases several staff members of the same NGO were interviewed. In addition, donor agency representatives (Netherlands) and staff of government agencies (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) were interviewed to obtain a government’s perspective on civil society, peacebuilding, and knowledge.

\(^{73}\) Disarmament, demobilisation, reintegration and rehabilitation

\(^{74}\) Interviewed in Nairobi, Kenya

\(^{75}\) Interviewed in Nairobi, Kenya

\(^{76}\) Interviewed in Utrecht, Netherlands

\(^{77}\) Interviewed in Osh, Kyrgyzstan

\(^{78}\) Nearly all of these organisations have programmes, and sometimes offices, in the countryside

\(^{79}\) Nearly all of these organisations have programmes, and sometimes offices, in the countryside
It has been difficult to establish how representative these NGOs are of the broader field of peacebuilding organisations. Few global or regional directories of peace organisations exist, and those that do (including the United Nations NGO database) tend to include only large international NGOs and not local ones based in conflict areas. The OneWorld partner directory of development NGOs does not include many peace-oriented members. GPPAC has a directory of peace NGOs but this directory is rather limited and does not include many grassroots groups. It provides no information on the number of staff members and focus. Donor organisations like ICCO and Cordaid have not integrated information of country desks about local partners into a central directory.

Looking at the table, however, the following remarks can be made with regard to the spread of the NGOs.

- Concerning geographical spread, the interviews concentrate on Southeast Asia and West Africa. This is the result of the selection of these regions as case study areas. In addition, some interviews were held in East Africa and Central Asia. This means that the Asian and African continents are represented relatively well. The question whether the countries visited are representative of their wider regions is discussed in section 3.10.4 below.
- The table also specifies the proportion of rurally-based versus urban-based NGOs. The majority of NGOs consulted are based in either a national or provincial capital. This is not surprising given that most NGOs in these countries have their offices in these towns. Reasons for this include better infrastructure and electricity, and being near the offices of donor agencies, government institutions, and international organisations. Most of the projects of these NGOs, however, are in rural areas. Few of these projects were visited, because the study does not discuss any individual projects. The study is about the organisations themselves and their activities and perceptions with regard to knowledge and learning.
- Although some local branches of international NGOs were visited, the focus is clearly on indigenous organisations. This has been a conscious choice. International NGOs have been relatively widely studied, and they themselves sometimes analyse knowledge flows among their branches. Locally-originated organisations face a different set of challenges in

80 Latin America is not represented; there the processes studied may well look different.
gaining access to information and getting their voices heard than international NGOs. Since these challenges are at the core of the study, the local NGOs receive the most attention. Analysing their relatively under-studied issues, it is hoped, will contribute most to the development of theory in the area of North-South knowledge flows and processes.

- Under ‘focus’ the areas of work which the organisations mentioned as core activities are listed. Most organisations work in more than one of these areas. All the focus areas mentioned are usually considered part of peacebuilding work, although there is some discussion with regard to whether social and economic development projects and human rights advocacy are part of the core toolkit of peacebuilders.  

---

81 Most people would say that they are not, but that they do contribute to the overall aim of building sustainable peace.

82 As stated above, there is not much reliable information about this. However, publications such as European Centre for Conflict Prevention 1999, Van Tongeren et al. 2005, Anderson and Olsen 2003, and Barnes 2006 give an idea of the range of activities undertaken. In chapter one more will be said about these activities.

---

Finally, the size of the NGOs, expressed in the number of paid staff members, has been specified. As the table shows, organisations of different sizes are relatively equally represented. Nonetheless, it was somewhat surprising to me that such a large proportion of the NGOs encountered had relatively high numbers of staff members. The perception prior to the field visits had been that the majority of Southern peacebuilding organisations were very small in size. Upon counting staff based in rural areas it turned out that many of the NGOs encountered were larger than expected. That said, not all staff are paid regularly and in many organisations there is a high variation in staff size depending, for example, on whether a particular grant has been secured for a project. It is not clear whether the organisational sizes of the NGOs visited are representative of the whole population of Southern peace NGOs.

Related to questions about the representativity of the peace NGOs visited is a set of issues relating to those organisations’ constituency in the regions in which they work. Are NGOs acting on behalf of communities or do they mostly represent their own organisational interests? Have they been created as a result of a need arising out of communities, or have they been founded in response to funds becoming available? Do they mostly implement projects determined by donors, or
do they set priorities through participatory processes among the beneficiaries of their work? The picture varies among regions, countries, and organisations. In some countries, particularly those emerging from large-scale violence that has destroyed many of the societal structures which may have been present before, many CSOs lack a real constituency – something that has for example been noted in Liberia. There, as in other parts of Africa and also in a country like Cambodia, there have been instances of ‘fake’ NGOs: organisations founded exclusively to get access to donor funds. In a country like the Philippines there is a strong tradition of a well-organised, interest-based civil society.

The interviews do not answer these questions, because they only give the view of NSO staff themselves. No NGO staff member is likely to admit that his or her organisation has only a limited constituency. It is likely that organisations have been visited which are not well rooted in local constituencies. It is even possible that some organisations have been ‘fake’ NGOs – although this is not very likely, as it is difficult to imagine why these organisations would be interested in discussing issues of knowledge and learning. Anyhow, the approach taken does not double-check the picture painted by interviewees of their activities; few actual projects of the NGOs were visited. However, this is also not the central aim of the study. The aim is to learn about the NGOs themselves and their perspectives of knowledge and learning.

The interviews did shed light on a related issue: the extent to which SNGOs are able to set their own agenda based on the needs of the people for whom they work. In many cases, donor relations limit the radius of action of local organisations. Despite the popular language of capacity building and ownership, local partners are often treated as subcontractors that implement the policies set by donors. There is little room for local partners to contribute to policy development by outlining the local needs and priorities. This limits the extent to which CSOs represent local communities; in some cases they seem rather to be acting as outposts of donor agencies. Chapters one and four discuss this issue.

3.10.2 Regional differences, culture and context

The reason behind the selection of countries to be visited in different parts of the world has been to increase the validity of findings for

---

83 although there, too, doubts have been raised about the extent to which these organisations represent the grassroots
various contexts. It was also thought that the comparison of findings between regions – particularly the two main focus regions, Southeast Asia and West Africa – might yield interesting observations about regional differences in approaches and experiences with knowledge and learning. In fact, it has proved difficult to make such comparisons between regions, as differences within regions are very large. The countries visited within regions differ significantly – particularly in Southeast Asia where Cambodia and the Philippines are very different. Differences include stage and scope of the conflict (with relative peace in Cambodia for eight years and peace negotiations ongoing in the Philippines, and the Cambodian conflict involving the whole country while the Philippine conflict is concentrated in one region), maturity of democracy and civil society (with civil society in the Philippines much stronger and more longstanding than in Cambodia), and the focus area of peacebuilders (with Philippine organizations being more political and action-oriented than Cambodian ones, which tend to emphasise gradual engagement and dialogue as strategies).

The different nature and focus of civil society organisations in the two countries relate in part to large cultural differences. In Cambodia, a traditionally Buddhist culture exists, which is influenced by Chinese as well as Thai traditions and the legacy of the French colonizers. The Philippine culture is influenced by Catholicism, Spanish occupation, and American influence; and Muslim and indigenous cultures in Mindanao. The case may even be made that those two countries represent two extremes of a range of Southeast Asian contexts. In that sense, the two countries are not a bad representation of the region as a whole. That is less true for West Africa. Sierra Leone and Liberia are neighbouring countries. They have different pasts (Sierra Leone was a British colony while Liberia is linked historically to the United States) but are both Anglophone countries and have relatively similar conflict histories. Countries in their direct neighbourhood, such as Ivory Coast and Guinea, have faced comparable and related civil wars, but other countries in the region deal with different kinds of conflicts and issues.

The Francophone parts of West Africa have not been visited. Those countries are said to be different culturally as well as in the level of civil society development (lower than in the Anglophone countries). Differences in colonial and administrative practices in French and British colonies have given rise to different state-society interaction. Put very briefly, the French tended to rule directly while the British ruled through local elites. The latter form of colonial governance had the advantage that locals developed governance experience, but it also led to conflict as some groups were selected to govern over others. In sum, the
study cannot claim to apply equally well to all of West Africa. However, the combination regions and countries visited, not only Southeast Asia but also East Africa and Central Asia, widen the validity of the findings.

Looking at what the differences in context mean for the findings when it comes to knowledge and learning processes by local peace NGOs, no obvious differences between the countries visited emerge from the interviews. In fact the issues are that NGO staff members around the world raise are quite similar. Indeed, this similarity follows from some of the developments that are discussed in this book, particularly the occurrence of exchanges among NGOs and the prevalence of a specific peacebuilding and development discourse. However, this raises a difficult question. Do the issues raised by interviewees correspond to their reality, or are they merely talking about the issues they know tend to be discussed and they expect will be understood by the researcher?

In fact the story is not that bleak. Indeed, many of the NGO staff members interviewed are faced with the same reality when it comes to the funding regime of which they are a part. This funding regime is international and has similar characteristics in different countries. It has led to similar issues when it comes to the knowledge local NGO employees use in their work. In response, employees in various places voice similar criticisms of the situation. They speak the language of the dominant discourse, but are not uncritical of it. From their position at the interface of international discourse and priorities on the one hand, and local realities on the other, they face dilemmas that occur relatively independently of the cultural or regional context.

3.10.3 Methodological approach

The methodology employed is essentially qualitative rather than quantitative. It does not use numerical data but analyses stories and case studies. The approach taken throughout the research has been explorative or heuristic. This means that theory and empirical data interact. Both are used to build up a new conceptual model. As part of the heuristic approach, data is collected using a variety of methods and perspectives. The study employs triangulation: the application and combination of several research methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon by combining multiple theories, methods, and empirical materials, in the hope of overcoming the weaknesses and biases that are
Having collected data through various methods and perspectives, the heuristic analysis is directed toward discovery of similarities. “Proceeding in this manner, the overall pattern, showing the structure of the topic, will gradually emerge. All data have to be considered and incorporated […]. The analysis is integrated into the process of data collection and mutually dependent on it.” (Kleining and Witt 2000)

What have been these various methods employed? Central elements of the study have been the review of various bodies of relevant theory on knowledge processes, civil society organisations, and peacebuilding work, and a large number of interviews with staff members of primarily Southern peacebuilding NGOs. In addition, the study has employed elements of action research (see section 3.10.7), observation, and case study research. As part of one of the case studies, namely the study on GPPAC, an e-mail survey was conducted. The survey findings also have some broader application beyond the case study alone, and have been particularly useful for the chapters on knowledge sharing and networking (chapters five, six and seven). All these elements (which are elaborated below) are combined in an inductive manner. The analytical model is not fixed but changes depending on the empirical data collected. Thus, the findings from the interviews, action research observation, and case study research serve to adjust and further develop the theoretical framework.

An approach which has inspired the methodology used for the current study is appreciative inquiry. Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a method for bringing about changes in organisations, starting from the strengths of the organisation. The approach concentrates not on the problems, but on the positive elements within the organisation. It explores what drives an organisation, what connects staff members with each other, and what inspires and motivates them. AI attempts to identify moments from the past in which organisational processes worked best, and to analyse the factors and strengths that made these moments possible. In other words, appreciative inquiry does not emphasise problem identification, but discovering, understanding and fostering social innovation. Although this study does identify issues and problems, it also aims to go beyond these and make suggestions for ways forward that build on the positive potential of the existing experiences and knowledge of Southern peacebuilders. Another principle of appreciative enquiry is that research

should be applicable, that is, it should generate theoretical knowledge that can be used, applied, and thereby validated in action. As will be discussed in 0.11 below, this is indeed what this study aims to do.

The study also contains some elements of another approach: action research. Action research is a mode of research in which the researcher does not strive to be an objective observer but is herself involved in what she is studying. Acknowledging her own role, she studies her own interventions and consciously reflects on her own assumptions and theories in doing so. The action research elements of the study came about primarily as a result of opportunities to do advisory work for several organisations engaged in knowledge processes in the peacebuilding field. They are further discussed in section 3.10.7.

Choices made regarding the approach - the selection of programmes, organisations, and countries to visit, and methods to employ - have been primarily based on the topic and questions at hand. The triangulated, explorative approach chosen is relevant because knowledge processes of Southern peace organisations are little-researched. On the specific topic few sources are available. Thus it becomes necessary to develop new theory, which is done by combining different (but related) bodies of theory with empirical data. The empirical data are obtained not only from interviews but also by observation and action research in order to balance the possible bias that the interviewees may bring, given that their views cannot easily be tested by comparing them with the studies of others – which are hardly available.

The above-mentioned consultancies (see 0.7 below) matched the content of the PhD project - which is why I was asked to carry them out. Their inclusion in the study did not lead to a reduction or alteration of the approach as it had been developed from a content perspective. They only added methods and travel destinations. For example, the review of GPPAC that is discussed in chapter seven made it possible to carry out a global survey among CSOs on networking in general, and the GPPAC network in particular. This survey was added to the methodology toolkit already planned or used. This applied only to a specific subset of issues: those relating to networks and networking.

3.10.4 Interviews

Central to the study are open-ended, semi-structured interviews. These have largely been with NGO people working in various conflict-affected countries. Table 3.5 gave an overview of the backgrounds and
characteristics of the interview partners and their organisations. In addition to these 105 Southern peacebuilders, around twenty-five conversations were conducted with people involved in supporting these peacebuilders, namely, European and American staff of donor agencies and international NGOs. The nature of these conversations ranges from formal interviews to informal discussions. The questionnaires used as reference points to guide the interviews differed depending on the respondent. Sometimes respondents were interviewed primarily as network participants; in other cases more attention was paid to learning processes. In many cases an interview was held for more than one purpose.

Although lists of questions were used as reference points, the conversations were open-ended and often changed their focus depending on what issues proved to be of particular relevance in relation to the respondent’s situation. Having said all this, some general themes and questions were addressed in most of the interviews, such the ways in which people learn, the knowledge they feel they need in order to improve their work, the extent to which they are able to gain access to this knowledge, and the difficulties they encounter when trying to learn new things. How NGO staff members apply new knowledge in their work was also addressed, as were the modalities and difficulties of sharing knowledge with others. Besides, the interviews paid attention to the type of knowledge interviewees think they have to offer and whether or not this knowledge reaches potential users. The role of donor agencies in supporting or inhibiting knowledge processes was often discussed, and most interviewees were asked whether they thought some types of knowledge are considered more important than others in the field of peacebuilding.

3.10.5 Action research

I have been involved in the GPPAC network analysed in chapter seven as well as in the ACTS programme of chapter eight. I have carried out a review of the GPPAC network as an external consultant invited by the network’s International Steering Group. The GPPAC analysis is not a classic case of action research in the sense of one’s intervention in a situation being the object of study. The role of the researcher has been that of an external interviewer and observer. However, the fact that the

---

85 For example, one and the same respondent may have been interviewed as a member of GPPAC for the case study in chapter eleven, as a participant in ACTS for the case study in chapter twelve, and in addition he or she may have been asked questions about general issues regarding learning and knowledge sharing.
research was designed and carried out in close interaction with people within the network, and that a number of concrete recommendations were formulated which were then discussed in a seminar organised by GPPAC, points to a relatively active role of the researcher.

For ACTS, I was an advisor in developing a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework for the programme. However, as this M&E development is a relatively long-term process which has only just commenced, it is difficult to see the outcomes of my intervention as of yet. In addition, although the M&E framework is an important element of any programme and sheds light on the programme as a whole, its development is not the central object of analysis in this chapter. This means that the study of ACTS is not a classic case of action research either. All the same, what is taken from action research methodology is an awareness of a researcher’s own involvement in the object of study and the implications this may have.

3.10.6 (Active) observation

Observation was employed as a method in two ways. First, several network meetings and other events at which knowledge was exchanged were attended. These concerned two meetings of the International Steering Group of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC), a provincial-level meeting of the Network for Collaborative Peacebuilding Sierra Leone (NCP-SL), a curriculum development workshop of the Applied Conflict Transformation Studies (ACTS) programme, a Cordaid conference with staff and partners on networking as a peacebuilding methodology, and a GPPAC seminar on the same topic. The latter seminar was attended by all fifteen GPPAC Regional Initiators plus a number of representatives of other regional and global networks. In addition, academics working on peace issues and representatives of donor agencies participated in the seminar.

These observation activities overlap partly with the action research described above, as in some of the meetings described I gave a presentation or otherwise provided inputs. In those cases it became possible to study the effect of my own interventions in the short- to medium-term.

86 such as the International Action Network on Small Arms, the Nonviolent Peaceforce, and the Amani Parliamentarians’ Forum in the Great Lakes region
3.10.7 Survey for GPPAC case study

The GPPAC case study, discussed in chapter seven, uses the results of a written survey that was e-mailed to people involved in the GPPAC network, which consists of fifteen regional networks around the world. I was able to do this because the study was combined with a consultancy aiming to carry out a review of the network on behalf of GPPAC’s International Secretariat. The survey was developed in close consultation with the International Secretariat. Two versions were elaborated: version A for people directly involved in GPPAC, and version B for people indirectly involved.87

The survey was sent to 623 people around the world. 199 people (or 32%) returned it. The statistics for each region are depicted in Annex 1. They show that all but two of the fifteen regional GPPAC networks achieved the minimum response of 25 per cent aimed for. Particularly high percentages of surveys were returned in Central Asia (78%), the Caucasus (58%), and Central and East Africa (51%). Two regions did not meet the threshold of 25 per cent of the surveys returned: Southeast Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. In Southeast Asia 24 per cent of the surveys were returned, which is very close to the threshold. In addition, 29 people were interviewed in this region. The Latin America and the Caribbean region is more of an issue because only two out of 87 surveys (which had been translated into Spanish) were returned and no interviews were held. This was due to organisational difficulties and deficient communication between the various parties involved in carrying out the survey in that particular regional network.88 I cannot assume that the two surveys returned are representative of the larger population of GPPAC members in this region, and have to conclude that Latin America and the Caribbean is not really represented in the case study.

3.10.8 Bias and role of the researcher

Ideally, researchers should be non-judgmental when compiling findings. Since complete neutrality is impossible, this characteristic is a controversial aspect of qualitative research. While absolute objectivity is impossible, it is paramount that researchers enter the field or study

87 ‘People indirectly involved’ usually do not consider themselves members of the network but they have been in contact with it as resource persons, donor agencies, or through informal contacts with network members.
88 Namely, the International Secretariat of GPPAC, the GPPAC Regional Secretariat for Latin America and the Caribbean, a local researcher, and myself.
group with an open mind, an awareness of their own biases, and a commitment to remain detached from those biases as much as possible while observing and interviewing. Indeed, all that can be done is to be as explicit as possible about possible biases and ways in which these may have influenced the findings. First of all, the choice to visit a number of different countries rather than just one has meant that field trips have been short: not more than one month at a time. There has not been time to immerse in a culture and environment and genuinely get to know people. Clearly to the people encountered, I was ‘en passage’. The role of the researcher, as a result, has been essentially that of an outsider coming in to talk to people, and then to disappear again. The limited immersion in the countries means that there may be biases that I am unaware of. The approach may also have led interviewees to withhold more information than they would with someone they have come to know. Indeed, several people honestly stated their suspicion of Northern researchers coming to ‘extract information’ and taking it away for their own benefit, leaving respondents with nothing. As will be discussed in the final paragraph of this methodology section, it has been attempted to minimise this issue by involving respondents as much as possible in the process and by feeding results back to them. Nonetheless, some suspicion may well have been there.

In terms of North versus South, two opposite biases may have been operating at the same time: on the one hand, an inbuilt Northern bias of myself as a researcher, being born and raised in Europe, and on the other hand, a pro-South sentiment. My unavoidable Northern bias has an impact on concepts such as time and effectiveness, which are under discussion during the research (for example when the interactions between Northern and Southern partner organisations are discussed). Being a scientist gives me an additional bias, emphasising the need for statements to be scientifically verifiable, preferring written information, and disregarding myth and intuition as a source of knowledge (see chapter four). Although for the aims of the study it is important to be open to different perspectives and to criticisms of Northern ways of seeing things, I unavoidably still look at these from the perspective of someone who has been immersed in those ways from a young age. A sympathy for Southern groups as the ‘underdog’ in North-South relations may have played a role at the same time. In that context, even some indirect sense of guilt about Northerners’ impact on the developing world over the centuries (from the slave trade, to colonisation, to Cold War sideshows, to neoliberalism) may be a factor. In addition, I tend to sympathise with pro-change actors such as civil society organisations working for a better world in difficult circumstances.
My age (young) and gender (female) may have influenced the responses given by interviewees, particularly in countries with patriarchal traditions. At least I myself perceived this to be something of significance in some instances. Upon entry, people would act surprised at my youth (and often at my gender, which my name usually does not give away to non-Dutch people). I sometimes had the feeling that I was taken more seriously after I had presented a book I had previously co-edited, and some copies of which I had brought along as gifts. At the opposite extreme of not being taken seriously, it is also possible that people may have accorded me some status on account of being from the North and academia, and tried to impress me by giving what they may have perceived as ‘socially desirable’ answers – although when looking at the interview reports it is difficult to envision what these may have been.

Importantly, and somewhat connected to the previous point, I played different roles in different interviews, and often played several roles at once: PhD researcher, consultant evaluating a Northern partner (this was the case for the Kenyan interviews), consultant carrying out a review of a global network in which the interviewee is involved (in the Philippines, Cambodia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), and consultant facilitating a process of joint monitoring and evaluation system development (in Cambodia). Although the different ‘hats’ were clearly introduced, this may still have been confusing to people. Moreover, depending on the roles, interviewees may have been more or less open. For example, if an interviewer is introduced as only and purely a PhD researcher (as was the case in West Africa), people may be more forthcoming than when she is evaluating an organisation they work with (as was the case in East Africa). The different roles played also had advantages, however. The consultancies provided me with access to information and contacts that would otherwise have been difficult to obtain. In addition, I entered conversations with a different status from a PhD researcher. People may have been more willing to meet me and more thorough in providing information when they knew that it would be used for a concrete project.

3.10.9 Research ethics and outcomes

As was mentioned above, some SNGO staff are critical of researchers coming in to pick their brains only to take the knowledge away and use it for their own benefit (for example, to obtain a degree or publish in an academic journal). Such issues do not only lead to ethical considerations
in the methodology section; they are part of the subject of the study as well. Because of this it has become even more important to make the research process as relevant and fruitful for the Southern respondents as possible. This has been done by according them as many feedback opportunities as possible (by e-mailing semi-structured questionnaires, interview reports, travel reports, and articles) and by sharing with them the results of the research and the information obtained in the process. Indeed, the intention is to feed the outcomes of the study back to those consulted for it as much as possible. This may lead to the generation of additional products aside from this book, such as a website with lessons learned, recommendations, links to additional information, and opportunities to participate in discussions taking place.

3.10.10 Presentation of the research outcomes

Since the study takes a heuristic, inductive approach, it does not rigidly separate theory (or the findings of others) from my own empirical findings. Literature and empirical data combine to lead to the model that gradually emerges from the different chapters. The first three chapters were mostly based on literature. The fourth chapter is based on a mix of theory and interviews, while the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth chapters are almost entirely empirical. As much as possible I try to indicate the basis on which statements are made. Where a statement is made about the views of Southern peace NGO staff, these reflect the views of the majority of people interviewed. Where quotes from interviews are given, these are intended to illustrate more widely carried opinions and ideas, rather than being exceptions to the rule (unless this is expressly stated).