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

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Chapter 5. Practice to knowledge and knowledge to practice

Learning and sharing by Southern peace NGOs

Having outlined the structural aspects that shape the learning of Southern peace NGOs in chapter four, I will now examine the ways in which these organisations exercise their agency within these structural constraints. Thus, this chapter focuses on the following sub-question: 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? The answers given in this chapter are largely based on the interviews done with local NGOs in the countries visited.

Section 5.1 looks at the practical meaning of peacebuilding knowledge, a concept discussed in chapter two. 5.2 examines the types of knowledge needed and offered by the peacebuilding NGOs studied. Next, the chapter turns to the strategies these organisations employ for learning and exchange.

Hailey and James (2002) studied the learning activities of a number of Indian NGOs considered successful in their work. They found that these NGOs held regular meetings, retreats, workshops, and seminars. One organisation even “moves staff around in the organisation or assigns them to new projects as part of its strategy to encourage cross-functional learning. It transfers staff from research posts to field positions and from specialist to management positions in an attempt to disseminate and institutionalise learning.” Other knowledge-related activities of these organisations included sponsoring relevant and applied research and publishing research findings (Hailey and James 2002: 402-403). Section 5.3 looks at our sample of Southern peace NGOs and the organisational learning activities they engage in. It assesses their knowledge acquisition, knowledge retention, knowledge application and transfer, and research and dissemination.

The Indian NGOs from the study by Hailey and James also had “sophisticated internal management information and monitoring systems”. However, “[t]he extent to which donor-led evaluation processes contributed to learning was mixed, with the incentive to cover up mistakes in order to maintain funding undermining the learning

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140 See the overview of NGOs visited at the end of Part One and the description of their activities in 1.5.1.
process.” (Hailey and James 2002: 404) As we will see in this chapter, this is consistent with the picture emerging from my interviews with local peace NGO staff. Section 5.4 explores some reasons for this and explores ways to better make use of the learning opportunity provided by monitoring and evaluation procedures.

The learning processes of the peace NGOs analysed in this study do not necessarily occur purposely. The organisations have few formalised organisational learning policies in place. Their staff members emphasise informal learning from practice as the main way of learning. Interaction – with colleagues within and outside of the organisation, beneficiaries, and others that play a role in peacebuilding – is deemed an important way of learning by SNGO staff. Section 5.5 looks at these processes of knowledge exchange in more detail.

Important constraints exist that limit the learning of Southern peace NGOs. The structural constraints discussed in the previous chapter play a major role in this. In addition, there are a number of more specific obstacles to learning. These are discussed in 5.6. What may also play a role is a lack of priority accorded to knowledge and learning processes by Southern peace organisations. This is difficult to say for certain because although interview partners did recognise the importance of learning for their work, this may also have been because they were asked about it.

5.1 Peacebuilding knowledge in practice

5.1.1 Knowledge for peacebuilding

Section 2.2 mentioned that knowledge of conflict dynamics in general is a prerequisite for peacebuilding knowledge. My interviewees made clear that knowledge of the specific context is a necessary addition to such general conflict knowledge when one wants to successfully intervene in a conflict. This includes knowledge of local power relationships, cleavages, identity groups, leadership, and the role of external parties in causing, prolonging or de-escalating a conflict. Such knowledge may be found among academic experts of particular countries or regions and their publications as well as, importantly, among (former) residents of the region one is dealing with. Insiders at different societal levels can offer different expertise: people familiar with a country’s leadership know about the power dynamics at the national level of decision-making, while a (former) foot soldier will be able to relate what causes
individual fighters to join a militia – and what it may take for them to lay down their arms.

Section 2.2 also discussed how efforts to establish some kind of common ‘truth’ about the conflict can be part of peacebuilding. Part of this is the collection of data. The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam), a local NGO financed mainly by international donor grants, has been collecting more than 600,000 pages of documents detailing the workings of the 1975-1979 Khmer Rouge regime. DC-Cam’s director Youk Chhang, himself a victim of the Khmer Rouge regime which killed his parents and sister, says that “knowing and understanding what happened has set me free.” DC-Cam’s documentation includes minutes of Khmer Rouge leadership meetings, confidential memos describing conditions in the countryside, and the confessions under torture of prisoners killed by the secret police; maps of some 20,000 mass grave sites, 189 prisons, and 80 memorials; 6,000 photographs; 200 documentary films; and 4,000 transcribed interviews with former Khmer Rouge soldiers. In addition to data collection, civil society initiatives try to stimulate dialogue around parties’ diverging interpretations of history. For example, the Split Screen project ran a pilot with Israeli and Arab youth in the Netherlands who put their histories of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict alongside each other on a computer screen. The aim was not to agree on a common history but to become aware of others’ different views.

Arriving at joint visions of peace may be seen as a next step after processes of fact-finding and joint interpretation (sometimes in the form of truth commissions) have been completed. However, this step has not received much attention up to now. As we saw in chapter one, even NGOs whose daily job it is to work for peace often lack an integrated vision of the kind of situation they are aiming to contribute to. Through their networking activity (discussed in upcoming chapters) the NGOs visited do pay attention to this, albeit usually not very systematically. Other initiatives in this direction appear in the literature. Powell (2006: 530) gives examples of projects that employ participatory processes to explore and express societal issues wider than the planning of a programme:

- The Dialogues Politiques project by the organisation Environmental Development Action in the Third World

141 Interview with DC-Cam director. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, November 2001.
142 Ibidem. (In 2006, the work of the Center took on another value as the tribunal for Khmer Rouge leaders has finally begun its operation.)
(ENDA) in Dakar, Senegal, aims to give each Senegalese person the opportunity to become an actor in change and development. It focuses on marginalised groups in particular and organises workshops in which people give their vision about the future of the country. Dialogues are organised on themes such as cross-border trade and cooperation, agriculture, and sustainable fisheries, involving the people working in these sectors. ENDA also stages dialogues around the elaboration of local, regional and national development plans.144

- In Brazil, the Landless Workers Movement has carried out similar visioning activities among its members, which “have not only managed to secure land, therefore food security for their families, but also continue to develop a sustainable socio-economic model that offers a concrete alternative to today's globalization that puts profits before people and humanity.”145

- The international NGO Action Aid has developed the Reflect Programme, an “innovative approach to adult literacy and social change, where groups construct their own learning materials using drama, story-telling and songs. It was tested in nations including El Salvador, Bangladesh and Uganda and is now used by 350 different [partner organisations] in 60 countries.”146

Some peacebuilders interviewed see knowledge sharing as contributing directly to peace by changing perceptions and attitudes, countering misinformation, and empowering people through knowledge.147 Having access to various sources of knowledge is likely to make people less vulnerable to propaganda. A Sierra Leonean interviewee noted that “in a society with seventy-five per cent illiteracy, high unemployment, poverty and food insecurity, people who have knowledge are in a position of power. Many try to use their knowledge to influence people with ideologies.”148 Giving traditionally marginalised groups access to knowledge may reduce their grievances. Cambodian women are one example:

“learning and knowledge sharing are particularly important for women. Women need to know what happens in the world, not to stay at home. Knowledge is power, also for women in the family. When your children know more than you they will no longer respect you.

147 See table 6.1 in section 6.2 summarising findings on the benefits of networking and knowledge exchange.
148 Interview with director of a Sierra Leonean NGO. Kenema, Sierra Leone, 22 February 2006.
This happens with the children of the generation that had lacked education opportunities under the Khmer Rouge.\textsuperscript{49}

5.1.2 Indigenous and external knowledge

Most interviewees emphasised the importance of indigenous knowledge for peacebuilding. Not taking local knowledge into account can lead to peacebuilding and development projects missing their target partly or entirely. According to one NGO worker in Liberia, “the experts designing the national DDR [disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration] programme said that combatants had to be put in an encampment. This would have been suitable if they were regular soldiers, but instead they were often kids who simply defended themselves. They just needed to be taken back home.”\textsuperscript{50} This resonates with the problems caused by donor-driven projects that were discussed in section 4.6.

In line with the distinction between different knowledge systems (see 2.5), traditional conflict resolution and peacebuilding methods in countries like Cambodia, Sierra Leone and Liberia differ from ‘Western’ ways. Western methods often involve written text, while in many developing countries knowledge transfer tends to occur orally and illiteracy is high. The following citations show what this can mean for the practice of local NGOs.

“In accordance with our oral tradition, written exchanges have received less priority within our network [of peace NGOs] and when we ran out of funds the quarterly newsletter and ‘From the Field’ reports were the first activities to be cancelled. They were deemed less important than direct facilitation of peace processes in the field. Nonetheless we try to create more of a habit of writing – as long as this is done to retain important knowledge and benefit from our own work and that of others, not to boast or take credit. We feel that donor agencies sometimes push us to publish stories from our practice for the sole purpose of providing them with ‘deliverables’ and enabling them to show off our results.”\textsuperscript{51}

“There is no reading and writing culture in the Philippines. This is sometimes difficult towards donor agencies. The NGOs that know how to make funding proposals are the ones that get the funding.”\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{49} Interview with Cambodian NGO staff member. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 22 May 2006.
\textsuperscript{50} Interview with staff members of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{51} Interview with director of West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{52} Interview with staff member of Philippine NGO. Manila, Philippines, 19 May 2006.
Other differences between Western knowledge systems on the one hand and African and Asian ones on the other that were mentioned in the interviews include the way people deal with gender and the role of religion “as a fall back during war and a source of strength and resilience”. Both issues are mentioned particularly often in (Muslim) Mindanao. Family structures are also different, with African and Asian families being much more extended and parents exercising particular positions of authority. The influence of elders is often used to resolve conflict. Elders mediate and their authority is respected. “This type of conflict resolution leads to reconciliation, whereas going to court only leads to dissatisfaction and hatred on the part of the losing party.”

Another difference is in the way people experience time. Where Western donors demand time-bound activities with clear deadlines, Africans and Asians tend to be more process-oriented: the process has to be completed regardless of the time it takes. Consultations and consensus are important elements of indigenous, including Islamic, ways of working. Although Western or ‘modern’ knowledge is usually considered particularly rational, in this case one may wonder whether Westerners’ obsession with time, independently of the natural time that processes take, is not in fact quite irrational.

Southern peacebuilders emphasise the importance of traditional symbols in peacebuilding – acts such as land cleaning or exchanging gifts and sharing meals to validate an agreement and build trust. Western donor agencies do not always recognise these activities to be important. They do not match Western standards of scientific validity. From the perspective of a Western-educated academic such as myself this is often quite understandable. For example, an organisation in Liberia organised a workshop on traditional early warning systems with elders from two ethnic groups, in order to expand the toolbox for early warning and conflict prevention. As it turned out, in some traditions early warning signs were found in dreams and occurrences like the movement of birds. These are very far from what most Westerners would consider valid signs.

However, Western concepts do not necessarily clash with indigenous traditions. Most of the African and Asian NGO staff interviewed conclude that both ‘modern’, ‘Western’ knowledge and traditional knowledge are important. They do not agree about whether the two

154 Interview with staff member of Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
155 Interview with staff member of a Mindanawan NGO. Cotabato, Philippines, 17 May 2006.
156 Interview with national coordinator of a Liberian NGO network. Monrovia, Liberia, 8 February 2006.

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clash or complement each other. Some say that there is no tension between Western and non-Western concepts of peacebuilding: “Western concepts are more elaborated, but not fundamentally different.”\textsuperscript{157} Others see a more contradictory relationship between types of knowledge seen as closer to and further from local traditions. The intermediary, and most often stated, position is that many Western concepts are useful but need to be applied in a way that is sensitive to local circumstances and traditions. Western methods are not unfit for the local context, but the crux of the matter lies in their implementation. They cannot be replicated in Asia and Africa without modification. For example, for programmes to succeed one must work with traditional power structures, and to do so, knowledge about these structures is required.

Another way in which the intermediary position was stated was that both Western and indigenous approaches are needed. Sometimes one proves workable, sometimes the other. “Western medicine can bring new solutions but does not know which leaf in our woods cures which condition.”\textsuperscript{158} It is important to be armed with both concepts. “It does not really matter whether useful knowledge is originally Western or African. Different knowledge systems are interacting in a globalising world, and a strong traditional system may no longer be applicable because of changes taking place.”\textsuperscript{159} Human rights NGOs tend to emphasise these changes and the importance of getting into line with modernisation. They state the position that “human dignity overrides […] culture and tradition. People have to be educated about their rights in the modern system.”\textsuperscript{160} Non-human rights organisations tend to place more value on tradition and cultural differences.

Regarding regional differences, a Ghanaian peacebuilder hypothesises that

“Asian countries have compromised less with Western knowledge systems and retained more of their own knowledge; or at least they have been better able to integrate traditional and modern knowledge (whereas in Africa modern and traditional knowledge are completely unconnected). As a result they have been better able to develop politically and economically.”\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{157} Interview with staff members of a Sierra Leonean NGO. Freetown, Monrovia, 16 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{158} Interview with director of West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{159} Interview with Liberian NGO director in Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{160} Interview with Liberian NGO staff member. Monrovia, Liberia, 10 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{161} Interview with director of West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
This hypothesis is not really corroborated by the findings that came out of interviews in Cambodia and the Philippines. The picture arising from those did not differ significantly from the one emerging in Africa. But the Philippines and Cambodia may not really have been the kind of economically successful Asian countries the Ghanaian had in mind. In any case, what emerges is that it is difficult to generalise across continents.

In any case, it is important not to suggest that modernisation is always bad or that traditional, local knowledge is always good. Indigenous ways of doing things may in fact have contributed to conflict, like in Sierra Leone where traditional systems of land ownership and hierarchical relations between generations led to a marginalisation of youth, many of whom joined one of the warring parties (Richards 2005). In Liberia, some traditional laws (such as the ‘trial by ordeal’ in which an iron is held in a fire and then pressed on a suspect’s leg – if he does not get burned he is innocent) have been outlawed by the constitution because they are now generally considered to be inhumane, but are still implemented locally. Similarly in Mindanao, various interviewees refer to the traditional Rido system of revenge killings as something that needs to be changed.

5.2 A two-way exchange: Knowledge demand and supply in the field

5.2.1 Knowledge demand

Based on the interviews held with peacebuilders in different parts of the world, what knowledge do they need in order to do their work well? What knowledge do they have to offer? Starting with the knowledge need, people working for peacebuilding NGOs in developing countries mention - in the context of this study - several kinds of knowledge to which they would like to gain access in order to work more effectively. Table 5.1 below gives an overview of the kinds of knowledge that were mentioned. They can by and large be placed in two categories: first,
the NGO workers identify a need for peacebuilding content knowledge. Second, SNGO staff would like to gain more knowledge on working skills. In addition to these categories, the table portrays two remarks that were made: first, some people said that they did not (or not only) seek a specific kind of knowledge, but that they rather sought interaction with others through which new knowledge could jointly be created. Second, a large number of people emphasised that although they would like to gain knowledge, this would need adaptation to the local context before it could be usefully applied. Both issues are elaborated further on in this section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge demand</th>
<th>Lib (10)</th>
<th>SL (16)</th>
<th>Phil (10)</th>
<th>Cam (14)</th>
<th>Total (49)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peacebuilding content knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories, methods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General peacebuilding</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lobby and advocacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights and justice</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early warning and response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict analysis</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace education</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity work</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research into traditional ways of conflict management</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on needs, issues beneficiarics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies from elsewhere</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

some interviews went in other directions than others. This also depended on the specific place and role of an interviewee. As a result, when an interviewee did not mention a particular issue, this may also simply be because it did not come up during the conversation. An additional thing to note about this particular table is that it includes only interview findings from Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Philippines and Cambodia.
Additional insights may be obtained from the survey done among members of the GPPAC network for the case study portrayed in chapter seven. Annex 2 provides excerpts from the global survey reports of this survey. In response to a question about their priorities for knowledge sharing, many people mentioned conflict prevention and peacebuilding knowledge and methods in general, while a number of specific issues and methods were mentioned. In this category, peace education, human rights, arms and disarmament, early warning and early response, lobby and advocacy, and good governance were mentioned more than once. In addition to peacebuilding knowledge, respondents wanted to exchange experiences about activities undertaken by members. In terms of working skills, networking methodologies, capacity building methods, and strategic planning were mentioned as issues around which to exchange knowledge.166

Summarising the findings from the interviews and the survey, the peacebuilding content knowledge that Southern NGO staff would like to gain includes:

- theories and methods of peacebuilding that have been developed and tested elsewhere. Peace NGO staff see value in comparing

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165 Lib refers to Liberia, SL to Sierra Leone, Phil to The Philippines, and Cam to Cambodia.
166 See question 22 of survey version A in Annex 2.
these with their own methods in use and to take out applicable elements that can be adjusted and applied to the local context.

- research into traditional ways of conflict management. Few studies have been carried out into the elements that keep people together in all those traditional communities that live in relative peace.
- research on the needs and issues affecting the beneficiaries or stakeholders of NGO programmes, and the priorities of these target groups.

Working skills include:

- capacity to reflect upon activities, analyse trends, causes, and achievements, and to document the outcomes of such reflection and analysis. Related to this are research capacity (in order to be able to carry out the above-mentioned research into traditional ways and the needs of beneficiaries) and ways to assess the impact of work.
- practical skills relating to organisational management, financial administration, information and communications technology (ICT) and webpage design, fundraising, project cycle management, and strategic planning. In addition there is a desire to gain access to new and alternative ways of bringing a message across to the (often illiterate) public, such as documentary making. Among GPPAC members, networking methodologies and capacity building skills are priorities.

5.2.2 Knowledge supply

Although they would like to gain more knowledge and skills, local peacebuilders in West Africa, Southeast Asia and other regions are obviously not void of these themselves. They emphasise that they have unique experiences and knowledge that they have developed as they carry out their work. Some of this knowledge is specific to the context (for example, how to address the chief of a particular tribe), but other parts may be of use to others working in the same field. Table 5.2 below gives an overview of the types of knowledge the interviewees feel they have to offer\(^{167}\).

\(^{167}\) See note 164.
### Table 5.2: Knowledge supply of Southern peacebuilders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge supply</th>
<th>Lib (10)</th>
<th>SL (16)</th>
<th>Phil (10)</th>
<th>Cam (14)</th>
<th>Total (49)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Specific area of work</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal, leadership structures; symbolism</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience with grassroots work</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application and translation of external knowledge</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information from locals; knowledge of context (early warning)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working under difficult conditions, with limited resources</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to specific expertise around their area of work (people mentioned for example peace education skills, networking, and training), local peacebuilders may offer

- tacit and implicit knowledge about communal structures, family structures and traditional leadership structures, and the role of symbolism. For example, one NGO staff member noted that “we can help explain the nature of the chieftaincy in Liberia to non-locals. A chief in Liberia is not an autocratic ruler. His role is much more circumscribed and difficult to define. Symbolism plays a large role. A chief is like a bee queen: the softest and most valuable, but not necessarily the strongest. One never really knows what authority he exercises until he is removed; then everything falls apart.”

- experience with grassroots work, including the facilitation of dialogue at the community level and the stimulation and support of grassroots initiatives
- ways of applying peacebuilding methods developed elsewhere in the context of war-torn developing countries and experience with efforts to combine traditional and Western methods
- access to local information through work with local people who keep them informed. This knowledge can also be used as early warning signals in the case that a potential for renewed violence is identified
- experience with working under difficult conditions and being creative with limited resources.

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168 Interview with staff members of a Liberian youth organisation. Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
Interactive knowledge generation and learning

When asked about the nature and value of knowledge transfer and sharing\textsuperscript{169}, local peacebuilders emphasised the importance of comparing one’s ideas with the thoughts, concepts, and experiences of others. This helps put people’s work into perspective and find new dimensions. Indeed, local NGO staff emphasise that learning and capacity building tend to occur through interaction with others. “I do not really have a defined set of knowledge that I would like to acquire. I am more interested in commonly achieving new insights through knowledge exchange and joint brainstorming, taking the problems organisations face as a point of departure.”\textsuperscript{170} This is particularly the case in non-Western parts of the world that have an oral tradition and where even those who are educated often do not have the habit of reading and recording information. As a result, face-to-face meetings and training sessions are considered to be more valuable than written documents. This is particularly the case in Africa, where the oral tradition is emphasised the most, but it also plays a role in the other regions studied - except perhaps Central Asia where the Soviet past has left a highly educated population accustomed to working with knowledge in written form.

Oral traditions are not the only reason why people emphasise learning through interaction. Exchange is more generally seen as a requirement for creativity and innovation. One interviewee introduced the expression ‘knowledge that is not shared does not grow’\textsuperscript{171}. Together people arrive at new insights. Interaction also helps reveal the tacit knowledge that others have, sometimes without being aware of it. “[N]o explicit knowledge […] has any meaning unless it connects with the tacit knowledge held by the user” and “[s]uccessful communication and application of knowledge […] depend as much on the recipient as on the provider”. (Powell 2006: 520) When someone simply sends you an article without explanation, it is unlikely that you will prioritise reading it or see its importance. When someone sends you an article explaining that ‘the other day after we had talked about your work, I realised that this might be relevant for you because..’ you are likely to respond with more interest.

SNGO staff consider learning and knowledge exchange to be necessary in order to keep up to date on new and different ways of solving problems.

\textsuperscript{169} See also table 6.1 in section 6.2.
\textsuperscript{170} Interview with staff members of a Liberian NGO, Monrovia, Liberia, 14 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{171} Interview with the director of a Sierra Leonian NGO, Freetown, Sierra Leone, 16 February 2006.
problems. Although it is important to learn by trial-and-error, a grounded knowledge of issues and existing methods can help one work more systematically and consciously. It is by combining one’s own experiences with theory and the lessons of others that genuine learning occurs. In this way, gaining new knowledge also leads the staff of organisations to being more reflective about their work and that of others. This process of reflection and interaction changes individual perceptions and attitudes. In addition, as we shall see in upcoming chapters, knowledge sharing builds solidarity and can be a source of inspiration and learning. For example, a Sierra Leonean youth organisation that employs drama as a peace education method read in the report of another organisation about the use of film as a more cost-effective alternative to theatre. “Though in some ways community drama is better – involving the whole community, it gives people a sense that it is about them – this opens up new possibilities.”\textsuperscript{172} An example given in Liberia is that “exchanging knowledge with people from countries with trust and reconciliation commissions could bring useful experiences to Liberians dealing with the newly established commission here”\textsuperscript{173}.

Southern peace NGO staff members feel that both external and internal knowledge are needed for good practice, and that it is by combining these bodies of knowledge that true learning occurs. In response to questions about the context-specificness of knowledge, many peace practitioners interviewed made it clear that they do not view knowledge as produced in one place and transferred to another, but as produced through interaction between and among practitioners and researchers, who are at the same time sources and users of knowledge\textsuperscript{174}. As written in 2.1.2, knowledge production can be conceived as being basically conducted in two processes: first by translating local problem definitions into the language of more generalised knowledge, and then by translating the results obtained from generalised knowledge back to the local context (Rip 2001, 14). What is perhaps most important in this conception is that although knowledge is not universally generalisable and applicable in every context, it (or parts of it) can often be translated to another context. This translation process requires an open mind: making explicit and calling into question one’s assumptions and perspectives\textsuperscript{175} may open a person up to other ‘mind frames’ and ‘world views’, making translation possible.

\textsuperscript{172} Interview with staff member of a Sierra Leonean youth organisation. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 15 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{173} Interview with staff member of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 10 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{174} See also Baud 2002: 54.
\textsuperscript{175} As in third-order learning: see 3.1.3.
5.3 Organisational learning activities

In this section the knowledge-related activities in which local peace NGOs engage are discussed in some more detail. First, I will look at the ways in which they acquire new knowledge. Secondly, I will examine strategies to share and retain such knowledge inside the organisation – in other words to prevent it from getting lost when knowledgeable staff members leave the organisation. Thirdly, the processes in which organisations translate, apply and pass on such new knowledge are analysed. Finally, I will look somewhat more specifically at research and dissemination as a knowledge strategy.

5.3.1 Acquiring knowledge

As Table 5.3 shows, SNGO staff in the various countries visited find interaction with other organisations working in the field (elaborated in 5.5) and ‘learning by doing’ the two most important ways of acquiring knowledge. In West Africa, both strategies were equally important, whereas in the Philippines the first was more important and in Cambodia the second. It was often said in the interviews that practical experiences yield knowledge than can never be obtained from other sources. The knowledge of beneficiaries is considered another source important of knowledge. Their experience with peaceful coexistence or living with conflict are seen as untapped sources of peace and conflict knowledge. In addition, knowing about their needs and specific circumstances helps make programmes more relevant and effective. Spending considerable time in the communities of beneficiaries is therefore considered important, as is research into local needs. More attention is paid to the interactions between SNGOs and local communities in 5.5.3.

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176 Like the tables that will follow in this chapter, this table is intended to give an impression of the types of issues mentioned by interviewees when discussing knowledge strategies. It should not be read as a representative sample of NGOs in these countries, because of the open and semi-structured nature of the interviews done. If a particular item was not mentioned during an interview, it is possible that this was because the issue did not come up during the conversation. This table does not include Kenya and Central Asia at all since organisational learning strategies were not structurally discussed in the interviews in those countries.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acquiring knowledge</th>
<th>Lib (10)</th>
<th>SL (16)</th>
<th>Phil (10)</th>
<th>Cam (14)</th>
<th>Total (64)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interacting with other organisations</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By doing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficiaries</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books, manuals</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project monitoring and evaluation</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following procedures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3: Organisational learning activities of Southern peace NGOs: acquiring knowledge

The mentioning of the knowledge of communities (and colleagues) shows the importance accorded to local expertise. Most Southern peacebuilders agree that the knowledge of local people is invaluable. After all, they have used it to sustain themselves throughout the years. No one can better judge the best ways to deal with local circumstances and traditions than the people living in the locality itself. Local knowledge may take the form of traditional peacebuilding methodologies, such as singing and storytelling as ways to educate people about conflict resolution, rights, and peaceful ways of living together.177 In Mindanao people mentioned the Djandi system, a mediation process between tribes led by a chief or spiritual leader.178 Other traditional peacebuilding methods include traditional rituals that can contribute to peacebuilding. In Cambodia, mediums and healers played a role in the reintegration of displaced people and refugees.179 In Liberia, land purification rituals took place involving the whole community, mediums and healers.180

Workshops and training courses are also considered to be important ways of gaining new knowledge. Such courses tend to be relatively short (from several days to a few months) and may take place in the home country of participants or abroad. Courses abroad that have been attended by interviewees are offered by institutions like Johan Galtung’s Transcend (in various locations); Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) in Virginia in the United States; Responding to Conflict, a British NGO.

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177 Interview with staff member of a Sierra Leonean youth organisation. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 15 February 2006.
178 Interview with director of a Mindanawan NGO. Amsterdam, Netherlands, 9 April 2006.
179 Interview with staff member of a Cambodian NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 May 2006.
180 Interview with staff member of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
based in Birmingham, United Kingdom; and Bradford University’s School of Peace Studies in Bradford, the United Kingdom. Only a small percentage of interviewees have attended such courses, but those who have seem to occupy rather central positions in the NGO community in their countries. The director of the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), an EMU graduate, is a notable example. Interactions with colleagues from different countries during these programmes are deemed very useful in order to gain new perspectives and compare approaches.

Other NNGOs, international organisations, and larger SNGOs offer training courses in the areas in which the local NGO staff work. About two-thirds of interviewees in each country has attended such training sessions. Most of the courses mentioned focus on various types of peacebuilding methodologies, such as analysing and conceptualising conflict and peace, early warning, mediation and conflict resolution, peace education, and reintegration and reconciliation. In addition, people attend courses on practical subjects like fundraising, management, proposal writing, and training and facilitation methods. Often the concepts and methodologies introduced there are considered quite useful, although the SNGO staff members emphasise that the concepts gained during training workshops usually need to be adapted to local circumstances. Once trained, some local NGOs attempt to further disseminate the knowledge gained by organising their own training courses and training of trainer programmes181 (see section 5.5).

SNGO staff also noted interactions with colleagues as a source of learning. Accompanying and observing experienced colleagues and simply following the rules and instructions of their organisation are related activities that people mentioned. This is how people learn to write reports and proposals, for example. Mentoring by experienced colleagues, peer-to-peer exchanges and networking were found to be important ways of learning. Formal education is hardly seen as useful for peacebuilding practice. In West Africa, most interviewees have not had access to university education. In Cambodia the quality of university education is considered low and little attention is paid to crucial skills like critical thinking and social awareness182. However, NGO personnel in all countries do deem formal education to be important, mainly because of the status and opportunities a university degree brings.

181 Interview with staff member of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
182 In response a new private university, Pannasastra University of Cambodia, has been founded explicitly to focus on these issues.
In line with the lack of importance attached to formal education as a source of knowledge, academic knowledge does not figure in the list of sources mentioned. This has to do with the fact that little academic knowledge is available locally when it comes to peacebuilding. The vast majority of academic institutions doing peace and conflict research are based in the North. Some universities in (post)conflict countries have recently begun to develop programmes in this field, but as yet they remain exceptions to the rule. Still, academic knowledge finds its way to local practitioners in other ways. The manuals and training courses provided by NGOs as part of capacity building often use concepts developed by academics like Johan Galtung, Hitzkias Assefa, and John Paul Lederach. Via the manuals and workshops these concepts find their way to local practitioners. As we saw above, training courses abroad are often (though certainly not always) organised by academic institutions. Finally, internet resources and books, though not frequently mentioned as sources, often originate from a scientific source.

West African and Southeast Asian NGO staff often refer to the oral tradition of their societies as a reason why reading and, particularly, documenting experiences are not widespread practices. They emphasise that most learning takes place through face-to-face interaction. Another reason for this may be that tacit knowledge gained through direct interaction is especially valuable in faster moving contexts – in which explicit knowledge is always running behind reality (ALNAP 2003: 58). Still, many interviewees see a need for more documentation of experiences and work. This is necessary for advocacy purposes, for interaction with donors (“those who know how to make proposals get the funding”), and in order to disseminate and exchange knowledge beyond the immediate locality in which they work. Despite their shared emphasis on oral interaction, Liberian, Cambodian and Philippine peacebuilders sometimes read books and manuals. Particularly in Cambodia, they also look up information online. Staff members look up information on issues like decision making and leadership, or search for the details and activities of other organisations working in peacebuilding. However, peace practitioners tend to have difficulty finding their way through the myriads of information available and in finding the time to read these sources. One interviewee mentioned that the archive of his organisation was an important source of information for him – he could look things up if needed. However he also noted that a basic level of education is needed to be able to do this. Less educated people can less easily search and find information.

183 Interview with staff member of a Cambodian youth NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 24 May 2006.
Western literature on peacebuilding concepts and methods is mentioned only by Philippine NGO workers as a source of knowledge. Some read books by authors like John Paul Lederach and try to adapt relevant concepts to the local situation, creating new theories and frameworks. These are then disseminated further to other SNGOs, grassroots groups and village leaders. In one case, village leaders trained by an NGO are now being invited by other organisations to introduce these concepts and discuss the way they are applied in their village. A few organisations mention having obtained training manuals from large SNGOs or partner NNGOs, and trying to adapt these manuals based on their own experience. One staff member noted that the manuals are based mainly on Western concepts and that information on traditional ways of conflict management has not really been documented.

A Cambodian youth organisation uses interns from abroad as a way to acquire new knowledge. These interns participate in the development of new training curricula, supplying concepts they have learned in their education. These are then adapted by local staff and developed for use in the local context. Interns have also been useful to this organisation in the areas of technology and fundraising. When it comes to the latter, the interns’ mastery of the English language is an asset. The NGO’s own staff have difficulty in communicating in English, and interns help by reviewing funding proposals.

No matter what the source of knowledge, nearly all interviewees emphasised that newly acquired ideas, concepts, theories, methods and skills must be compared with the situation at hand and adapted to the context before they can be used. This point was already made in previous section when the importance SNGO peacebuilders attach to interaction for learning was discussed. As a result of the interaction between knowledge from external sources, knowledge from experience and colleagues and the NGO’s analysis of the context, new methodologies are created. In the necessary interaction around the application and translation of external and local concepts, the role of local staff is of vital importance because of their familiarity with the context. Someone who is thoroughly familiar with a situation may feel it when change begins to occur. This may not always be tangible and will go unnoticed by external observers, and the reporting formats of

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184 Interview with chairman of a Mindanawan NGO network. Marbel, Philippines, 16 May 2006.
185 Interview with staff members of a Liberian youth organisation. Monrovia, Liberia, 10 February 2006.
186 Interview with director of a Cambodian youth NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 24 May 2006.
187 Interview with staff member of a Mindanawan youth NGO. Cotabato, Philippines, 17 May 2006.
NGOs and back donors usually do not capture it. Local NGO staff members nonetheless try to translate these kinds of changes into the necessary format, but part of the knowledge gets lost in the translation process.

In my interviews, project monitoring and evaluation (M&E) were mentioned only three times as sources of learning – even though all NGOs engage in these activities. A study by the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) confirms the lack of learning taking place as a result of M&E: “[n]one of the respondents mentioned […] agency monitoring and reporting systems as sources of learning […] Lack of reference to these mechanisms may result from their not generally being set up in a fashion that promotes learning.” (ALNAP 2003: 48) We will return to this in section 5.4 below.

5.3.2 Retaining knowledge within the organisation

When asked, the staff members of local peace NGOs affirm the importance of sharing information internally. As Table 5.4 shows, regular staff meetings are the most common way in which this is done. Other methods – from the organisational learning toolbox discussed in chapter three – are rarer. One Sierra Leonean organisation holds a three-day reflection with all staff every three months, involving staff travelling in from different field offices. At these sessions, a staff member may be given a particular topic to prepare and this issue will be discussed. Also everyone reports on their work and is given feedback by the others. A Mindanawan organisation mentions that its activity plans are shared and discussed among staff, and their implementation is jointly monitored.

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188 See note 164.
189 Interview with staff member of a regional NGO working in several West African countries. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 20 February 2006.
190 Interview with director of a Sierra Leonean church-based NGO. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 20 February 2006.
A big problem for SNGOs is high staff turnover. Talented, knowledgeable staff members are often the first to leave as they are able to obtain better-paying positions, sometimes in government (as happened in large numbers in Liberia after the election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as president) and more often in the local offices of international organisations, such as the UN, or NNGOs. This problem is salient in Sierra Leone and particularly in Liberia, where there are large UN and international organisation offices. Indeed, “all local Liberian organisations have lost knowledgeable staff to the government and international NGOs”191. It is not an exclusively West African issue, however. It is mentioned in every country visited.

In Cambodia the staff of peacebuilding NGOs also frequently change jobs and organisations, but seem to move more between SNGOs rather than to NNGOs, international organisations or government. This staff mobility is related to the fact that local organisations regularly grow and shrink in size depending on whether they have funding for a particular project. Once project funding has been secured, they hire additional staff, but after the project has finished, they have to let these people go again. This is seen in the other countries as well – a consequence of funding being largely tied to projects. It makes it difficult for SNGOs to provide job security – another reason why staff leave for positions in international organisations or governments, which are often more secure. That is, until an international organisation leaves the country and leaves its local staff behind.

High staff turnover presents local SNGOs with the following dilemma: they want to invest in the knowledge and training of their staff, but as soon as they do, this raises the value of their newly trained employees and thereby their job opportunities elsewhere. As one NGO director put

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Retaining knowledge</th>
<th>Lib (10)</th>
<th>SL (16)</th>
<th>Phil (10)</th>
<th>Cam (14)</th>
<th>Total (76)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-training seminars</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss work plans</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff required to stay after training</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share materials</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing reports</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide job security</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.4: Organisational learning activities of Southern peace NGOs: retaining knowledge

191 Interview with staff members of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 13 February 2006.
it, “we invest in our staff and their knowledge. Unfortunately this means that they become quite sought after by other organisations and sometimes leave for better-paid positions”. 192 A Sierra Leonean organisation sent two staff to the Netherlands to attend several training courses. After they had attended the courses they disappeared and never came back to Sierra Leone.193 When such people leave their organisation, the danger is that they take the knowledge with them which they have acquired, leaving their employers and colleagues empty-handed.

In order to deal with this dilemma, Southern peace NGOs have come up with a range of measures. In one Liberian NGO, when staff attend training they are required to do two things: first, they have to organise a training for all staff after the course in order to spread the knowledge inside the organisation, and secondly, as a prerequisite to attending the training they have to commit to continue working with the organisation for at least two more years.194 Similar measures are taken by other organisations. One NGO director mentioned having a regulation that all course materials received during trainings are the property of the organisation. In addition, staff are required to write reports on the training they have participated in.195 NGO directors also note that to retain staff it is important to pay well and provide job security. In order to achieve this, quality work needs to be delivered so that donors can be convinced of the need to give more funds for staff costs. Unfortunately most funding is tied and few donors are willing to fund this. 196

An indication that knowledge acquisition and exchange actually lead to learning is when operational changes are made as a result. A few organisations revisit working plans every year to see whether they are still relevant. 197 Evaluating activities – and relating the outcomes to other experiences and ideas - can play an important role in this. The problem here is that evaluations are usually carried out primarily at the request, and according to the methods, of donors, and that this external accountability function of evaluation often tends to get more emphasis than its internal learning function. Section 5.4 elaborates on this issue.

192 Interview with director of a West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
193 Interview with staff member of a regional NGO working in several West African countries. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 20 February 2006.
194 Interview with staff members of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 13 February 2006.
195 Interview with staff member of a regional NGO working in several West African countries. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 20 February 2006.
196 Interview with director of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 13 February 2006.
197 Interview with staff member of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
One interviewee mentioned that it is not always possible to change a programme directly as new knowledge comes in – because investments have already been made in a particular programme or because donor agencies do not allow changes to be made along the way. However, it is always possible to make small changes at the tactical level – and this is something NGO workers do on a daily basis, often without even realising it.

As discussed in section 3.2, staff working at different levels in an organisation may possess different types of knowledge. Genuine strategic learning primarily takes place when these different levels are connected – for example, when field-level experiences of implementing a given policy are connected to management-level discussions on strategy. Davies (1998: 209) suggests that indeed, in SNGOs, different types of knowledge and learning are required of different categories of staff: “[t]he short memory of the office staff is not problematic, because their work is highly routinised whereas the work of field staff involves more discretion and this requires more contextual knowledge.” However, in most NGOs I visited there is no clear distinction between office staff and field staff. As nearly all staff are engaged in operational activities in the field, they have to perform different learning functions instantaneously – from a more tactical to a more strategic level. At the same time, as we have seen, to a large extent policy is made outside these organisations and it is with donor agencies that strategic policy discussions should, and sometimes do, take place.

5.3.3 Adapting, passing on, and applying knowledge

Table 5.5 portrays the strategies Southern peace NGOs employ to process, pass on, and use the knowledge they gain. It shows that in all countries visited, networks are very prominent forums for sharing and refining knowledge. The next chapter will elaborate this strategy. Particularly in West Africa and the Philippines, interviewees mentioned organising community workshops at which they pass on their knowledge while at the same time learning new things from the interaction with local people. Capacity building of grassroots groups and weaker NGOs and peace education are related activities and the use of all these terms overlaps. Again, these ways of applying and adapting knowledge are mentioned particularly in West Africa and the Philippines. Cambodian and Central Asian NGOs do not mention this strategy. This may be because they are generally weaker and are not able to provide capacity.

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198 See note 164.
building. Advocacy towards policymakers is seen as another avenue for passing knowledge onto others. Southeast Asian NGOs also employ staff exchanges and internships as ways to pass on and adapt knowledge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adapting, passing on, applying knowledge</th>
<th>Lib (10)</th>
<th>SL (16)</th>
<th>Kenya (11)(^{199})</th>
<th>Phil (10)</th>
<th>Cam (14)</th>
<th>Centra l Asia (15)</th>
<th>To-tal (76)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Networks</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community workshops</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capacity building</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peace education</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create new manuals, modules</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletters</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internships, staff exchanges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booklets, comics</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
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<td>Resource centre</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Storytelling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-groups, listerves</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Website</td>
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<td>E-mail</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Press conferences, policy briefings</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5.5: Organisational learning activities of Southern peace NGOs: adapting, passing on, and applying knowledge**

As discussed earlier, all SNGO staff interviewed are open to new knowledge, but some are wary of culturally inappropriate, Western concepts being imposed. In some areas people see a tension between Western concepts and local culture, for example with regard to the concept of gender and the role of women. The challenge is to look for a convergence of different concepts rather than emphasising the divide. Indeed, Southern peacebuilders generally agree that they can learn from available theories but they have to put them into the local context; to translate them. Each conflict is different. It is one thing to receive knowledge through training and quite another to implement it in one’s work. Theories have to be compared with the situation at hand and adapted to it. As a result new methodologies are created. All

\(^{199}\) This includes two Sudanese and one Rwandese organisation; all based in Nairobi, Kenya.
organisations do this in one way or another – some more explicitly than others. Usually the translation process is informal, but sometimes more formalised, written tools are developed as a result of adapting external knowledge to local ideas and circumstances. The resulting knowledge finds its way into community workshops and capacity building activities.

Particularly in the Philippines, NGOs have been active in using relevant concepts from books and training and adapting them to the local situation, creating new theories and frameworks. Examples include the training and documentation activities of Catholic Relief Service (CRS) Mindanao. Its Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute aims to help grassroots organisations to learn about peacebuilding concepts and frameworks, and how to apply these on the ground. The application, adaptation, contextualising of concepts is already assisted during the course when cases from the practice of participants are used to illustrate the concepts that are introduced. These concepts come from books by renowned peace researchers and from conflict resolution manuals from NNGOs.

CRS emphasises that local organisations can offer insights derived from their experience with grassroots peacebuilding experiences and knowledge about initiatives that are working. For this reason the third week of the Mindanao Peacebuilding Institute is an exposure programme in the field where the participants can see how the communities are doing things. This also reinforces the effort of the local community. Another example of initiatives to translate external knowledge into new concepts is the development of modules and frameworks for grassroots actors and village leaders by the Mindanao People’s Caucus (MPC): see Box 5.1 below.

**Box 5.1: Module developed by Mindanao People’s Caucus (MPC)**

The Mindanao People’s Caucus (MPC) has developed a module on the ‘culture of peace’. The module includes the history of the Mindanao conflict, conflict resolution skills, cultural sensitivity, and inter-religious dialogue. The module is taught to people at the grassroots and paramilitary groups. Storytelling is an important tool used in the programme – one that fits Mindanawan traditions of knowledge transfer. The approach emphasises that no one should be treated as enemies; instead, all are victims. Via the participants in the course the organisation hopes this view will slowly spread to their colleagues in NGOs and paramilitary units, who often have a more adversarial approach. The staff of the MPC are often invited by NGOs and others to speak.

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200 See Box 4.3 in section 4.7.
201 Interview with staff member of Mindanawan NGO. Davao, Philippines, 15 May 2006.
These Mindanawan organisations are not the only SNGOs that engage in the provision of training courses. As we will see in section 5.5.4, which deals with capacity building by SNGOs, many organisations visited do. Their courses are offered to other NGOs, grassroots organisations and communities. They tend to focus on peace education and peacebuilding methodologies. Some training programmes offered also include more practical issues like organisational management, financial administration, ICT, fundraising, and impact assessment. One NGO has made it a focus activity to link up organisations that provide training with people who can benefit from it.  

In addition to training courses, there are various other ways in which Southern peace NGOs pass knowledge on to others. Some SNGOs regularly publish newsletters which are handed out to beneficiaries during field visits or e-mailed around to organisations that might be interested. Some organisations let members of the target group of their newsletter – other NGOs, grassroots partners - contribute to it themselves so that they can share their stories and feel ownership of the knowledge sharing process. Other SNGOs publish booklets documenting information about grassroots peace initiatives – such as the Mindanawan zones of peace - and translate them into local languages to that they may inspire people. Some larger peace NGOs also publish peacebuilding manuals. Others produce comic books which provide information to communities in a more easily digestible form. (One organisation mentioned that drawing the pictures for its comic book was a long process because it had to make sure the drawings were culturally sensitive.  

5.3.4 Research and dissemination

As Table 5.6 shows, nine of the 76 NGOs visited mentioned research as an explicit focus area. Of these, three are based in Sierra Leone, three in Kenya, two in the Philippines and one in Tajikistan. In Liberia and Cambodia research was not mentioned as a prominent activity. This is not to say that peace NGOs in these countries do not carry out research. Most organisations try at least informally to gather information about the circumstances and needs of beneficiaries, while some also study local peacebuilding practices.

203 Interview with director of a Mindanawan NGO. Amsterdam, Netherlands, 9 April 2006.
204 Interview with staff member of a Mindanawan NGO. Davao, Philippines, 15 May 2006.
205 See note 164.
A lot of interviewees said that they would like to do more research than they are doing at present. They would like to study local needs, the experiences and methods of others, and their own work, taking more time to reflect on experiences and ways forward. For example, a Mindanawan NGO staff member mentioned she is considering writing a proposal to do a participatory research project on how to reconcile concepts and methods of peacebuilding with traditional ways of living and doing things, particularly from Islamic culture, which could result in a training module. Some of the issues that kept people from doing so were a lack of time and a lack of willingness on the part of donors to fund such activities.

Research is more likely to get funded when it is for the purpose of early warning for conflict prevention. As recognition grows that preventing conflict is more desirable and cost-effective than curing it, local research leading to risk assessments and information on possibly mounting tensions in a given area gets some donor support. However, gathering information for early warning purposes represents only one area of study in the range of things that NGO staff members want to research. As mentioned, many NGOs would like to study their own work. Many interviewees desire more opportunity to reflect, draw lessons and document experiences. Such documentation would help Southern peace organisations to better contribute to global knowledge exchanges, discussions, and concept development in the field. A Mindanawan peacebuilder said that although he is used to oral exchange, he is now realising more and more the importance of writing, particularly for advocacy purposes. Written information can reach many more people than oral information. So, this peacebuilder has begun to write down experiences, and they have been published in magazines and books.

Similarly, a West African NGO network has recently begun to retain and write down the stories from its practice. It is also starting up a

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206 This includes two Sudanese and one Rwandese organisation; all based in Nairobi, Kenya.
207 See table 5.1.
208 Interview with staff member of a Mindanawan youth NGO. Cotabato, Philippines, 17 May 2006.
209 Interview with chairman of a Mindanawan NGO network. Marbel, Philippines, 16 May 2006.
research effort to document conflicts and create a database of narratives on conflict and peacebuilding in the region. This also provides baseline information for interventions.\textsuperscript{210} In another illustration of what may be a beginning trend, the action research Master programme that is analysed in chapter eight represents an effort to support local peacebuilders in Cambodia and elsewhere in their desire to reflect, learn, document, and contribute to theory development based on their practice.

The nine NGOs that already focus explicitly on research as a core activity do so in the following ways.

- In Kenya, SNGO research focuses on various issues. For one Kenyan NGO research is connected to awareness raising and capacity building work. This takes place around security issues, particularly the control of small arms and light weapons (SALW) in Kenya and beyond. The organisation has been actively involved in the process leading up to the Nairobi Protocol on SALW, and now helps provide the technical capacity towards its implementation.\textsuperscript{211} Another Kenya-based organisation considers itself a resource institution on peacebuilding in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa, providing knowledge based on research and interaction with people who intervene in conflicts. It also engages with governments to try and shape policy. It has formed various partnerships and platforms to deal with issues in the region, including a group working on early warning with governments and NGOs.\textsuperscript{212} The third Kenyan NGO is a network which does research mainly into existing activities and methodologies for peacebuilding and focuses on sharing best practices among its members.\textsuperscript{213}

- In the Philippines, a Mindanawan youth organisation carries out research into the traditional Rido system of feuding families and revenge, and ways of dealing with it. This includes a study of the ways the ancestors resolved Rido issues and what we today can learn from that.\textsuperscript{214} The second Philippine NGO for which research is an important activity is an organisation tied to a university that focuses on peace education.\textsuperscript{215}

\textsuperscript{210} Interview with director of a West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{211} Telephone interview with director of a Kenyan NGO. Nairobi, Kenya, 29 November 2005.
\textsuperscript{212} Interview with staff member of a Kenyan NGO. Nairobi, Kenya, 29 November 2005.
\textsuperscript{213} Interview with director of a regional NGO working in East Africa. Nairobi, Kenya, 28 November 2005.
\textsuperscript{214} Interview with staff members of a Mindanawan NGO. Cotabato, Philippines, 17 May 2006.
\textsuperscript{215} Interview with director of a Philippine NGO. Quezon City, Philippines, 19 May 2006.
• In Sierra Leone, an NGO peacebuilding network listed research as one of its activities. Its coordinator mentioned he was working on a research proposal together with a member organisation on the issue of chiefdoms that have been amalgamated into larger entities216, causing disgruntlement among some chiefs and providing a possible potential for renewed conflict217. Another organisation did research during the war into the extent of destruction in order to establish a baseline for post-war interventions.218

• A Tajik organisation carries out scientific research and surveys on a variety of subjects, including elections, ethnic relations, trafficking, child labour, migration, drugs, political Islam, security and conflict. It wrote the study on Tajikistan for UNDP’s Human Development Report for Central Asia.

5.3.5 Concluding 5.3

Section 5.3 has shown that the learning processes of Southern peace NGOs are usually informal and action-based. Written information and – particularly – formal education play very limited roles in the learning of SNGO staff. However, training courses specifically oriented at improving the work of peacebuilding organisations are found useful, both for the new knowledge introduced in them – which is then adapted by participants before it is applied or passed on – and for the interactions with other participants. Knowledge retention within organisations is a challenge due to high staff mobility. This forces NGOs to think increasingly about internal knowledge sharing strategies, which may support organisational learning.

When it comes to using new knowledge and passing it on, its adaptation to local knowledge and circumstances is once again emphasised. Most SNGOs do this in informal ways but some – particularly in the Philippines – increasingly document their own knowledge in the form of training modules, handbooks or articles. Still, many voice a desire to have more time, money and skills for such documentation. While only few Southern peace organisations in the countries visited explicitly focus on research and knowledge dissemination as an organisational strategy, many others do so informally. More significantly, nearly all

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216 the number of chiefdoms in Sierra Leone went from 400 to 49.
217 Interview with coordinator of a Sierra Leonean NGO network. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 15 February 2006.
218 Interview with staff member of a Sierra Leonean NGO. Bo, Sierra Leone, 21 February 2006.
local peacebuilders want to do more in this area in order to reflect on work, draw lessons, find out more about the needs and circumstances of local communities, and contribute to global discussions and theory development in the field of peacebuilding.

5.4 Monitoring and evaluation as a tool for learning

Although all SNGOs that work with donor funding (and the large majority of organisations visited does) are required to carry out monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in some form, only few interviewees mentioned M&E as a source of learning. This is surprising as on the face of it M&E seems like a useful tool for information gathering, reflection and adaptation. Through M&E mechanisms, NGOs relate the implementation of their activities back to their original plans and objectives. In doing so organisations try to assess the effectiveness of the inputs that they make and the processes they use.\textsuperscript{219} At a higher level, NGOs may try to assess how their efforts have, or have not, supported the ending of violence or the achievement of justice.

As we will see in this section, these are difficult things to determine, particularly in the shorter term. Trying to do so, however, stimulates reflection and learning by stepping out of daily practice and relating work to the bigger picture of conflict and peace. Below, we will elaborate the link between M&E and learning, examine some of the difficulties that occur when M&E is done in the field of NGO peacebuilding, discuss possible ways to overcome these difficulties, and formulate some characteristics of M&E procedures that support learning. Even though the respondents of my study did not pay much attention to M&E, the fact that they all have to do M&E and combined with its potential use in learning processes makes it worthwhile to devote some space to the issue nonetheless. The section is based on NNGO publications, academic literature, and a few SNGO publications and interview results.

5.4.1 M&E as a tool for learning and knowledge sharing

At least in theory, mechanisms for the M&E of activities constitute an important tool for the learning of NGOs. Activities are monitored and

\textsuperscript{219} This usually includes the project design, the selection of participants, how well the methodology was implemented, how well problems and follow-up were managed, how participants responded, and what the immediate results were.
evaluated with the aim to find out which parts of them have been more and which less successful. This is done for several purposes: accountability towards donors and project users; communication between stakeholders; improving the performance of the organisation by learning from experience; and helping others improve their performance by sharing lessons. (Britton 2005: 12) The last two aims show the contribution that M&E can make to learning processes in and around organisations. In this context, M&E can be a tool that facilitates the learning cycle by keeping track of developments, creating space for reflection on them, generating new knowledge as a result of this process, and feeding this back into practice. From this perspective, learning is a way to close the gap between M&E on the one hand, and project and programme planning on the other. This is important as “[t]here is an impressive body of policy recommendations and lessons learned [but] many practitioners […] are concerned that these cumulative insights have not led to a more informed and harmonised international response activity” (Salomons 2004: 24).

In addition, M&E processes offer an opportunity for exchanges of views between researchers, policy makers, and practitioners about the usefulness of activities and the future course of action. According to Baud, “this applies more to programme level evaluations than project evaluations; the former are specifically designed to instigate changes for more overall effectiveness, whereas project evaluations often remain within the boundaries of their existing terms of reference.” (Baud 2002: 60) In that sense, programme and project evaluations correspond to second and first order learning, respectively.

Thinking about the depth of learning made possible by different types of evaluations, it is also important to recall the structural constraints described in chapter four. In many ways, the international aid system and the Northern partners of SNGOs set the margins of practice and limit the learning of Southern partners to first order learning – making tactical adjustments within given terms. For more in-depth reflection and learning about the terms themselves an interaction with NNGOs and possibly back-donors is needed. Such deeper learning also requires introspection and learning on both sides – not only on the part of SNGOs.

Within the structural constraints of the aid regime, the specific approach organisations take in their M&E processes determines what opportunities for learning and exchange are created. The process adopted also helps shape the important next step: the incorporation of the results into policy and practice. In how far the results from
monitoring and evaluation, often formulated as ‘lessons learned’, are used depends on other factors as well - most notably the organisation’s capacity for organisational learning.

Unfortunately, the reality of M&E practice contrasts with the ideal picture in which M&E and learning mutually reinforce one another. After all, we saw in section 5.3 that when peace SNGO staff were asked about their sources of learning, project and programme evaluations and monitoring activities were hardly mentioned at all. Indeed, it is an often-heard complaint that in most cases the learning aims of M&E are not served. Lessons learned reports are written on the basis of evaluations, but they are not sufficiently used in future planning and execution. One reason for this is that M&E is often seen as a policing instrument, imposed by donors to keep an eye on the way their money is spent, rather than a system for learning and reflection for the organisation itself. Another reason for the lack of learning on the basis of M&E is said to be that evaluation procedures are inadequate, particularly in the field of peacebuilding. We will now turn to these issues in some more detail.

5.4.2 Difficulties: funding regimes and the special nature of peacebuilding work

Before elaborating on the issue of the adequacy of existing methods for peacebuilding work, we first look at the first issue mentioned at the end of the previous section: the role of funding regimes in constraining learning from M&E. When it comes to monitoring and evaluating their work, SNGOs experience a tension between learning on the one hand and accountability on the other. The NNGO donors determine not only the policies of their SNGO partners but also their procedures for M&E and reporting on results. A lot of emphasis is placed on these results, as NNGOs themselves face discussions at home about the effectiveness of development aid and in turn have to report to their back-donors. This increasing pressure for results-based reporting heightens the climate of competition among NGOs in the field (ALNAP 2003: 55).

SNGOs on their side are highly dependent on the funds of their Northern partners – funds which are often tied to specific projects rather than being part of a long-term, trust-based partnership. At the end of each project they have to write new project proposals to solicit new funds. Success in previous projects increases the likelihood of obtaining renewed or continued funding commitments. As a result, SNGOs have an incentive to obscure failure or partial success and emphasise results –
whether real or not. This clashes with the requirements of learning, which include self-reflection, a willingness to admit mistakes, and an open policy dialogues with donors and other stakeholders about what works and what does not.

Because of the strong emphasis of donors on M&E as a requirement for funding, M&E is primarily seen by SNGOs as a tool for accountability. There is little space to use it also for learning, particularly given the tension between showing results and learning from mistakes. In addition, SNGOs often have little space to develop their own M&E procedures in a way appropriate to their practice and circumstances. This is because donor organisations tend to have their own M&E and reporting formats, which they require their Southern partners to use. To make matters worse, different donors require different reporting formats. This results in a lot of work for SNGOs. Fortunately, the willingness of donor organisations to try different tools and methods, and to the learning needs of their partners more generally, varies. Some are much more open to suggestions for alternative ways of reporting than others. But the many complaints of Southern interviewees show that the constraints described are structurally present in all countries visited.

The funding regime and its consequences for the M&E practices of SNGOs also bears on the second issue introduced at the start of this section – the suggested mismatch between dominant procedures and peacebuilding practice. The logical framework or logframe model mostly used by donors comes in different forms, but generally resembles the following table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Activities / inputs</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Table 5.7: Example of a logical framework

The goal is the overall purpose of a project – what it wants to achieve. It is split up into more specific objectives. For each of these objectives, indicators of success are then specified – observable changes that tell us whether an objective has been achieved. Traditionally, such indicators are largely quantitative. In the next column, the activities or inputs that the project plans to carry out in order to achieve the objectives are quantified. There are different understandings of the terms output, outcome and impact, and they are sometimes used interchangeably.
Most people seem, however, to make the following distinction. Outputs are readily observable, measurable results – for example, the number of meetings organised or the number of people attending those meetings. Outcomes are any follow-up developments that resulted from these outputs (the meetings may for example lead to increased interaction or even joint activities by the participants). Impact, finally, is the actual change the project has made in the conditions of the beneficiaries – in other words, the progress towards reaching the overall goal.

This framework is widely used in development and peacebuilding for the planning and monitoring of programmes and projects. Many find it a useful way to help structure their interventions. However, as we have seen, there is also criticism, particularly in the field of peacebuilding. This criticism takes several forms, each having generated new responses. First, the model is criticised for being grounded in a Western, overly structured way of thinking. It is rigid and inflexible and does not capture the complexity and fluidity of conflict situations and peace processes. The Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA) methodology described below is one initiative that tries to relate project monitoring explicitly to the conflict context. PCIA is still mostly developed in the West and is rather elaborate and structured, and for that reason might still be subject to some of the above criticism. Other ways of taking this critique into account include participatory evaluation and a more general openness to other, locally or jointly developed methods.

A second, related but more specific point made is that in the practice of implementing logframes, indicators and outputs tend to be defined in measurable and quantitative terms. In Western knowledge systems statistics tend to be highly regarded as evidence, whereas doubts are raised regarding the wider applicability of qualitative information such as personal change stories. This contrasts somewhat with the practice of peacebuilding, which includes activities like organising dialogues, lobbying governments, and advocacy work to draw attention to problems and possible solutions. In response, many – particularly larger – Southern peace organisations work to develop alternative indicators by which to assess the outcomes of programmes. Below, one such initiative is elaborated upon.

Thirdly, it is increasingly argued that interventions aiming to build peace and promote reconciliation cannot easily be assessed in terms of ‘results’ or ‘impact’. Peacebuilding is a long-term change process. Its results often take the form of something not occurring (such as conflict escalation or outbreaks of violence). When such a (non-)outcome is observed, it is almost impossible to attribute it to one particular
intervention, given the many factors at play. This is often referred to as the ‘attribution problem’. In response to the attribution problem, new methods are developed to provide an alternative, such as the Outcome Mapping method of the Canada-based International Development Research Centre (IDRC) elaborated in the next section.

A fourth body of criticism relates to the way in which logframes are usually applied, namely at the short-term, project level. Contrasting with the long-term and often intangible nature of peace work, donor funding as we have seen is often tied to a particular project: a time-bound and tangible, result-oriented undertaking. (NPI-Africa and the NCCK-CPBD project 2001: preface) M&E is a requirement at this project level, even though longer-term, programme-level M&E activities may better serve the purpose of learning and knowledge exchange. The project-oriented nature of much funding, monitoring, evaluation and reporting is therefore another facet of dominant M&E procedures that does not match the field of peacebuilding well. After only a short amount of time has passed it is not yet possible to say anything meaningful about outcomes or impact at that point in time. Thus, evaluations should either take place over much longer terms or be less ambitious in what they claim to be able to find.

These and a number of other, more specific characteristics of peacebuilding that present difficulties for evaluation are summarised in Box 5.2 below.

**Box 5.2: Difficulties for the evaluation of peacebuilding activities, compared to other development-oriented interventions**

- Peacebuilding includes activities like organising dialogues, lobbying governments and advocacy work to draw attention to problems and possible solutions. The outcomes of this type of work are more difficult to measure than activities like the building of roads or vaccination campaigns.
- Its results often take the form of something not occurring (such as conflict escalation or outbreaks of violence). The results of conflict prevention measures are therefore difficult to evaluate.
- The attribution problem is particularly salient: there are so many factors and actors at play, at different levels, that it is almost impossible to attribute an outcome to one particular action or intervention.
- It is especially difficult to link “project outputs and outcomes on the micro level to changes and thus impact on the macro level of politics and society (an often-cited influence gap as well as an attribution gap)”. (Schmelzle 2005: 5)
- Peacebuilding is a long-term change process. It takes place in a highly volatile environment in which preliminary successes can be easily overshadowed by subsequent set-backs, - which does not imply that an

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Barakat et al. 2006
intervention has not made a positive contribution to the development.

- Peacebuilding is a highly dialectical process. The very success of a dialogue process, for example “might lead extremists to take violent action before their political standing is seriously eroded” (Smith 2004: 59).
- Conflicts are over-determined, i.e. even if some of the root causes are taken away, others may still be at work and perpetuate a conflict. Interventions can have been successful in addressing some of the root causes. But their effect will only be visible once other causes are subsequently (or in parallel) addressed as well.
- The causes of conflict can change. Some original causes may fade away, while new causes come up (new grievances, interests of refugees, interest of profiteers). In many cases, the violence itself takes the place of other ‘root causes’ as the main issue that needs to be addressed.
- “The field of peacebuilding is a relatively young one as many organisations only emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. It is therefore not surprising that many strategies, methods and instruments still remain in a test phase and therefore need further elaboration and investigation.” (Schmelzle 2005: 2)

The issues introduced in this section have led to considerable debate in both the North and the South. As a result, thinking about M&E in the area of peacebuilding has developed in recent years. The next section looks at alternative M&E methods that are being proposed in order to deal with the issue of the appropriateness of existing procedures for peacebuilding.

5.4.3 Developing methods and indicators for peacebuilding work

Going back to the criticism about the limited usefulness of quantitative indicators, two African organisations, the Nairobi Peace Initiative-Africa (NPI-Africa) and the National Council of Churches of Kenya Community Peace Building and Development Project (NCCK-CPBD project), developed a Community-based Monitoring and Evaluation System (CMES) in 2001. The system gives examples of suitable quantitative ‘output’ indicators and qualitative ‘impact’ indicators that require a longer narrative. To measure “increased interaction among differing ethnic groups”, for example, a quantitative indicator could be the number of “good neighbourliness workshops” held in the community.

Qualitative indicators could be

- new community peace initiatives established;
- confessions by community members;
- sharing of resources like water and pasture;
- agreements reached.
Such indicators could help capture the changes taking place in reality. Indeed, more and more organisations try to include qualitative data in their M&E procedures and there also appears to be growing acceptance on the part of donors of the need to do so.

In relation to the third criticism – about the usefulness of the concept ‘impact’ – the IDRC argues that this concept is too elusive and that it is difficult to assess which factors have contributed to a change in situation, and in how far the intervention was what made the difference (the attribution problem described above). Therefore its Outcome Mapping method limits assessment of programme outcomes to the people the programme interacts with directly, and their direct ‘sphere of influence’. Instead of using concepts like ‘impact’ or ‘result’, the method uses ‘progress markers’ to assess developments. By concentrating on small but observable changes in behaviour, at least some progress towards a programme’s goal may be demonstrated and directions may be provided for continuation (learning from the evaluation) as well as accountability towards donors. (Earl et al. 2001)

Outcome Mapping is valuable in cautioning about claiming credit for changes taking place, and its progress markers represent a useful alternative to ‘impact’ and ‘result’. At the same time it is somewhat limited in that it does not give any picture of the broader, structural situation and the longer-term changes taking place. This is difficult to do but many would at least desire some kind of tentative conclusion about broader impact as well. Indeed, there is some discussion about the level of measurement possible (Fischer and Wils 2005: 5-6). The indicators mentioned as examples by NPI-Africa and the NCCK above clearly focus on the project and community level. But how to establish what effects a project has had on a wider conflict? Some argue that impact at this higher level cannot be evaluated at all. Others look for ways to gather information about wider changes. Participatory methods could be of assistance: what are local opinions about whether the programme made a difference? We will return to this in the next section.

Another initiative to link specific projects to the wider context of conflict and peace is a tool called Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA), which has been developed over the last few years through contributions by various NNGOs. PCIA is designed to better assess

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221 According to Hoffman (2005: 3), these include the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP); the Clingendael Institute in the Netherlands; the UK-based organisation International Alert; the UK government’s Department for International Development (DfID); the European Platform for Conflict Prevention and Transformation; and the
“the ways in which the peace and conflict environment may affect an initiative or project” and “the ways in which an initiative or project may affect the peace and conflict environment”, as is depicted in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment

PCIA carries out these assessments at various stages of a project. Before a project starts, a risk and opportunity assessment (on the left side of Figure 5.1) is undertaken to assess the impact the conflict environment could have on a project. At this stage, risks and opportunities are listed with regard to

- **location** (geographical extent of the project; status of territory; level of infrastructure)
- **timing** (current stage of the conflict; current or future developments; increasing or decreasing opportunities to work in the area)
- **political context** (relationship between communities and authorities; level of political support for the initiative; stability of the environment; presence or absence, and inclusiveness, of major peace initiatives; nature of the political system; external conditions)
- **military context** (relationship between armed actors; intensity and patterns of violence)
- **socio-economic issues** (legacies of conflict; relations between communities; cultural factors; economic relations)
- **partners/stakeholders** (capacity of implementing organisation; position of organisation in conflict; choice of beneficiaries and its political implications; ability of stakeholders to make choices and willingness to make changes)
- **other factors** (vary by location).

In addition to listing risks and opportunities for each of these factors, the assessment also lists whether more information is needed and what

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Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Bush 2003: 4
When the risk and opportunity assessment is completed and it is decided to do the project, a Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (right-hand side of Figure 5.1) is undertaken three times: during the design phase, during implementation, and during evaluation. This assessment lists the potential or actual impact a project has on peace and on conflict through the following factors:

- **conflict management capacities** (of state or civil society)
- **militarised violence and human security** (patterns and levels of violence; the sense of security or insecurity of individuals and communities)
- **political structures and processes** (strengthening or weakening of governance capacities of different levels of government; ability or inability of civil society actors to actively and constructively participate in political processes)
- **economic structures and issues** (strengthening or weakening equitable socio-economic structures, institutions and processes; distortion or conversion of war economies; availability of capital; distribution of resources; income generation; training)
- **social empowerment** (creation of a culture of peace characterised by constructive social communication, tolerance, inclusiveness, justice, gender equity, and participation; confidence and capacity of all members of society to overcome obstacles to a satisfying life). As in the previous phase, the assessment lists not only impact but also looks at additional information needed and possible changes in the project. (Bush 2003: 20-24)

The proponents of PCIA have paid relatively little attention to the development of suitable indicators to measure the impact on the factors listed above, but they do state that both quantitative and qualitative indicators should be used. Initiatives such as those of NPI-Africa and the NCCK-CPBD project, as well as others working to develop relevant indicators, can be useful additions in this regard.

The table below gives an overview of the methodologies discussed in this section and compares their characteristics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment (PCIA)</th>
<th>Community-based Monitoring and Evaluation System (CMES)</th>
<th>Outcome Mapping (OM)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of analysis, target groups</strong></td>
<td>The PCIA debate focuses on assessing impact on the macro peace process (Paffenholz 2005: 6)</td>
<td>“Sphere of influence” which each project has: OM aims to assess the observable “behavioural changes” within the boundary partners’ sphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kind of activities which are evaluated</strong></td>
<td>Conflict management capabilities, political structures and processes, economic structures and processes, social empowerment</td>
<td>Improvement of interaction between ethnic groups, analysis of root causes; introduction of sustainable early warning system for early action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methods, tools</strong></td>
<td>Participatory workshops with stakeholders, field research</td>
<td>Programmes identify partners with whom they work &amp; then devise strategies to help equip these partners with the tools and resources to contribute to change.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weaknesses</strong></td>
<td>(Too) much oriented towards a broad framework for a standardized approach to aid in conflict situations</td>
<td>Focus on observable behaviour may disregard structural changes (difficult to see); seems to be based on external perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>LogFrames may be too much based on a linear, development project model and do not easily accommodate the flexibility of a dynamic process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Examples of indicators | Proponents of PCIA have paid relatively little attention to the development of suitable indicators to measure the impact of interventions | Ethnic diversity at meetings; new community peace initiatives, confessions of community members; agreements over the use of resources | Number of new ideas shared in the team, number of key informants from which programs seeks feedback, number of requests to share the program’s “wisdom”

Table 5.8: Methodologies for the evaluation of peacebuilding activities

Another ongoing discussion revolves around the way in which M&E is carried out. In particular, attention focuses on the limitations of evaluation by external people of interventions done by external people. Every programme is based on certain values, which may be culturally or ideologically determined. When an evaluation is done by people with the same cultural and ideological background, the programme outcomes are measured against these same values. After all, the word evaluation means that value is attributed to a certain set of data. However, the people for whom the programme is intended may cling to different values and from this perspective have a completely different opinion of the impact of the programme. (Barakat et al. 2005) The only solution to this problem would be to allow programmes to be evaluated by the people that they are intended for, using participatory evaluation methods.223

Barakat et al. (2005: 8) write that participatory evaluation is underpinned by several core themes:

“1) The importance of harnessing collective knowledge of many stakeholders, especially at the community level, to reflect on the development intervention; 2) the need to adapt the evaluation to the particular circumstance and contexts, thus requiring flexibility and reliance on qualitative rather than quantitative data; 3) the need for participation between evaluators and constituents; 4) the need to ensure that participants become beneficiaries, meaning that the evaluation becomes associated with joint benefits that evaluation participants obtain from taking part, particularly in terms of empowerment.”

Most important in participatory evaluation is that the primary stakeholders or intended beneficiaries of the programme play a role in

223 Related to this is the question of what should be evaluated: the actual situation (in so far as this is possible) or local perceptions of the situation. When statistics show that per capita income has grown, but the popular perception is that people are worse off, then there is still a problem – social dissatisfaction - to be solved. By including as many sources as possible that relate local perceptions of reality, an evaluation can help uncover this kind of problem as well.

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the planning and management of the process and define the indicators, often helped by a facilitator. Together they determine what for them would indicate success of the project. Thus, participatory evaluation starts at a much earlier phase than one would expect from an evaluation: it starts at the phase of planning a project and its M&E system. Such participatory indicator development could include not only the beneficiaries of a project and the staff of the SNGO carrying it out, but also in as far as possible staff of the financing NNGO and a representative of their back-donor (for example, someone working at the embassy of the back-donor government in the country in which the project takes place). In some cases organisations include colleagues from other organisations undertaking similar projects. In East Africa some SNGOs are experimenting with ‘peer reviews’ in which different organisations participate in the evaluation of each other’s activities. This can also have an important knowledge sharing function.224

5.4.4 A learning approach to M&E

In addition to the development of more suitable indicators and more participatory methods, there has been some discussion about arriving at a learning approach to M&E more generally. A study by the Dutch Inter-Church Development Organisation (ICCO) and the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) has distinguished between traditional approaches to M&E on the one hand and a learning approach on the other. Where traditional approaches tend to look at specific project deliverables only, a learning approach contains the following elements:

- the establishment of clear learning objectives
- the inclusion of qualitative as well as quantitative indicators of success
- participatory evaluation
- evaluation components are embedded in the planning framework from the beginning.
- regular monitoring takes place throughout the life of the project
- a reassessment of the concepts of ‘output’ and ‘impact’: the results of learning processes cannot be described in substantive terms yet can be framed in terms of capacities, process outputs and value added. (ICCO and ECDPM 2004: 14-17)

When we look at the results of evaluations, often formulated as lessons learned, we find that the way they are phrased also plays a role in determining whether they are applied. A lesson learned that takes into account the insights from organisational learning has the following characteristics:

- It contains a generalised principle that can be applied in other situations.
- It is related to the assumptions (hypotheses and existing knowledge) on which the programme or project has been based.
- It does not contain untested or inadequately justified assumptions about what might happen if something is done differently.
- It is neither too general nor too specific to be useful to others.
- It is clear about the audience for whom it might have relevance and is thus articulated in appropriate terms and targeted at intended audiences. (Adapted from Guijt et al. 2002: 11)

Taking such pointers into account could help make M&E not only a tool for reporting to donors, but also a method to facilitate organisational learning and knowledge exchange. It would then help to test assumptions, learn from activities, and feed these lessons back into activities in a cyclical learning process. This cyclical learning model for M&E is depicted in Figure 5.2 below.
There is, however, an important requirement for such a learning approach to M&E to take root. This is a “culture of transparency and a willingness to share results”. The funding regime can facilitate or obstruct this. “As long as projects are rewarded for good practices only, the willingness to discuss ‘failure’ or negative consequences is reduced – and a learning opportunity missed”. (Fischer and Wils 2005: 8) Willingness on the part of donors to tolerate failure and stimulate honest and critical reflection would help solve the tension between learning and accountability. This brings us back to the importance of longer-term donor-recipient partnerships that are based on trust.

As we discussed in the previous section, another necessity for M&E to become a learning tool is that various stakeholders are involved in it,

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225 NPI-Africa and the NCCK-CPBD project 2001: 23
including those a project is aimed at but also those who help set the structural framework in which action and learning take place – the donors. As became clear in chapter three, an important part of learning is interaction with others - in this case especially with those who help set the structural margins of action. This requires all involved in M&E to take a learning approach and to be willing to look critically at their own role and how it might be improved. Learning donors are just as important as learning SNGOs. Recall the statement by Dutch ministry staff quoted in section 4.3.1: “[w]e cannot be relevant or effective as a donor […] without a constant dialogue with policy makers, researchers and practitioners and without the capacity to learn from this. […] Did we not implicitly assume [in the past] that we, as donor, did not have anything to learn?” (Wiedenhof and Molenaar 2006: 10)

Thus, a learning attitude by donors and reciprocal, trust-based partnerships help make space for learning and creativity on the part of Southern peace organisations. As a result, they may begin to adapt M&E procedures to their own circumstances and at the same time play a role in global discussions about how these procedures may be improved more generally. One organisation in Mindanao for example took the logframe and added a dimension to it based on theories of change. The new framework asks additional questions such as: how did change happen at the personal, relational and cultural levels? The NGO finds that this makes a deeper analysis possible. Another example, this one more specifically about donor-recipient interaction around M&E formats, comes from Cambodia. There, a local peace organisation organised a meeting with representatives from its various donor NNGOs to discuss the problem that different donors required different reporting formats, which meant an enormous workload for the SNGO. The donors understood, deliberated, and came up with a common framework. Some of them said they had themselves learned a lot from this experience.

5.4.5 Concluding 5.4

In theory, the cycle of planning, monitoring, evaluation and renewed planning matches the learning cycle very well and thereby presents a good opportunity for supporting organisational learning processes in NGOs. However, for many Southern peace NGOs M&E procedures do not play a major learning role. There are two main reasons for this. First,

226 Interview with staff member of a Mindanawan NGO. Davao, Philippines, 15 May 2006.
227 Interview with staff member of a Cambodian youth NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 24 May 2006.
the procedures have been created by donors for accountability purposes, rather than developed to fit the learning needs of SNGOs. There is some tension between learning and accountability. SNGOs hesitate to include weaknesses or changes made in programmes – highly relevant information from the perspective of learning - into their monitoring and reporting for fear of losing future funding as a result.

A second reason why M&E does not work well for the learning of Southern peace NGOs is that standard procedures, elaborated for development projects, may not match the realities of peacebuilding practice. More specific tools may be needed for peacebuilding. These tools are indeed being developed, but a problem is that they tend to rather qualitative in nature, while many donors continue to call for numerical evidence of the outcomes of programmes. That said, understanding grows of the limits of quantitative information in reflecting peacebuilding practice – in the North as well as the South.

In Table 5.8 an overview was given of alternative, more qualitative approaches that are being developed. Given the criticism that most existing M&E tools have been developed in the North, are based on Western knowledge systems, and are generally applied inflexibly without much regard for locally developed alternatives, what would seem to be the best way forward is for organisations to develop their own systems, using elements of these or other approaches, in close collaboration with both their beneficiaries and their donors. This would ensure that M&E tools are as relevant as possible to the context and nature of the work of an organisation. A major difficulty, however, lies in finding ways to fit such a flexible approach into the M&E and reporting procedures and formats that donor NNGOs themselves use. Those procedures are necessarily standardised in order to prevent complete work and information overload in the offices of NNGOs and also as a way to fit the reporting requirements of their back-donors. A joint discussion involving all stakeholders along the chain would be required in order to find creative solutions to deal with these constraints.

More generally, the participatory elaboration of evaluation tools and criteria of success, involving all stakeholders in a programme – donor, SNGO, beneficiaries – would help making M&E more relevant to practice and more useful for learning. This requires similar relational characteristics between Northern and Southern actors as were described in section 4.7 on capacity building. Thus, we come back to the importance of a learning attitude by donors and reciprocal, trust-based partnerships between NNGOs and SNGOs as prerequisites for learning on the part of Southern peace organisations.
5.5 Canyons and bridges. Exchanging knowledge between organisations

We have seen in various places in this book that learning requires interaction with others. While in section 5.3 I discussed interactions within organisations, I now turn to interactions with people outside one’s organisation as activities contributing to learning, as knowledge exchange beyond the organisation is the main knowledge strategy used by many Southern peace NGOs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local peace NGOs exchange knowledge with…</th>
<th>Lib (10)</th>
<th>SL (16)</th>
<th>Kenya (11)</th>
<th>Phil (10)</th>
<th>Cam (14)</th>
<th>Central Asia (15)</th>
<th>Total (76)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International (non-governmental) organisations</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local beneficiaries</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government agencies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge institutions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.9: Partners in knowledge exchange of Southern peace NGOs

Table 5.9 shows the actors with which local peace NGO staff engage in knowledge exchange and joint learning outside their direct organisational environment. The most widespread are exchanges with other local NGOs. These occur twice as much as with any other actor. Second in importance are international organisations. Exchange also takes place with local beneficiaries and government institutions. Knowledge institutions were mentioned only twice. Below all these interactions are analysed in more detail.

5.5.1 Exchange with other local NGOs

Knowledge sharing with other local NGOs is an activity in which all organisations visited are very active. “[F]ield workers draw heavily on tacit knowledge assets through conversations with colleagues” (ALNAP 2003: 56). Many networks have been set up for this explicit purpose, as

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228 See note 164.
we will see in the next chapter. There also, the reasons why SNGO staff choose this strategy are explored. Prominently among them is the fact, already mentioned repeatedly in this chapter, that the staff of peace SNGOs see exchange and interactions as important ways of knowledge generation and learning. They feel they can learn from the experiences of others and that sharing tacit knowledge leads to new, joint insights and ideas.

In addition to networks, there are also many more informal ways in which knowledge exchange among SNGOs takes place. These include:

- **processes** in which smaller, lower-capacity organisations learn from larger, stronger ones. This impact of large SNGOs on other local SNGOs occurs through mechanisms such as imitation, the setting of standards, formal training provided by the strong SNGO to smaller organisations, and staff moving from one organisation to another.

- **partner meetings** organised by NNGOs to coordinate the activities of their local partners in a specific region or country. In Liberia, a consortium of ICCO partners gets together regularly to coordinate ideas and share experiences. Several partner organisations mentioned finding this very useful. There is an open atmosphere and people are not afraid to talk about their strengths and weaknesses. Together a need was identified to organise training to fill specific knowledge gaps. The ICCO partner network in Liberia is considered a positive example of a donor-initiated (but not donor-driven) network.²²⁹

- **training courses**, which can have an important exchange function. Some programmes explicitly aim at this. For example, the West Africa Peacebuilding Institute (WAPI) set up by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) employs facilitators (coming from various different countries) who ensure that knowledge is exchanged in an interactive way and concepts are continuously related to their practical relevance in the different contexts represented.²³⁰

- **newsletters**: in every country there are some organisations that produce newsletters that are handed out or e-mailed to other organisations. These newsletters give overviews of current events in a region in relation to peace and conflict, relate the activities of the organisation and others, give suggestions for

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²²⁹ Interview with Liberia programme coordinator of a regional NGO working in several West African countries. Monrovia, Liberia, 10 February 2006. Interview with staff members of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 14 February 2006.

²³⁰ Interview with director of a West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
funding sources, announce upcoming events, and/or discuss global developments and what they mean for the region.

- **thematic meetings** for organisations to share experiences around a specific issue. For example, an umbrella of church councils in the Horn of Africa and the African Great Lakes region recently organised a cross-border dialogue event on small arms with Sudanese, Kenyan and Ugandan local church representatives, because these countries face similar issues in their pastoralist areas.231

- **follow-up workshops**: a director of a youth organisation mentioned that after his staff members return from a conference, they are required to hold a workshop for other youth organisations so that they can benefit from the newly gained knowledge.232

- **staff exchanges** among organisations in different countries and international internship programmes. Such activities promote knowledge sharing. When taking place within a region, staff exchanges also build regional solidarity. People are strengthened when they discover that others face similar dilemmas and that they can do things together.233 Organisations also organise short exchange visits – for example, the above-mentioned church umbrella organisation organised for Kenyan and Ugandan church council members to go to Burundi during the election period to assist and share experiences with their Burundian counterparts.234

- **communication technology**: much exchange takes place face-to-face but internet is also used as well as, in a few cases, videoconferencing.235

- **informal conversations**: last but not least, much interaction takes place in informal conversations – “at the margins of coordination meetings, in the car park afterwards, in coffee bars, and in restaurants and bars in the evenings” (ALNAP 2003: 56).

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231 Interview with staff member of a regional NGO working in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. Nairobi, Kenya, 30 November 2005.
232 Interview with staff members of a Sierra Leonean NGO. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 16 February 2006.
233 Interview with director of a Mindanawan NGO. Amsterdam, Netherlands, 9 April 2006.
234 Interview with director of a Cambodian youth NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 24 May 2005.
235 In Phnom Penh, local NGOs are allowed to use the videoconferencing facilities of Cambodian World Bank office. Interview with director of a Cambodian youth NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 24 May 2006.
Knowledge shared among SNGOs in these ways tends to have the following content.

- Often, staff members of different peace NGOs exchange tacit knowledge about their programmes and the experiences they have gathered in implementing them. What worked, what did not, and why? What lessons have been learned?
- Updates on the situation are also regularly shared – what are the latest developments with regard to the conflict, and what is the security situation? Box 5.3 below illustrates this.
- Exchange also takes place around organisational strategies. What are the main issues that we should focus on? In which ways should we do so? In this context, meetings often aim at coordinating activities so as to prevent duplication and identify opportunities for joint action. This is hard because of the constraints presented by the funding regime (with donors to a large extent determining the strategies of organisations), and because of competition among NGOs that makes it difficult to openly share strategic information. Still, it is done.
- Exchanges during training courses and network meetings often focus on transferring knowledge of tools and methods for conflict analysis and conflict management. These include concepts that can help to understand and categorise conflict and methodologies for mediation, dialogue and reconciliation.
- Both training courses and network meetings focus on technical knowledge in the sense of ways to run an organisation efficiently. Two West African network coordinators note that in exchanges among members the emphasis is shifting from content knowledge towards technical issues and organisational skills, including M&E, planning, and proposal writing.236
- Some knowledge sharing activities aim explicitly at bringing together people from different sectors or backgrounds. One West African network runs a programme that explores the tensions between proponents of bringing to justice soldiers who have committed crimes during conflict, and those favouring reconciliation and drawing attention to the fact that calls for justice may impede peace processes. The programme aims to bring together human rights practitioners (who tend to emphasise accountability) and peacebuilding workers (who tend to prioritise reconciliation).

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236 Interview with director of a West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006. Interview with national coordinator of a Sierra Leonean NGO network. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 15 February 2006.
Out of the sixteen member organisations in the region, five were represented at the meeting. Including the visiting researcher, eleven people were present. The meeting was opened with prayer, followed by introductions of those present. Next, the coordinator for the Eastern region gave a report of the ‘national visioning process’ of the network and the Annual General Meeting that had taken place in Freetown.

- During the visioning process the representatives present had worked on adjusting the constitution of the network.
- It was suggested that the AGM should not always take place in Freetown but rotate between the regions.
- Participants agreed that inactive NCP-SL board members should be replaced.
- It was agreed that the secretariat would write a concept paper on research.
- It was discussed that the network should link up with the organisations dealing with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC has issued recommendations, but these have not been implemented. Here lies a role for civil society.
- The representatives looked at the three-year strategic plan, harmonising ideas and making a concise plan, which was put to the AGM.

A discussion followed, in which the following questions and issues came up:

- People agree that the network should be less Freetown-centred. A member proposes that the next AGM be held in Kenema.
- People are unclear whether the election of board members takes place centrally or in the regions. It turns out to be in the regions. All are dissatisfied with the performance of the board members representing the Eastern region. The Eastern region is highly affected by conflict issues, but none of the board members for the Eastern region attended the visioning process or the AGM.
- It is suggested that the TRC should be asked to join the network.
- Some of the districts in the Eastern region are inactive. Those present who carry out programmes in Kailahun and Kono districts are asked to approach all involved organisations there and ask them to come to the next meeting.

Various practical issues are discussed, including the distribution of a report about whether peacebuilding includes human rights organisations, the suggestion that invitations for meetings should be sent longer in advance, and the problem that many people do not check their e-mails regularly. There is some discussion about funding and the network. It is noted that the network asks the members to solicit their own funding. Finally, someone notes that the meeting was supposed to exchange information about the work of the members and learn from each other’s intervention strategies.

The next meeting is set to take place in two weeks.

Box 5.3 illustrates some of the issues discussed at meetings between local NGOs. In this particular meeting practical and organisational matters took prominence over substantive discussions regarding peace.

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237 Excerpts of the report I drafted after attending the meeting
methodologies. At least for networks, this seems to occur more often. However, such discussions are also useful. To some extent the Kenema meeting described in the Box was also about organising substantive knowledge exchange (rather than doing so at that moment in time) in that it set the stage for information to be exchanged in written form or in the next meeting.

5.5.2 Exchange with international organisations and government agencies

Next to interactions with their donors, Southern peace NGOs engage in knowledge exchange with other non-local actors, namely international multilateral organisations with a presence in their countries. The main reason for this is that international organisations (IOs) are important players in the field of peacebuilding in all the countries visited. Large NNGOs have offices there and as we have seen play an important role in shaping the policies and practices of local civil society. In some of these countries—particularly Liberia—large UN missions are present and play a large role in day-to-day security, political and socio-economic matters. In all countries, specialised UN agencies are present that focus on development issues. Other IOs include intergovernmental regional organisations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Southeast Asia and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in West Africa.

In addition to intergovernmental actors, NGOs also interact with governmental ones in their country and region. These interactions often take the form of lobbying work in order to get governments and IOs to put specific issues onto their agenda, more strongly support civil society, or respond to specific challenges identified by NGOs. In addition, some organisations advice and training services to advice and training services to governmental employees and the staff of IOs. This type of work is done particularly by stronger SNGOs. The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), for example, provides expertise to IOs by giving advice, organising workshops, and writing manuals. Smaller, weaker NGOs are more localised and do not engage much in such activities. For them, networks are important vehicles to make their voices heard to official institutions as they are not able to do so on their

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238 Based on network meetings attended (see list in sources).
239 Interview with national coordinator of a Liberian NGO network. Monrovia, Liberia, 8 February 2006.
own. Somewhat surprisingly, in the interviews little mention was made of knowledge flowing the other way: from governments to NGOs.

More horizontal knowledge sharing takes place in policy forums organised by civil society networks. In the run-up to the 2002 Kenyan election, a local civil society network organised policy forums with likeminded institutions, including the government, on issues such as the relationship between the police and the media and the making of a constitution. Unfortunately, due to staff shortages, these forums were not continued. In Sierra Leone, a national NGO network regularly organises a National Peace and Development Forum with network members and government representatives from various ministries as well as UN staff. Each person present reports on his activities and a discussion takes place.

In Cambodia there is much less interaction with governmental agencies; in fact, the government is not mentioned as a partner for exchange. Cambodian NGOs interviewed did not elaborate on this, but the lack of responsiveness of the government towards civil society is likely to be a reason. In the Philippine government, a presidential Office for the Peace Process has been established which liaises with civil society, and about a third of NGO staff interviewed mention this office as a partner for exchange. However, other Mindanawan NGOs consider the office to be part of the ‘enemy’. In Liberia, organisations speak of organising a large multi-level consultation process that would link up the grassroots level with the governmental level via peace NGOs and culminate in the creation of a two- or three-year plan for peacebuilding in Liberia. This would counter the influence of donors in determining both “the diagnosis and the solution adopted”. However, as of yet they have not been able to realise such a process. When it comes to interactions with government agencies, the difference between Liberia, in which this is quite common, and Sierra Leone in which it is hardly mentioned, is striking. Although the new Johnson-Sirleaf government (which includes many former civil society members) was not yet established at the time of my visit, it seems that even then there were stronger links between government and civil society. In Sierra Leone by contrast many SNGO staff complained about the unresponsiveness of their government.

240 Interview with staff member of a Kenyan NGO. Nairobi, Kenya, 29 November 2005.
241 Interview with national coordinator of a Sierra Leonean NGO network. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 15 February 2006.
242 Interview with Secretary General of a Liberian church-based NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 8 February 2006.
5.5.3 Exchange with local beneficiaries

When asked about knowledge sharing, many local peacebuilders bring up exchanges with the communities in and for which they work as an important activity. The reasons for this have been elaborated in section 5.3.1, where beneficiaries featured as an important source of knowledge for SNGOs because of their unique knowledge of the local context. Exchanges with beneficiaries take the following forms.

- **Community workshops and town meetings** are regularly organised. These aim specifically at the surfacing of local knowledge and information about priorities and needs. In addition, they are intended as exchange forums in which a mutual learning process takes place involving both SNGO staff and community members. For example, a Cambodian NGO organising peacebuilding training programmes for young people emphasises the value of its participants as knowledge resources – whether they have received formal education or not. In line with Freire’s ideas (see Box 4.1 in section 4.1) the courses this organisation provides are based on the knowledge of the youth participants. “They are given the opportunity to discuss and learn by themselves. Our staff members are not teachers but merely facilitate the young people’s learning”.

- In a similar vein, some youth SNGOs organise **peace camps** in which views are exchanged with local stakeholders.

- In case of membership organisations – umbrellas of grassroots or church groups – regular **assemblies** are held in which all the members participate to develop policy. This also occurs in most networks. One umbrella organisation notes that “it is necessary to actively extract information from members as they rarely share it on their own initiative”.

- Some NGO staff members mention **community-level dialogues and mediation activities** as important ways to bring out local knowledge. In this sense knowledge sharing becomes a tool for peacebuilding: “mediation is a process in which knowledge exchange plays an important role. Missing parts of history are rewritten through the exchanges that take place in the mediation process. This completion or rewriting of history makes peace

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244 Interview with director of a Cambodian youth NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 24 May 2006.
245 Interview with staff member of a Sierra Leonean youth NGO. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 15 February 2006.
246 Interview with staff members of an NGO working in South Sudan. Nairobi, Kenya, 28 November 2005.
possible.”

More generally, village-based processes of dialogue spur organisational learning from beneficiaries.

- Some organisations explicitly try to gather local inputs for lobbying work or for higher-level exchanges. For example, a Nairobi-based fellowship of churches in the Great Lakes region played a role in the process leading up to the government-level International Conference on the Great Lakes region. As part of these preparations it collected inputs from church leaders and women.

- If SNGOs are able to do so, they conduct research into the needs and capacities of local communities, as a basis for the planning of capacity building and other activities.

- Some organisations engage in a conscious process of documenting local information, such as information about the human rights violations for the purpose of human rights reporting, and information about possibly rising tensions in a particular area for the purpose of early warning:

  “We have access to local information in areas difficult to reach in a way that others do not. While others face security issues, we have access through our work with the local people, who keep us informed. They consider our staff to be part of them and protect them. This is a functioning early warning system. Indeed we have in the past accurately predicted events such as large-scale population movements. People now tend to listen to us because we have proven to be well-informed and credible.”

In more general terms, interviewees emphasise that establishing a genuine two-way knowledge exchange with beneficiaries requires an attitude of openness to local information and views. This is helped by a willingness and ability to spend time with communities and listen to them. Unfortunately, there is often a lack of (paid) time to do this. Still, the example quoted below shows the difference it can make.

  “[I]n an effort to expand the impact and scope of its health programme, [an Indian NGO]’s staff were ‘mobilised with motorbikes’. They became so focused on meeting quantitative project objectives that they had little time to sit and talk with local people. It soon became apparent that ‘when we walked or went by bicycle, we did much better.’ So [the NGO] introduced slower, more time-consuming ways of working with local communities.” (Hailey and James 2002: 402)

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247 Interview with director of a West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
248 Interview with staff member of a church-based organisation working throughout the Great Lakes region. Nairobi, 30 November 2005.
249 Interview with staff member of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
250 Interview with staff members of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 13 February 2006.
5.5.4 Capacity building by Southern NGOs

Southern peace NGOs engage in the capacity building of various target groups, including grassroots organisations, local government staff, village leaders, elders, and ‘ordinary’ community members. Such activities are part of a strategy of peacebuilding: the aim is to provide local groups with abilities, tools and knowledge that may help them deal with conflict in a peaceful way. In addition, some SNGOs - particularly larger, stronger ones - aim to build the capacity of other – usually smaller and weaker - SNGOs. This is motivated by the observation that many local NGOs are deprived of knowledge and skills:

“there is a knowledge gap among Liberian NGOs in the areas of conflict transformation and the systematic analysis of conflict. There is little skilled manpower with organisations. The majority of organisations working on peacebuilding were founded in the last few years. In earlier years, international organisations and donors focused on supporting ‘hardware’: building schools, agriculture, water, etc. More recently there is recognition of the importance of ‘software’: peacebuilding capacity. This includes advocacy, justice, and good governance.”

The following types of activities undertaken by Southern peace NGOs may be grouped under the heading of capacity building:

- Building the capacity of grassroots groups and smaller NGOs through training and advice. Organisations for example advise such groups on conflict analysis and on how to organise, lobby, and draw attention to a cause. A network organisation working in the Great Lakes region notes that this was successful in Eastern Congo where “people have come together and organised themselves, and lobbied to draw attention to the situation there”.

- Building the capacity of local policymakers through training and exchange. For example, SNGOs work to promote understanding of the existence of a rule of law, to increase the skills of local council members, or to help policymakers to integrate peacebuilding into their work. A Kenyan organisation noted that it was only successful in convincing local councils of the need to become aware of conflict transformation concepts and tools once the issue was approached from an economic perspective and the NGO began to emphasise how conflict was affecting

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251 Interview with national coordinator of a Liberian NGO network. Monrovia, Liberia, 8 February 2006.

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local revenue collection. This led local government institutions to engage in peacebuilding activities out of their own budget in order to ensure the sustainability of their policies.253

- Quite a number of NGOs in all countries visited engage in the training of mediators who then mediate in conflicts arising at the local level in communities or schools. These mediators usually participate in training and afterwards in mediation voluntarily in addition to their regular work or education. An organisation aiming to train young people to become mediators has devised a strategy to draw people to its offices in order to become interested in becoming a mediator. It provides table games at the offices, so that youngsters will come to play, hang around for a while and hopefully start to talk to the facilitators present. 254

- Some SNGOs enable trained mediators from different places to meet and exchange experiences. A Liberian youth NGO has created peace mediation committees consisting of trained mediators, who meet once a month to share experiences from their own communities. The NGO provides transport and a small allowance to make these meetings possible. 255

- Training of trainers is used to broaden the scope of training and mediation is the in various areas within the field of peacebuilding. 256

- Some organisations assist others in implementing activities to achieve learning through joint action. An umbrella organisation working on conflict prevention and peacebuilding with church councils in the countries of the Great Lakes region and Horn of Africa aims to empower the councils to implement programmes. If there is a lack of capacity, then the organisation goes into a country to assist. It has supported the joint preparation of civic education material before elections and helped to convene roundtable meetings for knowledge exchange on issues such as small arms. 257

- Over a third of all NGOs visited engage in peace education. Through billboards, posters, newsletters, radio programmes, theatre, training school teachers, organising lectures, and other activities, organisations attempt to spread the message of

253 Interview with Kenyan staff member of the local office of an international NGO in Kenya’s North Rift province. Eldoret, Kenya, 1 December 2005.
254 Interview with staff members of a Liberian youth NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 13 February 2006.
255 Interview with staff members of a Liberian youth NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 13 February 2006.
256 Interview with director of a West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
257 Interview with staff member of a church-based regional NGO working in the Great Lakes region and the Horn of Africa. Nairobi, Kenya, 30 November 2005.
peaceful coexistence and promote basic conflict resolution skills among local populations. 258

In capacity building, quite a number of organisations emphasise the importance of starting with the pre-existing knowledge, skills and needs of those whose capacity is being developed. This is in line with the theory of capacity building discussed in section 3.6. For example, interviewees say they aim to strengthen people’s traditional ways of dealing with conflict rather than trying to impose alternative approaches. “One should not tell people that they are doing things in the wrong way, but instead support them and influence their actions slowly through positive reinforcement”. 259 In how far the approaches described match the actual practice of capacity building by SNGOs I have not been able to find out.

5.5.5 Exchange with knowledge institutions

As was already mentioned in 2.3.2 and 5.5.5, little interaction takes place between Southern peace NGOs and universities and research institutions in the countries in which they operate. Some more interaction takes place with knowledge institutions abroad – mainly in the North – as staff members take short courses or degree programmes there. Local universities, however, do not often have departments focusing on peacebuilding or related issues and tend to be rather theoretical rather than practical in their approach.

As we saw in chapter three, knowledge institutions have the potential of functioning as learning ‘scaffolds’, helping individuals and organisations to take a step back from practice and reflect at a deeper level than they otherwise would. Universities could play a role in the research and documentation activities SNGOs want to develop. They could strengthen the voices of both Southerners and practitioners in global development and peacebuilding debates, which tend to be dominated by Northerners and academics.

The practitioner-oriented action research Master programme entitled Applied Conflict Transformation Studies (ACTS), which is offered in Cambodia and other places in cooperation with local universities, is an interesting example in this regard. For that reason it is discussed relatively extensively in chapter eight. But there are a few other

258 Interview with staff member of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
259 Interview with staff member of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
examples of NGO-university interaction that came up in the interviews and that deserve mention here. In Freetown, Sierra Leone, the local university has created a peacebuilding department. In developing its curriculum it is actively engaging with the local NGO community. Students work with NGOs as interns in order to learn from their practice. As of yet, these interactions seem to benefit mainly the university department and not the NGOs, as the department does not yet have much knowledge and capacity to offer. But in the future this may change.260

Another example is the Centre for Peace Education (CPE) at Miriam College in Quezon City in the Philippines. An academic but practice-oriented institution, it engages with NGOs in order to help develop peace education activities in various countries in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines itself the Centre trains school teachers in peace education in cooperation with the Department of Education. The Centre has three staff of which two are part-time. It is funded in two ways: Miriam College pays for the staff costs, and for all other costs project funding from donors is sought. CPE faculty associates (volunteers from among Miriam college faculty) and the Pax Christi student organisation in college and high school provide volunteer services. The CPE is a member of a global peace education centres network that was created to undertake a joint project on the ethical and spiritual foundations of peace education, which included teacher trainings in Quezon City, Tokyo (Japan) and Seoul (South Korea). The network has four member Peace Education Centres located in Teachers College, Columbia University in New York; the Lebanese American University in Lebanon; Seisen University in Tokyo; and the CPE in the Philippines.261

5.5.6 Concluding 5.5

Southern peace organisations engage in various types of knowledge exchange with actors outside their organisation. Exchange with knowledge institutions, particularly local ones, lags behind despite the potential this has for improved research and documentation. But with all other actors involved – other local NGOs, international organisations, governments, and beneficiaries – SNGOs work to establish regular interaction. Stronger, more developed NGOs are able to engage with governments and international organisations in a two-way manner – they

260 Interview with director of a Sierra Leonean church-based NGO. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 20 February 2006.
261 Interview with director of the Centre for Peace Education (CPE). Quezon City, Philippines, 19 May 2006.
lobby them for specific policy approaches while at the same time offering them knowledge and training. Stronger NGOs also engage in capacity building activities in order to develop the skills and abilities of weaker NGOs and local communities. Smaller, weaker NGOs participate less in knowledge exchange with governments and international organisations but more so with other NGOs and grassroots groups. These SNGOs are more often on the receiving end of capacity building programmes, but they also try to offer knowledge based on experience and draw from the knowledge of local beneficiaries.

Some organisations complain that knowledge exchange initiatives are sometimes too detached from action. There are “meetings, meetings, meetings” and there is a lot of talk – but not always is sufficient attention paid to planning for concrete action. Neither does follow-up to meetings always receive the necessary attention. “Follow-up should be budgeted from the start” (Huna and Beernink 2005: 12), but this is often neglected. Depending on the needs of organisations involved, such follow-up could entail “mentoring, or training in the tools learnt through exchange, or even a capacity building within the organisation itself. Follow-up can also entail time and space for experimentation.” (Huna and Beernink 2005: 12)

5.6 Obstacles to learning and knowledge sharing

In chapter four we saw that structural constraints that result from North-South inequalities in general, and the aid regime in particular, limit the learning of SNGOs. In addition to these structural constraints, a number of more specific obstacles to the learning of Southern peace NGOs emerge from the interviews. Table 5.10 portraits these obstacles as they were mentioned by SNGO staff members. Several of these have already been discussed earlier: the fact that knowledge gained needs to be adapted to be relevant to the context, the lack of capacity organisations have to document their knowledge in order to more easily share it with others, the imposition by donors of ways to look at peacebuilding, and the fact that not all SNGOs are necessarily tied to constituencies at the grassroots. Others – mainly the issue of different expectations – will be addressed in the next chapters.

Mentioned most often is a lack of time and money (elaborated in 5.6.1), followed closely by the observation that much knowledge exchanged is not directly relevant and needs to be adapted to the context – an issue

262 See note 164.
discussed in other places in this book. Competition and distrust (5.6.2) among actors in peacebuilding is mentioned third often. Imposition of knowledge and priorities by donors is also considered to limit learning and open exchange, as was discussed in the previous chapter. Limits to the capacity and characteristics of individual organisations (5.6.3) was also mentioned. Factors resulting from the difficult social and political situation in (post)conflict societies (5.6.4) include bad infrastructure, government scrutiny and conflict-related constraints. Related to both conflict and competition are aspects relating to power relations and inequality among participants in knowledge exchange (5.6.5), which play a particularly strong role in Sierra Leone. As Table 5.10 shows, various other issues are mentioned. Further on we will address cultural issues and gender (5.6.6) and the fact that knowledge changes over time (5.6.7).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obstacles to knowledge exchange</th>
<th>Lib (10)</th>
<th>SL (16)</th>
<th>Kenya (11)</th>
<th>Phil (10)</th>
<th>Cam (14)</th>
<th>C-Asia (15)</th>
<th>Total (76)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Imposition by donors</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>13</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Different expectations of exchange initiative</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>NGOs lack constituency</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Lack of follow-up, implementation</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Initiatives confined to capital</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>Different opinions on the role of civil society</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.10: Obstacles to knowledge exchange for Southern peace NGOs
5.6.1 Time and money

Section 3.4.2 made clear that for NNGO staff a lack of time poses a major obstacle to learning processes. This is compounded by pressures for direct impact and to spend resources efficiently, and by the sense of urgency that comes with working in conflict situations. For SNGO staff, the situation is no different. Asked about the main obstacles to learning and knowledge sharing, they mention a lack of time most often. SNGO workers tend to be overwhelmingly busy. They feel that peacebuilding is such a big undertaking and there is so much to be done that there is always a shortage of time. This means that they often have to miss out on knowledge sharing meetings or other occasions in which learning may take place. The business of NGO staff also affects meetings when they do take place:

“if a meeting is organised in Monrovia then it does not work because people will be running around to other meetings and have their phones on all the time. It is better to go far away. Unfortunately, when we propose this to donors they understand it as a selfish desire to take a trip”. 263

The emphasis of donors on short-term impact in order to have something to show for the money spent makes it a challenge for SNGOs to find the resources needed to reflect and share. These activities require time to be allocated to them in budgets so that learning does not become an added activity in addition to the regular workload of staff members. In addition, it sometimes requires resources for travel and accommodation to bring people together for knowledge exchange. As we have seen in chapter four, the preference of many donor agencies for clearly demarcated projects and activities with concrete outputs leaves little space for this.

However - is funding always necessary for learning and knowledge exchange? Could the emphasis on required funding perhaps mean that the inherent value of learning processes is not strong enough to provide an incentive for SNGOs to realise meetings, reflection processes and documentation? Funds are not necessarily required for staff members to take the initiative to discuss lessons and strategies, and indeed, they do this. But more structured processes require time and given the high work load on NGO staff members it is not realistic to expect them to create additional space for learning on top of normal practice. In order to become a part of practice time has to be set aside for it. In any case, “[i]n resource deprived states such as Sierra Leone and Liberia funding

263 Interview with staff members of a Liberian youth NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 9 February 2006.
seems to be an important prerequisite for any NGO activity. Only on rare occasions has civil society mobilised without any external funding” (Douma 2005: 10).

Local NGO workers (and, increasingly, donor organisations) do recognise the importance of learning from experience and of knowledge and lessons from elsewhere. However, learning aims are perceived to be in conflict with other aims (‘direct impact’ in particular) and learning is often seen as an extra activity rather than an integral part of action. Some interviewees said they were not paid to read, reflect or participate in networks. They are paid to act, and this always receives more priority. It makes a difference, however, when NGOs consider learning and networking to be part of their work rather than an extra activity. Organisational policy, culture and capacity are important in that respect.

5.6.2 Competition and distrust

Competition among NGOs is another important obstacle to learning and, particularly, to knowledge sharing. After time and money it the obstacle mentioned most often by interviewees, and it came up in each country visited. NGOs in the same area tend to compete for the same donor funding. In the words of one NGO staff member, “conflict is business now.”264 Such competition can influence people’s willingness to share information beyond their own organisation. This not only applies to information about funding sources, but also to any other knowledge that may be seen to provide an organisation with a strategic advantage over others. As a result, there is a reluctance to share for fear of losing one’s competitive edge. Goodhand found in his study of NGOs working in conflict areas that “[i]n each of the case studies, NGO rent-seeking behaviour was common, with organizations undermining competitors, concealing information and acting unilaterally. Interorganization discord is a predictable result of existing material incentives.”(Goodhand 2006: 144)

As a result, the will to work together, and the acknowledgement that sharing is important, are less strong than considerations of organisational survival.265 This plays a role not only during, but also at the start of knowledge sharing initiatives. Those not already engaging in inter-organisation exchange may not easily be convinced to participate,

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264 Interview with staff members of a regional NGO working in several West African countries. Freetown, Sierra Leone, 16 February 2006.
265 Interview with staff member of a Kenyan NGO. Nairobi, Kenya, 29 November 2005.
thinking there are hidden agendas involved. Such distrust, inherent in the funding regime, is likely to be strengthened by the legacy of the conflicts that have taken place in the countries studied. As was discussed in chapter one, NGOs in conflict-affected regions are not necessarily politically neutral and are likely to have affiliations with one group or another that played a role in the conflict. Even if this is not the case, suspicions in that direction are easily born in others. In Mindanao, for example, a Bangsamoro-based civil society consortium faces regular distrust and accusations of partiality. “It is difficult to optimise knowledge flows, because of distrust and misconceptions among communities. Many non-Moro organisations perceive our organisation as terrorist or criminal, and are unwilling to engage with us.”

A related aspect that is mentioned about knowledge sharing among NGOs is that cooperative endeavours – such as networks - raise issues of credit, billing and name recognition. People are unwilling to foot the bill for meetings while at the same time eager to get credit for their contributions, which in collective processes they often do not. Interestingly, an NGO staff member noted that “these issues are most salient with NGO leaders. People who are lower in the organisations, those who actually carry out the work, tend to be more open towards one another. They are less occupied with issues of recognition and billing and see the benefits of knowledge sharing directly in their work.” Issues like competition and credit recognition are strongest in inter-NGO interactions, as these involve participants that are at the same time direct competitors. With grassroots groups they seem less significant. In addition, in exchanges across borders they are also less important as competition is less direct – people are not competing for funds allocated to a specific country or region.

Solutions for the obstacles posed by competition and distrust are mentioned as well. They include good communication, trust building and emphasising a common goal that overrides individual objectives. This also entails creating a safe space for learning and sharing, in which people feel secure enough to talk openly. For longer-term knowledge exchange initiatives such as networks, agreeing on codes of conduct for the use of information may help, although it is often difficult to claim ownership of a specific piece of knowledge after it has been shared and used by others. Another solution for networks is to agree on a clear division of labour among organisations in which each focuses on its own

266 Interview with Secretary General of a Mindanawan NGO consortium. Cotabato, Philippines, 17 May 2006.
267 Informal conversation with staff member of a Mindanawan NGO. Davao, Philippines, 15 May 2006.
strong points. This prevents competition and duplication of activities. However, it may be difficult in a situation in which donors are more willing to pay for some activities than for others.

5.6.3 Organisational capacity and characteristics

Among Southern peace NGOs the level of organisational capacity varies widely. Organisations with low capacity face a lack of funds, are understaffed, and have insufficient access to infrastructure such as the internet. Their staff members have a lack of appropriate skills. Most NGOs complain of a lack of knowledge in the areas of conflict transformation and the systematic analysis of conflict. There is little skilled manpower within organisations. The majority of organisations working on peacebuilding were founded in the last few years. "In earlier years, international organisations and donors focused on supporting ‘hardware’: building schools, agriculture, and water supplies. More recently there has been recognition of the importance of ‘software’, such as peacebuilding capacity"\(^{268}\). The need for skills is a priority. With respect to the learning capacity of members, some aspects of organisational learning (such as training and retention of knowledge from training) receive more attention than others (such as learning cycles, reflecting on work, and sharing knowledge within the organisation).

Of course, the aforementioned issue of funding plays a role in limiting the capacity of staff. Qualified staff usually prefer to work with international organisations, because they pay more and because few local organisations are able to guarantee employment between projects. This causes organisational brain drain.\(^{269}\) Language issues also play a role, more specifically in many cases, a lack of fluency in English. Similarly, a lack of proficiency in ‘technical’ terminology, jargon, inhibits the access SNGOs have to available information and their ability to participate in sharing and networking. Thus, these issues present obstacles for learning and knowledge exchange.

Knowledge exchange can itself contribute to capacity building by providing access to tools, training and donors. The knowledge exchanged may include information about whom to see for what, how to frame messages in order to draw attention, and how to raise funds. Where capacity of participants or potential participants is an issue, it

\(^{268}\) Interview with national coordinator of an NGO network, Monrovia, Liberia, 8 February 2006.

\(^{269}\) Interview with staff member of Sierra Leonean NGO. Kenema, Sierra Leone, 22 February 2006.
would help for knowledge exchange initiatives – such as networks - to explicitly include the transfer of this kind of process knowledge. This includes the translation of documents into local languages and jargon-free versions. What also helps to develop the learning capacity of local organisations is to raise awareness of the importance and requirements for learning and to make instruments for learning and M&E available.

However, organisations need to prioritise the development of their learning capacity if they are to yield any results. Some consider that there is a lack of awareness of the need to learn and share knowledge among people in the field. People go about doing their work without taking the opportunity to reflect, document or evaluate. They themselves could do more to place learning higher on the agenda. It seems to be mostly the larger SNGOs with the means to engage in reflection and research, that emphasise the importance of these activities. As we saw in section 5.3.2, another difficulty SNGOs face is to retain knowledge within their organisation. Organisations are pressed to devise methods to prevent staff from leaving shortly after having received training. Providing job security from one project to another would contribute to retaining staff for longer periods, but the funding regime often prevents this.

A final aspect of the organisation of NGOs relates to the extent to which their decision-making is participatory and their leadership accountable. Although one would expect NGOs to be naturally democratic in nature, this is not necessarily the case. Many SNGOs are highly dependent on a strong leader figure who founded and continues to run the organisation. These leaders are not necessarily authoritarian – in fact they usually are not – but their preponderance in terms of skills and contacts makes them dominant figures around whom the organisation revolves. Knowledge is often concentrated in the head of such a figure, rather than being spread evenly in the organisation. Culture may also play a role in this. In Mindanao, a network coordinator noted that “some participants in training and networking activities are too leader-oriented and follow everything their director says. This is particularly the case with grassroots actors in Mindanao; traditional Moro culture emphasises strong leadership”. The danger is that when such leaders leave – one leader I met during my travels is now in the United Kingdom doing a PhD while several others have moved to government positions – they

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270 The Central and Eastern African Peace Tree Network has begun to do this (source: conversation with director of Peace Tree Network, Nairobi, 28 November 2005).
take their knowledge with them and their organisation struggles to survive.

Box 5.4: Issues relating to the capacity of CSOs in Central Asia

According to some network members interviewed in Central Asia, the networking concept is not really understood in the region. Central Asian CSOs are said to lack the knowledge and skills to develop a network. Problems mentioned include the following.

- Central Asian CSOs are relatively weak.
- Most CSOs do not develop their own policy but depend on the policy of donors; they are ‘grant-hunters’. Asian CSOs are dependent on foreign, particularly US, funds.
- Most CSOs engage in multiple tasks instead of specialising in one area (such as conflict prevention); as a result they offer less quality.
- Even if CSOs try to engage governments, they are not sure what their message should be. CSOs have little self esteem and organisations from different Central Asian countries do not easily agree on the right message, because they all have a different focus.
- There is little thinking in Central Asia about the role of civil society beyond the implementation of technical projects. There is also no sense of global solidarity, for example with regard to events in Lebanon – although this may also be related to the dependency on US funds.
- Not all CSOs consider conflict prevention to be the responsibility of civil society. Instead they tend to focus on implementing concrete, ‘technical’ socio-economic projects in a project-driven way. Conflict prevention, however, is more than a project. It is a large and political undertaking. It is also still quite vague and unclear.
- There is an absence of moral motivation; as a result networks work ad hoc, namely only when there is funding.

5.6.4 Limitations posed by politics and conflict

NGOs are involved in interventions to change societies, but they are also part of those societies. Their actions have intentional and unintentional consequences for the context in which they operate – and vice versa. Hilhorst writes that “everything happening in and around NGOs has a bearing on the politics of power within the organizations, the politics of organizational legitimation and, finally, the politics of (local and global) development” (Hilhorst 2003: 4). The room for manoeuvre local actors have, or the social space available to them for their projects, is restricted by the presence of other actors in peacebuilding. State-society-NGO relations make up the context of the actions of NGOs. In many developing countries, family standing and tribal affiliation cut across and help determine state-society relations. Finally, NGOs are fitted into local politics. Local constituents shape their identity and goals. All this

modifies the idea of a linear, step-by-step policy and implementation model: in reality actions are shaped by personal perspectives, social relations, and everyday politics. (Hilhorst 2003: 106-119)

In Table 5.10 we see that in Central Asia the restrictions placed on civil society by political actors is a major issue that limits their freedom of action – and therefore, the knowledge they are able to gain and share. In chapter seven more attention is paid to this. In the other countries state authoritarianism is a less direct threat, but NGOs do sometimes have difficulty gaining access to official actors. In chapter one and beyond, the limited ability of many peace SNGOs to play an independent political role was linked mostly to the international funding regime. However, governments may also play a role in preventing the involvement of NGOs in political processes. Although this issue is not mentioned in these terms by peace organisations in the countries visited except for Central Asia, it is possible that it plays a role in subtle ways. Moreover, in countries not visited state authoritarianism is certainly a major issue.

Achieving an active interplay between actors is difficult in conflict areas due to high levels of distrust between groups and individuals. In addition, such regions are often plagued by a scarcity of resources, low security and weak or bad governance, none of which provides an enabling environment for open learning and interaction processes. Fear may prevent people from speaking freely, and practical issues such as illiteracy, low Internet connectivity, expensive and intermittent energy supply, and bad physical infrastructure (particularly in West Africa) limits access to information and participation in exchanges. This weak enabling environment also puts local actors in conflict-torn developing countries at a disadvantage in generating and disseminating their own knowledge and lessons. As a result, capacity building programmes and knowledge exchange networks are more likely to revolve around international research agendas and Northern policy concerns. (Stone 2005: 101) As we have seen, this is compounded by the fact that those who control the money to a large extent control the content.

5.6.5 Power relations

A related set of obstacles has to do with power relations and inequality among people involved in, or surrounding, knowledge sharing initiatives. It is mentioned particularly in Sierra Leone. The context in which these remarks were made is the Network for Collaborative Peacebuilding Sierra Leone (NCP-SL), which is analysed in the next
chapter. As will become clear there, this network has been plagued by
accusations of power abuse by board members and more generally by a
sense that some members try to impose their will on the network. This
draws attention to the fact that those who have the capacity, means,
experience, or legitimacy to impose their preferred solution upon others
determine to a large extent what happens in a knowledge sharing setting.
In general, Northern participants will be better positioned to do so than
Southern participants, and better-funded actors will be more likely to
have power than less well-off ones. Indeed, power issues are strongly
related to the control of resources. This means that opportunities to get
the most out of knowledge exchange are unequal. In order to understand
a knowledge sharing initiative – such as a network - it is important to
take this dimension into account by asking questions like: ‘who benefits
from the network?’ and ‘who is seeking to influence the network?’.

5.6.6 Cultural issues and gender

Cultural issues are mentioned as obstacles to knowledge sharing in
Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cambodia. People mean different things by
this, including cultural differences between indigenous and external
participants in exchanges and differences between organisational
cultures. Both are addressed in this section. In addition, a few
interviewees mentioned gender issues, dawning attention to inequality
between men and women in their countries and the way in which this
inequality limited the extent to which women’s knowledge and views
were taken up. External actors may not realise that in many countries it
is more difficult for women to participate in learning and discussion than
it is for men. In Liberia it was mentioned that in some communities
women do not talk openly with men present and may need to meet
separately in order to get a more active knowledge exchange process
going.272

Regarding cultural issues, differences between external and indigenous
actors in peacebuilding where mentioned in each country. To the extent
that external actors participate in joint learning activities, the differences
between Western and other knowledge systems (described in section 2.4
and elsewhere) come into play. It has even been suggested that
structured initiatives explicitly organised for knowledge exchange, such
as networks, by their very nature emphasise ‘Western’, rationalistic
knowledge over other types of knowledge:

272 Interview with staff member of a Liberian NGO. Monrovia, Liberia, 13 February 2006.
“[n]etworks systematise knowledge generated by diverse individual and organisational knowledge actors and impose a rationality that gives precedence to a particular conception of knowledge – usually of a codified, technocratic, secular, westernised society. Participation is informally restricted through boundary drawing discourses by the network to exclude or devalue indigenous knowledge that does not conform to techno-scientific criteria.” (Stone 2005: 99)

Efforts to exchange tacit knowledge through direct interaction might be less prone to this type of rationalisation. However, such exchanges will be very difficult across cultures as there is less of a shared context that makes the tacit knowledge explainable and understandable. In any case, the above warning seems most relevant for international networks that aim at exchanges across cultures and regions. From what I have seen, local or national-level knowledge sharing among actors involved in peacebuilding, usually taking place in face-to-face meetings, offer sufficient opportunity for the exchange of any kind of tacit or explicit knowledge deemed useful by the participants.

However, for cross-regional exchanges – for example in the GPPAC network discussed in chapter seven – these considerations are quite relevant, as is the more general realisation that cultural issues can be an important constraining factor in achieving successful knowledge sharing and joint learning. In addition, representatives of NNGOs regularly participate in – or even organise – knowledge sharing events among peacebuilders in Southern conflict-affected areas. This introduces a North-South and cross-cultural element into these meetings. In fact, given the knowledge regime and structural inequalities in knowledge production and discourse domination described in the previous chapter, even meetings with only local participation are likely to have knowledge originating outside of the locality play a role in the exchange. As discussed in the third chapter, implicit, cultural knowledge and a willingness to question one’s assumptions and views may help overcome barriers between cultures and knowledge systems.

A West African peacebuilder drew attention to differences Francophone and the Anglophone countries in the regions with regard to how they look at the world.

“People educated in France have a particular sense of ‘civilisation’ and feel closer to France than to their Anglophone neighbours. Côte d’Ivoire feels more affiliation with France than with neighbouring [Anglophone] Ghana. This is despite the artificiality of the border between Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana, which actually separates families. The knowledge that is most recognised in Côte d’Ivoire is knowledge coming from France. The special relationship with France ensures the
commercial influence of French companies in the country. [Our regional network] attempts to foster more of a regional identity by making sure that our Secretariat is composed of people from different countries in the region, Anglophone and Francophone. Its meetings and documentation are bilingual, despite the higher costs that this represents. Documents are also translated into local languages.\textsuperscript{273}

Cultural issues posing difficulties for knowledge sharing are impossible to overcome entirely, but it helps to recognise them and make them explicit during exchanges. In doing so it may be necessary to be aware of different kinds of cultural cleavages. Culture is not only geographically bound. Different organisations also have different organisational cultures. In inter-organisational exchange this can lead to misunderstandings. Organisational cultures tend to differ particularly among different categories of organisations – such as government agencies, NGOs and private businesses. In addition, the different backgrounds of participants when it comes to education or profession can lead them to looking at reality in very different ways. One peacebuilder noted that “exchanging with friends who work in government is difficult because they have a different perspective. The same goes for lawyers, who tend not to look at root causes as peace workers do.”\textsuperscript{274}

Sensitivity to cultural differences may lead knowledge exchange participants to think about different ways to package information in order to be most accessible and relevant to a particular target audience. For example, in areas with predominantly oral traditions written information may not be the best way to reach people. Alternative – more visual – ways of documentation may therefore be more useful. Working on such alternatives can be done parallel to activities that support the documentation of knowledge in written form. The latter is still important as internationally as well as within many societies written knowledge is dominant and therefore needed to participate in debates. In Mindanao, for example, “in spite of their oral culture, even the indigenous people are now starting to document things: they are codifying their traditional laws in order to get them recognised and integrated into the justice system.”\textsuperscript{275}

\textsuperscript{273} Interview with director of a West African NGO network. Accra, Ghana, 6 February 2006.
\textsuperscript{274} Interview with staff member of a Cambodian youth NGO. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 24 May 2006.
\textsuperscript{275} Interview with staff member of a Mindanawan NGO. Davao, Philippines, 15 May 2006.
5.6.7 Knowledge changing over time

Four interviewees, including two in Kenya, drew attention to the rapidly changing nature of much knowledge about conflict and peacebuilding. As circumstances in their locality change, information and methodologies may no longer apply. Groups that were initially willing to enter into dialogue with one another can suddenly become hostile again in response to a particular incident, such as cattle raiding in Northern Kenya. And both the policies of governments and of powerful international actors change the context to such an extent that activities and ideas are no longer relevant. For example, the work of Bangsamoro organisations in Mindanao changed when the ‘War on Terror’ began and they were suddenly branded as semi-terrorists.

Often, knowledge is implicitly or explicitly considered to be cumulative: it builds up over time. One piece of knowledge adds to another and expands the knowledge base. This is not always the case. Knowledge has a short ‘shelf life’ and often the knowledge of yesterday is no longer relevant today because the world may look radically different. The paradigm has changed, fashion and language are different, different discourse coalitions dominate, and packaging has changed. In the field of conflict transformation and peace building relevant knowledge has dramatically changed with the end of the Cold War, and partly perhaps again after 11 September 2001, which changed the discourse. Looking at a more local level, relevant and up-to-date knowledge changes all the time in conflict situations due to their fluidity and rapidly changing circumstances, as the following citation illustrates.

“[W]hat we see as the learning need during a field level assignment is for very rapid assimilation of new knowledge assets specific to the immediate task, the key ones of which will be in tacit form. The right sources for these are not always evident so aid workers need skills, partners and tools to be able to smell out and unearth these truffles. Even if these are made explicit efficiently, the fluidity of field conditions is likely to create a demand for new tacit information tomorrow. The explicit is always in catch-up mode. Explicit knowledge from other situations may be of interest (if people know that it exists), but few have the time to plough through others’ reports to find the truffles they need. The best form of explicit knowledge in this situation is in the form of highly distilled checklists and methodologies based on a wide range of evaluations and organizational experiences, which can serve as tools for locating more local tacit knowledge.” (Faulkner and Foster 2004, cited in ALNAP 2003: 59)
As a result, saved up, explicit knowledge may become irrelevant more quickly than we might think. It is therefore a continuous challenge to keep databases and other storing tools ‘clean’ of outdated knowledge in order to prevent them from becoming unworkable. In addition, as the citation suggests, paying attention to ways of gaining quick and easy access to tacit knowledge when needed may be more valuable than merely focusing on the creation and storing of explicit knowledge.

5.6.8 Concluding 5.6

Summing up, the following issues make learning and knowledge sharing more difficult:

- a lack of time and funds to engage in knowledge activities;
- low organisational capacity and organisational characteristics – such as a leader who monopolises knowledge and dominates decision-making;
- the fact that, particularly in conflict-affected contexts like those under study, knowledge is always contested, which gives knowledge sharing a conflict resolution component;
- the important issue of competition among actors working for peace in a given area, which leads to mistrust and creates incentives to withhold rather than share information;
- in addition to the North-South inequalities discussed in the previous chapter, issues of power and inequality also play a role among local actors. In knowledge sharing forums, more powerful participants may dominate the agenda at the expense of others;
- the social and political situation in (post)conflict societies, which contributes to distrust and tensions but which also leads to many practical circumstances relating to the resources and infrastructure for learning and knowledge sharing;
- cultural differences can inhibit sharing among actors engaging in joint learning, while inequalities between genders create differences in access to knowledge and exchanges;
- the fact that knowledge changes over time, and that particularly in conflict situations relevant knowledge quickly becomes outdated, represents a constraint for ‘classical’ organisational learning tools that focus on making knowledge explicit and storing it for future use.

Possible ways to overcome these obstacles will be discussed in the next chapter when we look at a specific – and common – tool used to
facilitate learning and knowledge sharing by Southern peace NGOs, namely networks. In that chapter these obstacles, as well as other factors discussed in this study that influence the learning of SNGOs, will be translated into factors that influence the success of networking.

5.7 Concluding remarks

This chapter set out to analyse what the knowledge and learning processes of local peace NGOs look like, what their strengths and weaknesses are and what difficulties and gaps exist in their learning practice. Here I will briefly sum up the findings for each element of this question, before moving on to discuss some implications and remaining questions.

Local peacebuilders would like to gain external knowledge but stress the importance of learning in interaction and combining external knowledge with their own, indigenous knowledge. In order to better do so, peacebuilders would like to obtain more time and skills to do research and to reflect upon their practice. In this way they would generate knowledge that might be usefully combined with external concepts and methodologies. Interactive learning involving people from North and South entails translation processes that help bridge cultures and knowledge systems. It requires an open mind and a willingness to question one’s assumptions and even world views: the characteristics of ‘third-order learning’. However, chapter four has shown that inequalities among the participants in such processes may limit the extent of openness and retrospection on all sides.

In analysing the learning processes of the organisation, the following characteristics emerged. Learning seems to be mostly tactical or first-order: how can we better do what we do? Second- or third-order learning – are we doing the right thing? Are we basing our work on the right ideas and assumptions? – is less done. The staff of local peace NGOs tend to have activist learning styles. They learn from experience and from interaction with others in the field. Workshops and training courses are also found useful, although knowledge gained there needs to be adapted to the circumstances in which people work. Reading to gain knowledge is not a common activity and formal education is hardly seen as a source of relevant knowledge at all. In contrast, exchange with others within and outside the organisation is an important activity. Outside their organisation, staff members of Southern peace NGOs engage in exchanges with the following categories of people and organisations.
Interactions with other local NGOs take place regularly, despite obstacles that limit this (see below).

Exchange with international organisations and local and national governments is undertaken particularly by stronger SNGOs. These interactions take the form of lobby, sharing information in policy forums, advice and training.

Exchange with local communities and the beneficiaries of programmes is deemed an important source of knowledge for SNGOs. Such sharing takes place during the implementation of programmes. In addition, peace organisations undertake specific capacity building activities that attempt to build on local knowledge. However, learning from local communities takes time for immersion into their reality and building trust. Given the project-oriented funding regime, this time is often not available.

Exchange with Southern knowledge institutions hardly takes place, despite the potential this could have for both sides: for knowledge institutions, more interaction with practitioners could help make their research more relevant and practically grounded. For NGOs, knowledge institutions could help meet their need for increased research into the context and modalities of their work. Knowledge institutions could function as ‘scaffolds’ and facilitate deeper levels of reflection and learning. For both, such cooperation could contribute to building a stronger Southern knowledge base and lead to a more prominent Southern, and practitioner, role in global discourse and theory development about peacebuilding.

Research is done by SNGOs themselves, but not very much or structurally. Many organisations would like to be able to do more research to find out about the needs and knowledge of local communities and peacebuilding methodologies, both external and local. In addition, research would help document lessons from people’s own work and facilitate reflection. All this could help Southern peace practitioners to have a stronger position in exchanges with Northern partners and play a larger role in global peacebuilding debates and theory development.

What are the strengths and weaknesses (or gaps) in the knowledge and learning of Southern peace NGOs? As mentioned, interaction with knowledge institutions is a weakness or gap, as is research and documentation. In addition, there is not much learning from monitoring and evaluation. To a large extent this is due to M&E procedures being
embedded in funding regimes that emphasise accountability and results, and limit learning. Strengths include learning by doing – although it is difficult to prove concretely that this has occurred - and the frequent interaction of SNGOs with other SNGOs and beneficiaries. Particularly striking is the prominent place among learning strategies of interactions among SNGOs, often in networks, in order to exchange knowledge and learn jointly. Such inter-SNGO-exchange is clearly a strong point of the peace NGOs visited. This is despite the existence of obstacles to knowledge exchange.

What exactly are the obstacles to learning and exchange by Southern peace NGOs? In addition to the structural issues described in the previous chapter, more specific issues include a lack of time and funds, low capacity and skills to do research and document, the contested nature of much knowledge in conflict areas (and elsewhere), competition and low trust among peacebuilding actors, power and inequality, practical obstacles posed by the social and political situation, cultural differences, and the fact that knowledge changes over time.

Now let us compare these findings to those by Hailey and James (2002: 402-404), who studied successful Indian NGOs and their knowledge strategies. In the introduction to this chapter, where this study was cited, the following learning activities of these Indian NGOs were mentioned.

- The NGOs held regular meetings, retreats, workshops, and seminars. This also goes for the peace NGOs examined in this study.
- One organisation even “moves staff around in the organisation or assigns them to new projects as part of its strategy to encourage cross-functional learning. It transfers staff from research posts to field positions and from specialist to management positions in an attempt to disseminate and institutionalise learning.” This I have not encountered in the organisations visited; however, some do organise exchanges among rather than inside NGOs.
- Other knowledge-related activities of these organisations included sponsoring relevant and applied research and publishing research findings. As mentioned, the NGOs studied are not able to do this as much as they would like.
- The NGOs had “sophisticated internal management information and monitoring systems”, but “[t]he extent to which donor-led evaluation processes contributed to learning was mixed, with the incentive to cover up mistakes in order to maintain funding undermining the learning process.” This is consistent with the
picture emerging from my interviews with local peace NGO staff.

Although in theory the cycle of planning, monitoring, evaluation and renewed planning presents a good opportunity for supporting organisational learning processes in NGOs, for many Southern peace NGOs M&E procedures do not play a major role in learning. One reason for this is the tension between learning and accountability. In addition, many NGOs contend that existing, predominantly quantitative, procedures do not match the realities of peacebuilding practice. However, more specific procedures for peacebuilding are being developed to overcome the limits of only quantitative information in reflecting peacebuilding practice.

The participatory elaboration of evaluation tools and criteria of success, involving all stakeholders in a programme – donor, SNGO, beneficiaries – would help making M&E more relevant to practice and more useful for learning. This requires similar relational characteristics between Northern and Southern actors as were described in sections 3.6 and 4.7 on capacity building. Thus, we come back to the importance of a learning attitude by donors and reciprocal, trust-based partnerships between NNGOs and SNGOs as prerequisites for learning on the part of Southern peace organisations and for joint, North-South, third-order learning.