The owl and the dove: knowledge strategies to improve the peacebuilding practice of local non-governmental organisations
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Chapter 8. Action learning for peace

Applied Conflict Transformation Studies

The Applied Conflict Transformation Studies (ACTS) programme is another initiative set up by an NNGO together with partners in various conflict regions. Like GPPAC, it has characteristics of a network but it aims more explicitly, and exclusively, at supporting learning processes of local peacebuilders. An interesting facet of the programme is that it does so by involving local knowledge institutions, something which I found to be rare in the countries visited. The case study of ACTS sheds light on all questions posed in this Part Three, giving an example of an initiative to improve the learning processes of local peace NGOs that aims to function as a ‘scaffold’ to make ‘third-order’ learning possible, that is supported by a Northern actor, that involves knowledge institutions and that brings actors from different parts of the world together in a network. The international Master programme for peace practitioners aims not only at facilitating the learning of peacebuilders but also at increasing their role in knowledge generation and international debates. The aims this initiative therefore resonate with many of the needs identified in this study. For that reason, it is worth taking a closer look at the way it is functioning to see if it is indeed an approach worth developing in other places.

I have been able to gather information about ACTS through my own involvement in the development of the programme, first as a resource person contributing to the development of the curriculum, and later as a consultant whose task it has been to

- be part of, and facilitate, a process of learning and reflection by those involved in the ACTS programme on M&E and the impact of ACTS as a whole;
- draw together the experiences with M&E practice in ACTS and overall practice in implementing the course; and
- draw together the outcomes of M&E in the regions in order to give a first idea about the impact of the whole ACTS mechanism as a vehicle for change.

I am therefore not a neutral observer but have been, more and less closely in different periods, involved in the programme. I have tried to be conscious of the possible bias that this may bring and will reflect on it at the end of the chapter. The positive side of my involvement in ACTS has been that it has allowed me to attend various meetings, have access to internal documents, and talk to most of the main stakeholders. More specifically, this chapter is based on
In this chapter, I will first look at the background, aims and development of ACTS in section 8.1. Next, in 8.2, I will take a closer look at the way in which the programme tries to support the learning of peace practitioners, namely through the use of action research. 8.3 addresses the organisation of the programme, focusing on cooperation between NNGOs, SNGOs and academia in making it possible. 8.4 looks more closely at the way the learning of peacebuilders is supported as the course is taught in Cambodia and Serbia. Does it indeed function as a learning ‘scaffold’? The section deals with the expectations, opinions, capacities and development of the participants; cultural issues; the academic aspects of the course; and the way its content is developing as the programme progresses. 8.5 takes a look at the documentation and dissemination of research outcomes that are needed to start building a local peacebuilding knowledge base in the regions where the programme takes place and to start contributing to global discussions and theory development. Finally, 8.6 addresses learning and M&E by ACTS itself.

8.1 Background, aims and development of ACTS

8.1.1 Background and aims

Responding to Conflict (RTC) is a UK-based NGO working on conflict transformation. It was founded by Quakers in 1991. A major field of activity of the organisation has been the provision of training courses to peacebuilders from around the world. In Birmingham, various courses are offered, ranging from short, several week-long courses to the three-
month Working with Conflict course. Over the years a specific curriculum has developed. The courses are based on participatory, experiential learning that builds on the experiences and knowledge of the participants. In addition to its UK-based programmes, RTC has supported partners in various conflict-affected regions of the world to develop training programmes there. Its partners include the Coalition for Peace in Africa (COPA), which has its headquarters in Nairobi, the Nansen Dialogue Network in the Balkans, and the Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT) in Cambodia. Often, partnerships began when someone working for these organisations participated in the Working with Conflict course.

During a sabbatical in 2002, Simon Fisher, the director of RTC, spoke with various peacebuilding practitioners in East Africa who had participated in RTC’s Working with Conflict course. These people voiced the need for more and extended training of the same kind, preferably linked to a postgraduate degree programme. They emphasised that an academic degree was an important prerequisite for getting ahead in many countries. For that reason, many of the former course participants had gone on to Bradford University in the UK or the Eastern Mennonite University in the US to do a Master course. These courses had been valuable to them – but, they said, not to the communities they left behind. It had been difficult to abandon their work and their families. The need therefore was for a Master programme in the conflict regions themselves, based on the practice-oriented teaching principles of RTC courses. As a result, the Applied Conflict Transformation Studies (ACTS) programme began to develop.

ACTS is a Master programme for peacebuilding practitioners that is offered in parts of the world that are affected by conflict. It was initiated by RTC but developed together with a consortium of partners – ACT Cambodia, the Nansen network in the Balkans, and COPA in East Africa. In addition, universities were asked to come on board in order to make it a truly academic programme – something RTC and its partners had never done before. ACTS tries to combine academic principles and requirements with practice-based learning. It is based on the principles of action research (AR), which are elaborated in the next section. The idea is that by carrying out research in their own work environments, and comparing their findings with existing thinking in the field of peacebuilding, the participants will not only become more effective in their work but will also contribute to global theory development from a Southern, practitioner perspective. In this way the programme aims to shift the centre of gravity of the peacebuilding field from the ivory towers of universities toward the field, and from the North to the South.
More specifically, the aims of the programme are to:

- provide accessible, affordable, relevant, high quality postgraduate education in the field of conflict transformation;
- create better peace practice through more analytical, reflective, reflexive, critical and adaptive practitioners;
- generate theory from practice and linking practice to theory in order to increase the contribution of practitioners to the global body of theory on conflict transformation and influence policymakers;
- support and promote sustained multi-level and multi-sectoral work for peace and justice within regional areas through improved skills and practice of individual practitioners, and thereby contribute to peace in communities. (ACTS 2007)

In 2005, the first Master course began in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, with participants from all over Asia. Soon after, a second programme began in Novi Sad, Serbia, for participants from different parts of the Balkans. In 2006, both Centres started a second course, while the first was still ongoing. This time, the Centre in Serbia also recruited participants from the Middle East. The set-up of the programme allows students from various countries to attend without abandoning their work and families: as the course is based on research in people’s own practice, much of the work is done at home. Over the course of two years, the participants come together in the ACTS Centre six times to attend a ten-day seminar. During these seminars, theory is introduced and AR findings are exchanged and discussed.

The ACTS Asia Centre based in Phnom Penh is run by a consortium of three partners: the local NGO ACT, which coordinates the programme, Pannasatra University of Cambodia, and RTC. ACTS Balkans and Middle East is organised jointly by the Nansen network, Novi Sad University, and RTC. In the coming years, ACTS is also hoping to start programmes for East Africa, in cooperation with COPA, and Western Europe, with a Centre in the UK.

As mentioned, two ACTS courses are currently running in Asia and the Balkans/Middle East. At the time of writing, the first cohorts are nearing their completion. This means that the programme is at a relatively early stage to discuss outcomes and impact. Nonetheless, some interesting lessons can already be learned at this point.

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8.1.2 Development and implementation of the course

The curriculum of ACTS consists of six modules, taught in six regional seminars over the course of two years. The first four modules contain theory on various aspects of conflict and peacebuilding, while the fifth and sixth module are left open to provide room for discussion on the action research (AR) of the participants. ‘Core papers’ have been developed for each of the first four modules. They depict the main theories and discussions with regard to a particular topic, including references pointing the participant to additional literature. The core papers were written by people with both academic credentials and practical experience, and revised during a curriculum development workshop in Kampala in the fall of 2004, at which all of the NGO partners (but not the universities) were present, and which I also attended. The content of the first four modules, and their corresponding core papers, is outlined below. In addition to these four, a fifth core paper is used throughout the course: the one on AR as a methodology.

- **Module One** is entitled *Theories of conflict: Its causes and dynamics, and implications for addressing it*. It addresses theories about conflict and violence, and ways of analysing and classifying them. In addition, it deals with various schools of thinking about causes of conflict – psychological, social, political and economic.

- **Module Two** is called *Conflict, power and change: Engaging with actors, systems, structure and policies*. Its core paper discusses ideas and theories regarding social change, the constraints and opportunities posed by power and structures, and ways in which various actors can relate to each other to bring about change. In the terminology of Part Two, it deals with ways in which the *agency* of actors can affect the *structure* created by systems and power differences.

- **Module Three** is named *Designing and facilitating conflict transformation processes* and maps a wide array of ways in which peacebuilding processes can be shaped, discussing various methods, designs and approaches. The core paper addresses the peacebuilding activities of CSOs as well as official actors, and includes discussion on mediation, peace negotiation, and postconflict strategies for sustainable peace.

- **Module Four** focuses on the latter challenge and is called *Building sustainable peace*. It deals mainly with the concept of postconflict reconstruction, looking at various socio-economic and political aspects that come to the fore after violence has
ended and the task at hand is to build and shape political, economic and juridical systems that can sustain peace.\textsuperscript{345}

For modules Five and Six no core papers were designed. These modules were envisioned as follows.

- Module Five was left open in order to make space for a discussion on the AR of the participants, to look at preliminary thesis drafts, exchange findings and experiences, reflect on AR as a methodology and prepare for the finalisation of the theses. It was also thought that this module could be used to discuss any content that the participants felt needed attention but that had not yet been addressed in the previous modules. This could include more region-specific issues.

- Module Six was planned to be a larger conference at which the participants would present their findings. The conferences are to invite various stakeholders from the region – including the organisations of the participants, possibly some of the beneficiaries of these organisations, other peace NGOs, and academics – as well as some people from the other regions in order to facilitate exchange, solidarity and the building of a global ACTS network. The conference of Module Six is seen to be an important element in the strategy to disseminate the results of AR done in the framework of ACTS. In addition, an ACTS Journal is being set up in which the findings of the participants will be published. Section 8.6.2 discusses these dissemination strategies in some more detail.

As the first courses progressed and Module Five came nearer, there was some uncertainty about how to fill it in. However, the regional Centres took the lead to design the fifth seminar for their region. In Asia, where the first Module Five was taught in March 2007, it focused entirely on the AR findings of the participants and their presentation. Significant attention was devoted to preparing the participants for the regional conference of Module Six. Thus, the fifth seminar included feedback on and adjustment of the draft Master theses and certificate papers of the participant as well as sessions on how to present one’s findings to a broader audience.

The modules are facilitated by a team of three tutors. Two tutors are from the region and the third is ‘international’ – often a staff member of RTC, one of the people who took the lead in developing the readers, or a

\textsuperscript{345} The core papers can be found in the literature list as ACTS 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, and 2005e.
staff member of one of the ACTS coordinating NGOs in the other regions. The tutors tend to be experienced peacebuilding trainers with an NGO background. Staff of the participating universities take part in some, but not all of the sessions.

The ACTS programme aims to attract participants from among peace practitioners – people working for local and international CSOs in various countries in the region. In the first edition of ACTS Asia, sixteen participants from six countries\textsuperscript{346} participate. The second group consists of fourteen participants, again from six different countries\textsuperscript{347}. The Serbia-based course attracted seventeen participants from various parts of the Balkans for its first edition. The second group, consisting of fifteen students, also includes people from Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Applicants are selected based on their experience, current involvement in peacebuilding, and motivation to take part in the course. Given the aims of ACTS – to help practitioners become more effective in their work and to increase the voice of practitioners in global theory-formation – academic qualifications are not considered particularly important, at least not by the RTC and its partner NGOs in the regions. However, given that it is an academic Master course, the participating universities have added an additional entry requirement: a Bachelor’s degree. When it turned out that there were many applicants who did not have a degree but who did seem otherwise very fitting candidates for the course, it was decided after some discussion to allow such people to participate. This group will not obtain a Master’s degree but will receive a certificate instead. At the end of the course they produce a final paper instead of a full-fledged Master’s thesis.

In addition to the two current Centres in Asia and the Balkans-Middle East, new Centres may be created in the coming years in Africa, the Americas, and Western Europe. Although RTC’s partner in East Africa, COPA, has been involved in the development of ACTS from the start, the start-up of an ACTS Centre there has been delayed. The main problem has been to find a suitable university partner in the region\textsuperscript{348}. In 2006, talks began with the organisation Centro para la Paz in Guatemala to begin a centre for the Americas. This organisation is already linked to RTC as part of the ACTION network that RTC established in 1999. Since February it has been discussing the programme with a number of

\textsuperscript{346} Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, India, Nepal and New Zealand.

\textsuperscript{347} Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, Nepal, the Philippines and Sri Lanka.

\textsuperscript{348} Other issues affecting the programme in Africa are discussed in 8.3.2
universities in the region. In the UK, talks are underway with Huron University about the establishment of an ACTS Centre for peace practitioners who are based in the Western Europe.

In addition to all this, ACTS has talked to various universities in Europe, the US and Australia about gaining global accreditation by a Northern university for the programme in all ACTS regions. The reason for that is that in most of the countries in which the participants live and work, a Master’s degree from a European or American institution is regarded more highly than one from a local university. Thus, ‘Northern’ accreditation of their degree, in addition to the accreditation provided by Novi Sad University or Pannasastra University, would be considered a benefit. Such accreditation could also help in the acceptance of ACTS research findings and their publication by recognised academic journals. However, universities are reluctant to accredit a practitioner-oriented programme that is taught abroad and that has already been developed before they came on board. A problem arises with regard to quality control, as accreditation visitation committees usually do not have the resources to travel around the world in order to assess the quality of the teaching and research taking place. As a result, the efforts to gain global accreditation have not yet yielded any results.

8.2 Improving the learning of local peace NGOs through action research

In chapter three of this study I discussed various ways, or levels, of learning. The most profound type of learning, according to the literature, was third-order or double-loop learning. To recapitulate what I wrote in section 3.1.2: where first-order learning uses a pre-given set of knowledge, second-order learning is the creation of new knowledge by learning in action. It is a cyclical trial-and-error process of action and adaptation and involves asking questions, reflecting, and adjusting while acting. Third-order learning, it was added, goes a step further in that it also includes questioning the validity of the tasks and problems posed. It does not take the structural framework in which the action takes place for granted but questions the ultimate aims and principles that underlie the action. Where second-order learning leads to adjustment at the tactical level in order to meet one’s aims more effectively, third-order learning may lead to strategic changes, such as an adjustment of the aims themselves.

Third-order learning adds another cycle to the learning cycle of action, reflection, adjustment, and renewed action; namely the cycle of self-
reflection that involves the questioning of underlying values. In the terminology of ACTS this is the ‘reflexive’ cycle. It entails asking difficult questions about my own role in the activity in which I am engaged. What implicit theories, assumptions and experiences do I bring to this action, and do they lead to any distortions? Should my assumptions be modified? Because third-order learning adds another cycle, it is often referred to as ‘double-loop learning’. In double-loop learning, the values and assumptions underlying my actions are reflected upon and tested simultaneously with the reflection and testing of the actions themselves.

The concept of action learning or action research (AR) builds on this idea of third-order learning. Here, too, learning takes place by doing, reflection, and experimentation – while at the same time there is a reflection on the underlying implicit theories and values of the learner. The action learning cycle is depicted in the following figure, which clearly shows the double loop.

Figure 8.1: Action learning

The outer circle represents the action cycle, in which an activity is carried out. This starts from an analysis of the situation, followed by the

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349 ACTS 2005a: 11
An important difference between AR and ‘traditional’ research is that while “traditional academic research denies the relationships between the investigator and the empirical object”, AR recognises that the presence and actions of a researcher have an impact on the reality he studies, and vice versa. According to AR, “the ambiguous, dynamic and changing world cannot be understood from the detached position of the pure observer”. (Boonstra 2004: 17) Thus, action researchers do not strive to be objective observers who are separate from what is being observed. On the contrary, they study a reality of which they are part and explicitly take into account their own role in shaping this reality. In response to their growing understanding of what they are studying through AR, they may introduce changes to this reality in order to examine the results to which those may lead.

ACTS aims to use AR as a way to help peace practitioners to begin looking at their own work in a more systematic manner, to relate their activities more explicitly to their aims and values, to analyse the effectiveness of their work and ask how it could be improved. In other words, ACTS hopes to create learning practitioners – and through them, perhaps, learning organisations as well. In addition, as mentioned, it is hoped that the outcomes of the AR of ACTS participants lead to the generation of new theories or the adjustment of existing ones in the peacebuilding field. AR is applied in ACTS in the following way. After the principles of the approach are introduced, making use of an especially developed reader, the participants first carry out small AR projects in order to experiment with the method. Next, they decide on a larger project – for example, to study a project they are involved in and find out how it may be improved. This project becomes the ‘red line’
running throughout the two-year Master programme. The participants are expected to relate the theories that are introduced during the seminars to their projects of study and look for additional sources that may shed light on their research questions. They are asked to record their reflections and findings in both learning loops – so both with regard to the project of study and their own role and theories – in a journal. Aided by the journals, they discuss their reflections and progress during the seminars. At the end of the course, the AR projects lead to Master theses, which the students need to obtain their degree and which, it is hoped, may contain new or adjusted theories that can be disseminated and discussed in the wider peacebuilding field.

8.3 North-South and academic-practitioner cooperation to implement the programme

ACTS is implemented by a consortium of organisations, including an NNGO, a number of SNGOs, and academic institutions. As elsewhere in this study cooperation among these groups has been identified as a difficult issue, this section takes a closer look at how this works in the case of ACTS. Is its NNGO-SNGO cooperation shaped by the aid chain model, or have equal partnerships been achieved? And given that so little cooperation takes place between Southern peace NGOs and Southern academia in general, how is this cooperation going inside ACTS?

8.3.1 Global standards and regional variation

At present the ACTS structure looks as follows.

- There is a ‘governance group’ at the top of the decision-making structure which consists of the peace organisation partners: ACT, COPA, Nansen, and RTC. Recently, the participating universities have also been invited to nominate a representative to become part of this group. Its role is to act as the guardian of the vision, engage in risk management, keep an eye on resourcing, and set reporting requirements.
- Accountable to this group is the ‘leadership and management group’ which focuses mainly on the course itself – more specifically content, delivery, quality and standards, and philosophy. It consists of the ACTS coordinators in the regions (employees of the local partner NGOs) and RTC.
A third group that is in turn accountable to the management group is responsible for ‘on site implementation within agreed parameters’. Until recently the universities were represented only at this level. (ACTS 2006)

The division of labour between RTC and its partners in the regions appears to be relatively clear to most involved and to be working quite well. The roles and responsibilities of RTC include investigating possibilities for global accreditation, providing international tutors, organising tutor training, and continuing to develop the core curriculum. In addition RTC is responsible for the development of new ACTS centres, the provision of ongoing support and advice to the regional centres, and the facilitation of exchange and joint learning between the centres. The latter includes organising regular meetings as well as developing and implementing a system for monitoring and evaluation. It is also a role of RTC to work on the dissemination of research outcomes to a broader audience. Finally, RTC plays a major role in fundraising for the programme. (ACTS 2007b)

The NGOs in the regions are responsible for the actual implementation of the course in their regions. This includes interacting with the local academic partner, coordinating the organisation of the programme, and recruiting participants and regional teaching teams. The NGOs may also develop regional course materials to complement the core curriculum as required. Financially, the regional NGOs are responsible for the allocation of scholarships and for regional fundraising to cover local costs and scholarships. (ACTS 2007b)

A question has arisen within ACTS about the global versus the regional characteristics of the programme: what aspects make up the core of ACTS and should be the same for all regions, and what elements may vary according to local conditions and preferences? In ACTS Asia, for example, there has been some discussion about whether the participatory teaching methods of RTC were appropriate in a region where people are much more used to more traditional lecturing. It was not suggested to abandon participant-led methods, but some felt these should be complemented by more lecturing sessions. A recent internal review of the way AR has so far been implemented in the programme, carried out by AR expert Diana Francis who also wrote the methodology reader for ACTS, states that one of the regional coordinators was “concerned about the relationship between the courses being run by ACTS Balkans [and Middle East] and ACTS Asia and felt that it was important to review commonalities and differences and what degrees and areas of difference
were acceptable or desirable.” The coordinator felt that more clarity was required about the extent or “regional autonomy” of the Centres in determining the content and organisation of the course, although she emphasised that such autonomy should not alter the “context of connectedness and a common frame”. (Francis 2007: 16)

This implies a deeper question, phrased as follows in Francis’s AR Review: “[a]re we looking for a family of independent and different institutions and practices or for some greater degree of structural relatedness, common standards and systems, etc?” (Francis 2007: 23)

All involved agree that some measure of regional variation is desirable, and that more regional content – like literature written by people from the region – would make the programmes more relevant to their context. After all, not only culture, but also the nature of conflict and peace differs between the regions. Thinking and discussions on this issue within ACTS do not question this, but centre on the issue of finding the right balance between regional variation and adhesion to the main principles of the course. In addition there is the issue of quality control. As I will discuss in the next section, ACTS hopes to acquire accreditation by a Northern academic institution for the whole, global programme. To make this possible, some common standards and content will probably be required.

8.3.2 North-South NGO partnerships in ACTS

In chapter four I discussed North-South partnerships between NGOs in peacebuilding. Despite good intentions, equal partnerships involving two-way exchanges of knowledge and policy ideas are often difficult to achieve due to the inherent inequalities of the funding chain and the weaker knowledge base of Southern actors that results from a lack of recognition of indigenous knowledge and a lack of Southern capacity for reflection, research and documentation. The chapter showed that where more equal partnerships have been achieved this is often due to trust standing relations that have developed over a longer period and that are made possible by long-term core funding rather than short term project funding. Such partnerships are based on the strength and contributions of both sides, each of which brings added value to the relationship. This means that they are possible mainly with stronger Southern organisations.

The NGO partnerships in ACTS tend to reflect this second model of longer-term, equal partnership. Relations were not started as part of the implementation of ACTS, but preceded the programme. Personal
contact and trust had already been established and the partners had worked together in the past. Although the initial idea for ACTS came from RTC, it was based on consultations with partners and together with them it was further developed. RTC emphasises that it wants to avoid being a ‘money depot’ for the regions but strives for equal relationships in which each partner provides added value.

There is, however, one partnership in which the issues discussed in chapter four do play at least some role. In Africa North-South issues seem to affect the relationship more than in other regions. Between RTC and COPA there have been some difficulties around the question how much freedom of operation each partner has in developing the programme in Africa. After negotiations with several universities in the region faltered, COPA decided to go ahead and start the programme while the search for a university partner continued. RTC disagreed with this course of action, which as it turned out was also not possible due to the terms of a major donor. However, by the time this all became clear (and RTC essentially pulled the plug), the organisation of the course was already quite far progressed and this led to some resentment on the part of COPA. Still, the organisation decided to go ahead with the development of an ACTS Centre and began talking to new potential university partners. However, where in the earlier stage COPA had accused RTC of acting too much on its own, now, the tables turned and RTC feels uncomfortable with the lack of consultation of COPA with RTC as it negotiates with universities. Although RTC does not want to impose anything, it does want to be involved in order to ensure that the vision and reputation of both ACTS and RTC are safeguarded. RTC staff speculate that the colonial history may have something to do with the fact that equal, trust-based partnerships prove more difficult to develop in East Africa than elsewhere.

Another interesting episode in the context of partnership and peacebuilding was the interaction between RTC and COPA on the one hand, and a university in Uganda on the other. In 2004 the parties came quite close to agreeing on the terms of the joint creation of an ACTS Centre with this university. However, it then became apparent that the university only wanted RTC to help them set up the programme, after which it expected the NNGO to leave the programme for implementation by local groups. This showed that there were different visions of partnership. In the university’s view, development is about building capacity and then pulling out whereas in RTC’s view, all bring something different to the partnership.
In other regions, views of partnership correspond better with one another. Still, thinking takes place about the best partnership model for ACTS in the longer term, once the regional centres become independent financially. RTC speculates that at one extreme, one could conceive the regions becoming independent and RTC pulling out. This does not correspond with the type of partnership most people involved have in mind. At the other extreme, all three partners (RTC, local university, and local coordinating NGO) will continue to play equally strong roles in keeping ACTS running. In between, one could imagine RTC playing a purely coordinating role, or a role that differs depending on the phase and needs of the region.

8.3.2 Cooperation between academia and NGOs

As interactions between NGOs and knowledge institutions hardly take place in the countries analysed, the ACTS model of cooperation between the coordinating NGOs and the universities in the regional Centres provides an interesting exception. In the ACTS model of cooperation, the responsibilities of the local universities include providing advice and support to local NGO partner to ensure that ACTS meets relevant accreditation guidelines, providing a university course administrator, supporting the teaching and provide staff as and when required, and working with the local NGO partner on areas such as marketing, recruitment, assessment, teaching and learning resources (such as rooms and libraries). (ACTS 2007b)

In both regions, cooperation among the partners has made possible the accreditation of the Master’s degree by the local universities. It took some puzzling to fit the pre-developed programme into the requirements the universities posed to a Master’s programme. At Novi Sad University these requirements include that a programme should consist of fifteen courses and a thesis. The ACTS programme with its six modules was not altered but for the purposes of the application for accreditation, various elements of it, such as assignments, were labelled individual courses. Accreditation in Novi Sad also required that three ACTS tutors officially became visiting faculty of the university, something that was also arranged. 350

In Cambodia, as the following citation from the AR Review illustrates, Pannasastra University worked cooperatively with the ACTS tutors to

350 Interview with staff of ACTS Balkans / Middle East. Belgrade, Serbia, 3 November 2006.
ensure that the theses produced by the ACTS participants were in line with what the university expected of a Master thesis.

“At the meeting we held with them, [the dean] outlined what they looked for in MA theses and I told him the structure and elements we were helping the students to plan. He agreed with me that there was a perfect match and assured us all that there should be no problem – if the students could fulfil these requirements. He most generously offered to look at the theses informally as they came in, giving feedback where necessary on what would need to be changed before they were officially handed in for marking, if they were to make the grade.” (Francis 2007: 17)

However, there have also been difficulties in the cooperation between the NGOs and universities. In large part, these difficulties have revolved around AR as a methodology. It clashed to some extent with the more traditional research methods of university staff, who had trouble seeing AR as valid. In at least one of the courses, this led to frustration among the students who received conflicting feedback and advice from the ACTS tutors and the university. (Francis 2007) The differences concerning methodology do not yet seem to have been resolved entirely, or at least not in both Centres. Suggestions are made for ways in which ACTS can raise the awareness of university staff of the use of the methodology, for example by organising a conference on AR with international academics.

There are several deeper issues underlying this discussion. First of all, there is the question of whether to consider the capacity building of the universities – at least with regard to AR – as a positive side effect, or even an aim, of the programme. As the AR Review puts it, “[w]hile we want to ensure high standards and academic recognition for our students, we presumably would also want to honour and strengthen local academic capacities, rather than undermine them, and explore with them the relationship between culture and academic approach.” (Francis 2007: 23) However, as is already implied by this citation, such capacity building requires openness to the ideas and perspectives of the institution whose capacity is being built. This leads us to the second issue: that of partnership and ownership. It is difficult for the universities to be true partners which ‘co-own’ the ACTS programme, because they have not been part of developing it.

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351 Not all universities necessarily prefer ‘traditional’ research methods over AR. Many European universities in fact use AR. In the US it is less accepted. It may be that the universities in ACTS are modelled after the US system more than the European one. For Pannasastra this is certainly the case.
352 See 4.7
353 Also discussed in 4.7
One way to begin to build such ownership would be to include them in decision-making about the programme as much as possible. Up until recently the universities did not have a central position in the governance of the programme. This has now changed, and it remains to be seen what effect that will have. An RTC staff member remarked that although the inclusion of the universities in the decision making structure was necessary, it is also risky. It is hoped that university representatives may not push too strongly for traditional research and thereby jeopardise the basic philosophy of ACTS, of which AR is a central part. It is understandable that ACTS staff hesitate to make concessions on the approach that has been so carefully developed and in which they believe so strongly. Still, finding ways to develop a true partnership dialogue over content with the universities seem to be priorities as the programme moves forward. This could also help the Centres to find more regional content, achieve more academic input into tutor teams and the course in general, and become more familiar with the way Master courses are generally taught – all necessary steps identified by the AR Review (Francis 2007).

8.4 Education as a scaffold: teaching the course

In this section I turn to the course itself, asking whether, based on the limited information available at this early stage of the programme, the ACTS course has indeed functioned as a scaffold supporting the knowledge and learning strategies of local peace NGOs.

8.4.1 Expectations and opinions of students

In May 2006 I had conversations in Phnom Penh with three Cambodian participants in ACTS Asia. Among other things, we discussed their expectations of the course and the extent to which these had been met so far. Through ACTS, the participants expected to be able to

- share experiences with participants from other regions
- reflect on their work
- learn new insights from the course
- develop and improve their work further, and find good mechanisms to work towards goals
- test their knowledge and whether they “are doing things right”
• obtain a Master’s degree, which means that they have something to show for their knowledge and are taken more seriously.\textsuperscript{354}

At the time of the conversations, when the programme had been running for about six months, the participants made clear that so far their expectations were largely being met. They had already learned a lot from the course. To the extent that they were not getting out of ACTS what they had expected, they felt this was due mostly to their own lack of time to spend on it. The participants were generally positive about the content, method, and tutors of the course. In addition, some specific benefits were mentioned.

• The most successful aspect of ACTS was considered to be the knowledge sharing with tutors and participants. The peacebuilding knowledge and AR skills were deemed very useful. Participants also mentioned that ACTS was helping them to document their experiences and reflect and learn.

• The AR element was considered very useful because it was not detached from the work of the participants. One participant was initially confused about AR but said she had now understood that she was supposed to write about her own work, thereby improving the work itself. All three participants planned to use their AR project to improve the way of working of their organisation.

• The course was considered time-intensive but this was also seen as normal for a degree programme and was to be expected. It was generally manageable for the participants. However, the input asked from them was the maximum they were able to give; their organisations would not allow them to do any more. Some participants received time off from their organisation to work on the reading and research; others did so in their free time.

• The atmosphere among the group was considered very good and open. There was high trust and much sharing. People also felt free to challenge each other constructively. One of the international tutors confirmed that the issue of rivalry, which often limits openness in interactions among NGOs (see 5.4.4), plays less of a role within the ACTS courses. The sense of group identity during seminars appears to be stronger than competition. The fact that the participants are recruited from the wider region plays a role in this; there is less direct competition

\textsuperscript{354} Interviews with ACTS Asia participants. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 22, 23 and 26 May 2006.
over funding than between people working in the same country.  
- Through ACTS the participants felt part of a regional network. Information was shared by e-mail about what was going on in the various countries and useful documents were exchanged. The participants really felt connected to each other and “shared their fears and joy”. Regional solidarity was fostered, for example when a Nepal solidarity event was organised in Phnom Penh. Participants also directly learned from each other. For example, an interfaith peacebuilding initiative, modelled after the one ACT is running in Cambodia, was being started in Burma. There was not yet a similar sense of being part of a global ACTS network, however.  

8.4.2 Capacities of the students

In one region in particular, the academic writing abilities of the participants are not as good as expected. In response, a training course in academic writing is being organised by the university. A more general issue, however, relates to the basic abilities of the students to digest texts and understand abstractions. There is no significant difference in this regard between people who are eligible for a Master’s degree and those who are not. Since the participants are used to practical work, abstract thinking and discussion is difficult for some of them. The AR Review reflects on this:

“[t]he vision of this MA course was to enable people doing important work in practice to translate their practice based knowledge into widely useable insights and theory. An assumption was made, I think, that all practitioners would be able to do this. Now we have to assess whether this is our experience. We are not in the business of encouraging people into fields where they are likely to fail.” (Francis 2007: 18)

An issue closely related to this is the language barrier. Particularly in Asia, it is difficult for some participants to express themselves in English and to fully follow the explanations of the tutors. ACTS is struggling with the question whether there may be a way round this problem. Raising entry requirements for English proficiency may close the programme off to some peacebuilders who could otherwise benefit and contribute greatly. The same dilemma applies to tightening entry requirements more generally in order to deal with the issue of the

355 Interview with ACTS international tutor. Birmingham, UK, 10 April 2006.
academic skills of participants. On the one hand, this seems a necessary step, while on the other, it risks jeopardising the aim of providing opportunities for development and capacity building to motivated peace practitioners.

8.4.3 Learning and development of the students

In ACTS Asia, according to the coordinator, change at the level of the individual participant can be observed in many instances. In one case, two students from the same country but from different religious groups, who at first hardly communicated with each other, became enthusiastic about each other’s work, and even began to cooperate in their work back home. Another example is of a certificate student who never received academic education, but began to read books. In addition this participant actively passes the newly gained knowledge on to colleagues, even organising week-long sessions to report back after each module.357

In the Balkans, the course coordinator also observes changes in the participants. They are starting to ask more in-depth questions, particularly regarding AR. Some participants have learned through ACTS to include their target groups more in their planning process. They are also better involving their colleagues and others in reflection, and they now know which questions to ask for such reflection to be valuable. The ACTS Balkans team has also received feedback from some of the organisations in which participants work, albeit only those organisations that are part of the Nansen network that is a partner in the ACTS course. Nansen management, which regularly visits its offices throughout the region, has observed changes in the staff that participate in ACTS. They are more systematic, plan better, think of things more in advance, connect their work with theories, put programmes in a broader framework, and reflect more.358

These individual changes that the coordinators refer to seem to be closely related to the AR approach and its emphasis on reflection – both on activities and the theories and assumptions the participants bring to them. It seems likely that such reflection will lead to the kind of more systematic thinking and improved planning observed by the Nansen network. Similarly, the AR Review found after talking to students that AR had “become a way of doing things. It had opened the way forward

358 Interview with staff of ACTS Balkans / Middle East. Belgrade, Serbia, 3 November 2006.
Interview with staff member of Nansen network. Belgrade, Serbia, 3 November 2006.
in conflict transformation and had made them more confident in what they were doing.” (Francis 2007)

Despite these positive signs of learning from AR, however, there have also been some problems in the development of the AR skills of participants. The AR Review revealed these issues after attending the presentations given by participants on their research findings and looking at the first thesis drafts. This is a particularly striking finding in view of the enthusiasm with which the participants talk about AR and the fact that in one region, according to the tutors, this approach in fact came more naturally to the students than traditional research did. When in the Asian course, during an introduction of AR, tutors referred to traditional methods for comparison, this caused confusion among some students. AR to them seemed normal enough but what was meant by traditional research methods was not understood. Still, in both regions the understanding and use of AR by some of the participants has remained limited. The AR Review states that “the students had not entirely understood the way the ‘I’ not only could but needed to be present in the research, or that the research should be done mainly in the course of action rather than after it.” In addition, not all students had clearly understood that “it is the work they do – or some episode or aspect of it – that should be the focus of their action research, and that AR is not some kind of ‘external’ evaluation or impact assessment.” (Francis 2007: 5)

It is possible that the universities have played a role in this by causing confusion about the extent to which the method was actually acceptable in a Master programme. According to the AR Review there is some indication that participants initially used the method, but back-tracked when they were writing their Master theses, for which they felt the method was perhaps inadequate. In fact, in one region the non-Master students were found better able to stick to an AR approach as they were not bogged down by what they felt were the requirements of a Master’s degree.

8.4.4 Cultural issues

Reflecting on the difficulties students have with AR, Francis writes that “there is a fundamental issue here about whose model of academic education we are following. Do we see our current ACTS model as unquestionably the one to follow?” She reflects that AR may be based on Western ways of thinking in the sense that “[n]ot only the kind of scrutiny (particularly self-scrutiny) that we are advocating in AR (as our
Asia colleagues have told us), but also the heavy emphasis on analysis that is particular to the RTC family and also to Western academia, are counter-cultural in many places.” (Francis 2007: 11) Although an emphasis on analysis is not specific to action research, it may be true that Western universities place more emphasis on critical thinking than many non-Western ones.

On the other hand, the way the Asian students felt AR came more naturally to them than traditional research suggests that other elements of it may in fact be quite culturally appropriate in that part of the world. For example, the separation between observer and object of study that is central to traditional research is an alien concept to many non-Western cultures (see 2.5), and AR is markedly different in this regard. The applied nature of the programme was also applauded by the participants I talked to in Cambodia.

8.4.5 The meaning of ‘academic’

Although I have not yet been able to confirm this hypothesis, some of the statements I have read and heard during my involvement with ACTS gives me the sense that there is some unease among people involved with the concept of ‘academic’. They are not sure what it entails and whether it may be threatening to their way of teaching. The picture some ACTS staff have of what makes up an academic course may not always be realistic. The AR Review for example suggests that using readers may be too much spoon-feeding or that handouts summarising literature are not fitting to an academic course. From my own experience at the university, readers and handouts can be very helpful in an academic course, as long as they are not presented as ‘the truth’, sources are referred to, the reading of other texts is stimulated and critical reading is taught. The last point, critical reading, may be an issue in ACTS: the AR Review notes that the readers have in some instances been used in a “painting by numbers way”, rather than “being understood in themselves and so being useful in a flexible and responsive process of research-shaping” (Francis 2007: 5).

Another example relates to staff perceptions of what defines academic teaching relations; some feel the relationship between students and teachers is more distant at universities than it is in NGO training workshops. However, this may be more a cultural difference: hierarchical teaching relations are probably more part of the academic cultures of Serbia and Cambodia than they are in Amsterdam or Birmingham. In any case, it is clear that ACTS continues to look for the
best way to give shape to a programme that is academic but at the same time integrates the positive elements from the interactive training experience of RTC and its partners. An interesting conclusion that emerges from this section, and that may help explain the findings in 8.3.3 regarding cooperation with the universities, is that cultural differences may exist not only between parts of the world but also between academic and NGO cultures.

8.4.6 Development of course content

Over the past few years, various thoughts have been raised with regard to the course content and how it may be further developed. Already mentioned was the issue of using more region-specific content in addition to, or perhaps partly in replacement of, the material that is used in all Centres. Related is the search for an optimal balance between setting standards internationally and ensuring regional ownership. Recently this point was raised again as the Centres developed Modules Five and Six, which had been left largely open to fill in as the course progressed. The question was raised to what extent these modules needed to be the same in each region, and whether general guidelines needed to be developed at the global management level. (ACTS 2006)

Another balance that staff members feel needs to be found is between, on the one hand, being rigorous about assessment tasks, and making this clear to the participants from the start, and on the other hand emphasising self-reflection and learning. It is difficult to assess self-reflection and some people felt they were being subjected to psycho-analysis. This relates to the question of how far one may invade into the personal lives of participants as part of the self-reflection necessary for AR. There are cultural differences that play a role here; Asians may be more private about personal issues than people from other regions. Still, there are ways in which self-reflection can be stimulated without prying too deeply, and the tutors now feel they have begun to strike the right balance. (Francis 2007; ACTS 2006)

As might be expected, people start to see gaps in the content offered as the programme progresses, or perhaps more adequately, areas in which further development would be desirable. Different ACTS staff members have different priorities, including disarmament, reconciliation, reconstruction, and the relationship between religion and
peacebuilding.359 In the Balkans there was mention of the need to bring the development dimension in more explicitly and to address the relationship between conflict, peace and development.360 However, in Asia this feeling was not shared.361 This again suggests that it could be good to introduce more variation between the regions as far as content is concerned.

8.5 Strengthening the knowledge base: documentation and dissemination

As we have seen, earlier chapters identified a need to enhance the capacities of peace practitioners to document and disseminate their knowledge so as to increase Southern knowledge bases and achieve more equal North-South and practitioner-academic contributions to global debates. Indeed, as we have also seen, these needs correspond with some of the aims of ACTS. To the extent that any conclusions can be drawn at this early stage of the programme, this section looks at whether and how these aims are being achieved so far.

8.5.1 Research outcomes so far

In Asia, the first Master theses have been produced. The AR Review judges their general quality positively:

“there was some wonderfully cogent and reflective writing in some of the theses, which demonstrated that bright and keen students with sufficient control over their working lives – or at least a match between their research ambitions and work possibilities – had been able to get all they needed from the course and related resources to ‘run with’ action research. I am [...] hopeful [...] that most if not all of the theses will be adequate and that some will be excellent – which for a first round is a very good result. One student’s discussion of AR as an approach […] is so eloquent that I think it would be very useful to future students.” (Francis 2007: 10)

Still, as was already mentioned in 8.4.4, many of the theses reflect little AR, and the same goes for the preliminary findings presented in the Balkans:

“we could catch glimpses of the action, but in many cases that was all we got, and the self was hardly mentioned and difficult to detect.

359 This was discussed during the Business Meeting of the global management group which I attended in February 2007.
360 Interview with staff of ACTS Balkans / Middle East. Belgrade, Serbia, 3 November 2006.
361 Telephone conversation with ACTS Asia coordinator. 8 December 2006.
While in the Balkans plans the ‘own action’ had been largely displaced by interviews and questionnaires, in Asia the space was mostly taken either by context background or by theory, and in some cases the theory was largely undigested and scarcely relevant. [...] Where there was action, there were not often, at this point, clear cycles of research.” (Francis 2007: 8)

8.5.2 Dissemination of outcomes

ACTS aims to generate knowledge through AR by its participants. New theories are to be created based on AR results and patterns emerging – all from the perspective of the practitioner. One of the aims is to shift the centre of gravity of the peacebuilding field from the ivory towers of universities more toward the field. There are various potential audiences that could benefit from the findings. In the following figure, the cylinder in the centre depicts the ACTS program.

![Figure 8.2: Audiences for ACTS findings](image)

Ideally, the AR process itself engages the organisations of participants as well as perhaps the beneficiaries of their programmes and possibly other resource persons, and would naturally spread knowledge through the interactions that take place as part of the research process. At this

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362 Perhaps it should be redesigned as different cylinders or columns which stand for the individual regional Master programmes so that the learning relationships between these programs can also be illustrated.

363 Figure by Gerd Junne
stage it is difficult to say in far this is occurring at present. The ACTS teams in both regions would like more time and money to visit the organisations of the participants in order to make sure they are involved in the research and to build their understanding of the value of the programme. This would help ensure that insights and knowledge gained by participants are applied in their work when the course is finished. In addition, ACTS staff see a need to develop an alumni policy for better follow-up with former participants and a better tracking of the impact of the course.

In addition to knowledge spreading informally through the research process, ACTS aims to actively disseminate its findings in the following ways.

- As we have seen, the sixth module will be a regional conference at which participants present their research results.
- ACTS aims to encourage and facilitate participation by participants in conferences. At the Asian Peacebuilders Conference in October 2006 several ACTS participants participated as keynote speakers.
- It is hoped that the research findings will be fed into the Nansen and ACT networks, and into the Action Asia network in which the coordinator of ACTS Asia is involved.
- Exchanges between ACTS regions are another way to share findings. Some students from Asia are intended to attend the Balkans conference and vice versa. Pictures and poster presentations are already exchanged among the regions. In addition, international tutors coming from the other regions also provide a connection.
- Last but not least, ACTS is in the process of setting up an international ACTS Journal in which the research findings are to be published. A strategy for ensuring that the Journal reaches relevant audiences is being developed.

8.6 Learning by ACTS itself

8.6.1 Learning attitude

A lot of informal reflection and learning takes place by people involved in ACTS with regard to the way the programme is going and how it can be continuously improved. During conversations and meetings people are willing to be self-critical and question the way things are going. Such learning takes place mainly at the tactical level (how can we do
this thing better?) as the following example, from a conversation Diana Francis had with ACTS Asia’s second batch tutors, shows:

“The first thing I was told, with heartfelt emphasis, was how much they had been helped by the experience of the first batch tutors – from their detailed records and reflections, from their conversations, responses and reflections about sessions and their outcomes and responses, and from their materials, activities and insights – even photos.” (Francis 2007: 17)

Such learning takes place at all levels of the programme. In fact, staff involved in ACTS actively try to learn from their practice. During and in between seminars reflection takes place and changes are made according to what has been learned. ACTS discusses learning points during Business Meetings and actively creates opportunities for feedback by relative outsiders – such as myself. Learning at a strategic level (are we doing the right thing?) is understandably more difficult than tactical-level learning, but even there people appear open to discussion and reflection. However, a member of the governance group mentioned that during their meetings there is not so much opportunity for reflection and that this takes place mostly in the management team.

The trouble with all this learning is in systematising and documenting it. This leads us to the place of M&E in the learning processes of ACTS.

8.6.2 M&E in the regions

Monitoring in the regional centres takes place mostly at the level of the individual participants and their learning and development. Other levels of impact – organisation, work, community – are considered more difficult to assess. It is also felt that it may be too early to look at these levels.

In Asia it has been decided to look at impact at four (overlapping) levels. Indicators are being developed (mainly by the regional coordinator) as the programme progresses.

- Short-term / student level: after one or two modules.
  - Indicators:
    - Are students staying in the course?
    - Use of the library
    - Assignments submitted on time
    - Quality of assignments
    - Frequency of e-mail correspondence
    - Keeping of journal (assessed through journal essays)
• Middle level / students when they go back home / organisation: after one year
  • Indicators:
    o Personal change, including: students becoming better able to articulate themselves, daring to speak up
    o Students starting to apply concepts in their work
    o Changes made to projects or work
    o New pieces of work starting to be developed
    o New relationships developing between students around work related matters
    o Meetings with organisations of students about the course and AR projects (does the organisation understand what the student is doing, is the organisation involved)
  • Long-term / work itself: after one course. Significant shifts in the way people work and strengthening of the way they already work.
    o Indicators yet to be developed
  • In so far as possible, impact on peace in the region
    o Indicators yet to be developed

Information about impact on all these levels is gathered and documented in module reports after each module, which consists of the results of student and tutor evaluations, a record of comments made by students during the seminar, and general reflections by the ACTS coordinator. In addition, the coordinator tries to visit the organisations of participants (combining it with travelling for Action Asia, a regional network for which she also works) to find out if any changes have taken place. Another way of gathering information for M&E purposes is by holding two evaluations after one year: one with the students and one with the university.\footnote{364 Interview with ACTS Asia coordinator. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 May 2006. \footnote{365 Interview with ACTS Asia coordinator. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 May 2006.}}

In the Balkans and Middle East programme the levels of impact have been formulated slightly differently. Indicators have not yet been formulated, but ways of information gathering for each level are being studied.

• The individual level is the most developed. It has various elements:
  o A daily reflection during the seminar.
  o Tutor de-briefings – each day and after each seminar.

\footnote{364 Interview with ACTS Asia coordinator. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 May 2006. \footnote{365 Interview with ACTS Asia coordinator. Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 25 May 2006.} }
Individual tutorials – which are used for two-way feedback. These have proved valuable. Participants speak more openly in a one-on-one setting. At the tutor debriefings tutors discuss which issues that came up in the tutorials are individual issues and which are more general learning points.

At the end of the first year, a more detailed individual tutorial which serves as an assessment of the student but in which there is also room for feedback on the part of students.

Evaluation forms after each seminar – in the first year, forms asked people to grade various elements of the course. This provided clear reports with quantified information, but it was not so useful for the students themselves. Therefore, now a new form has been developed, which focuses on the learning of participants: objectives, process, group, etc. It also helps the students to write their learning journal because the questions on the form give some guidance. However, this kind of qualitative information is difficult to process into an overall report. In addition, it may be necessary to have a more ‘traditional’ evaluation once a year in order to collect information about the quality of tutors, materials etc.

- The daily reflections, tutor debriefings and individual tutorials make it possible to apply lessons while a seminar is still ongoing.
- The organisational level.
  - It is easier to follow those who are part of the Nansen network. For other organisations only participants’ own perceptions of organisational changes are available. The ACTS coordinators are trying to cooperate more with the participants’ organisations. However, obtaining feedback from colleagues is sensitive. They may not be willing to give ACTS too much credit for any organisational changes. They may feel that their colleague has participated primarily for his/her own benefit or wonder why they themselves were not allowed to participate in the course. On their part the ACTS participants may feel they are being investigated by their management and colleagues. If they try to introduce changes, these may meet with resistance.
- Programme / community level.
It is not yet possible to say much about this level. One tool at this level is the sixth module which will take the form of a public seminar to which colleagues, donors, and people from the projects and target groups of participants will be invited. This will also achieve that members of participants’ communities of work feel part of the whole endeavour rather than objects of study.

At the level of the community, the AR projects provide an entry point. The students are reflexively researching their projects and their own role in them. This will hopefully include the extent to which ACTS has improved their approach and impact.

8.6.3 Development of global M&E framework

A global ACTS management group meeting in February 2006 noted that an instrument for M&E at the global level was lacking and decided to prioritise its development. In response, RTC contacted me to “accompany” ACTS in the development of a global M&E framework that could draw together the findings of regional-level M&E processes already taking place. People involved in ACTS agree that global-level M&E should draw together findings from monitoring taking place in the region in order to stimulate cross-regional learning and begin making statements about overall impact. In addition it should play a role in structural quality control (deciding and checking standards of quality and making sure that ACTS is the same thing everywhere).

At the time of writing the process to develop global M&E mechanisms that meet these aims has been ongoing for a little over a year. Unfortunately, it has largely remained an added activity for people involved in ACTS and has not become an integral part of learning and planning processes that do take place. It has been difficult to get people involved in the process. Other activities seem to have more priority. In addition, ownership of the process by the regions may be an issue. It is possible that it is seen mainly as something required by the Centre. This raises a number of questions:

- how can ACTS make global-level M&E a central part of work rather than an added activity, that receives little priority?
- How can ACTS create incentives for people to become involved in it?

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366 Interview with staff of ACTS Balkans / Middle East. Belgrade, Serbia, 3 November 2006.
How can ACTS ensure that global M&E facilitates and documents, rather than overlaps with, monitoring already taking place in the regions?

As mentioned in the previous section, a lot of reflection takes place during various meetings and during regional monitoring around the seminars. The outcomes of this reflection find their way into various documents. In addition they do often lead to adjustment of practice – so learning does take place. A global framework may help institutionalise / formalise this a bit, identify possible gaps (areas in which no reflection yet takes place) and stimulate reflection on larger, strategic questions (‘are we doing the right thing’ rather than ‘how can we do things better’).

Global evaluation has taken place in the area of AR through Diana Francis’ AR review. Global monitoring is done by drawing learning points from various sources together into a paper that I have produced. All this is considered very useful. But the attempts to systematise monitoring and the documentation of lessons at a global level has remained a little difficult. Recently it was decided to look at the three larger questions posed above in a small research project that looks at the M&E literature from the perspective of integrating M&E and learning into organisational processes and by gathering some experiences other organisations have in this regard.

In addition, not much systematic thinking has yet been done with regard to what the most suitable evaluation methods for each aspect and level would be – such as participatory methods to gather the input of the participants and other stakeholders. When it comes to involving the participants (and possibly their organisations) in M&E, the AR projects of the participants may provide an opportunity to capture data on the impact the ACTS programme is having in the work of the participants. Intertwining M&E and AR would be an interesting experiment in itself, and it would bring out information on impact that we otherwise would not have access to. It would probably entail building specific questions into the research design of participants. At an even earlier stage, the ACTS participants may be involved in the development (and, for later courses, refinement) of indicators for M&E of ACTS.

Another issue still waiting to be addressed is to plan for the documentation, sharing and utilisation of M&E results globally, so as to ensure that learning is combined and fed back into the programme. Presently learning is documented in various, somewhat scattered ways.
These include the reports of management group meetings, individual module reports by ACTS coordinators in the regions (which draw on evaluations by students and tutors), the reports of annual evaluations done in the regions with the universities and participants, and lessons learned papers produced by Diana Francis and myself. The global M&E framework is envisioned as a way to systematise and combine all of these. Thus, it becomes a priority to make sure that lessons learned in various places are fed into this framework. Technology may be helpful in the future in linking the Centres together through an intranet site and a common database.

8.7 Concluding remarks

What are the wider implications of the ACTS case study for the questions of Part Three (see page 354)? Here the five questions are answered together. ACTS is an initiative that tries to improve the learning processes of local peace NGOs through the participation of their staff members in its action learning programme. It meets a need voiced by practitioners in the peacebuilding field by offering practice-based action learning Master courses in conflict-affected regions. The course is largely relevant to the participants, who praise its action-orientation in particular. Information from the Balkans and Asia suggests significant learning by the participants, although it would be good to document their personal change stories in more detail. The feedback from Nansen also suggests that this learning is having an impact on the work of the participants, who are more systematic in their planning and reflection and placing their activities in a broader framework. Based on the findings of the AR Review, however, it seems that there is room for improvement regarding the extent to which the reflective and critical skills of the participants are developed.

Knowledge exchange among the participants is considered an important additional benefit of the programme. The action research of participants probably facilitates this exchange as it encourages people to reflect explicitly on their work and draw lessons, which can then be shared. An important obstacle to knowledge sharing among NGO staff, mentioned in earlier chapters, is overcome in the case of ACTS by fostering group identity and by bringing together participants from different countries, which means there is less direct rivalry.

A particularly interesting – though as we have seen also difficult – element of the programme is that it is carried out in cooperation with local NGOs and local universities. Since we saw in chapter five that
such cooperation between academia and practitioners, though desirable, is usually lacking, ACTS is meeting another need in that regard. However, this cooperation entails overcoming some obstacles which relate to issues with regard to research methodology (the universities involved have some trouble accepting AR) and cultural differences between academia and NGOs. The cultural differences are reflected in the fact that the NGOs view academic teaching as more hierarchical and formal and less participant-centred than their own approach. They have a rather rigid, perhaps not entirely justified perception of academic requirements for good teaching and research.

Another need that this study has identified is to find ways to increase the voice of practitioners and Southerners in global knowledge development and exchange regarding peacebuilding. This, too, is something the ACTS programme aims to do. The extent to which this aim is being reached is difficult to assess given the early phase in which it finds itself. It is after all too soon to say anything about the outcomes of the research and the dissemination of these outcomes – required to begin contributing to global theory and debates.

Some difficult issues remain for ACTS, which may serve as points of consideration for similar initiatives elsewhere. One set of issues relating to capacity building is the importance of building on existing knowledge and create ‘ownership’. The experience of ACTS and its participants raises the question: should already capable individuals and institutions be selected for capacity building, or should the focus be on providing opportunities for development and capacity building to weaker actors – or both? Another unresolved issue emerging from the ACTS experience so far is the difficulty of tying the development and implementation of M&E processes into general learning and organisational processes, and how to better involve the various stakeholders in them.

All of the issues mentioned here are recognised and openly discussed by ACTS staff members. Although M&E remains a difficult issue, the learning attitude of those involved in the programme is a positive factor. Changes are constantly made in response to observations and reflections. This is already a promising start. In drawing this conclusion I am aware that my personal involvement may colour my view. It will be good to compare it with more independent studies that are likely to be undertaken as part of M&E in the future. However, from my perspective both the extent to which the aims of ACTS match the needs identified over the course of this study, and the open learning approach with which those involved in the programme continue to work towards meeting these aims, remain highly interesting. It will be worthwhile to examine
the programme again in some years’ time and see what progress towards them has been made.

8.8 Concluding Part Three: Global initiatives to support learning

At the end of Part Two, the following questions were formulated for discussion in Part Three.

1. Given the structural realities in which they operate, what initiatives are undertaken to improve the learning processes of local peace NGOs? What can we learn from these initiatives?

2. To what extent do these initiatives facilitate cross-cultural, ‘third-order’ learning?

3. How can international/external/Northern actors support the knowledge and learning strategies of Southern peace NGOs, thereby increasing their agency?

4. How can knowledge institutions be better involved in supporting the knowledge and learning strategies of local peace NGOs working in (post)conflict countries – and the knowledge base of these countries as a whole?

5. How can global networks support the knowledge and learning strategies of Southern peace NGOs, thereby increasing their agency?

Starting with the first two questions regarding initiatives to improve learning: in Part Two we already saw that networking is a strategy widely used by local peace NGOs. At least in theory, networks may help to facilitate the various interactions depicted in Figure 3.5 (page 153). However, the findings discussed in chapter six gave rise to the perception that networks at the local, national and regional levels tend to focus mostly on interactions with other NGOs – depicted on the left side of the figure. At the end of Part Two, it was suggested that global-level networks may be better able to cover exchanges with a broader range of actors – and thereby to start addressing the ‘structural realities’ to which the first question refers (and which have been elaborated in chapter four) that shape the action radius of local NGOs.

This leads us to the fifth question on the potential role of global networks in increasing the agency for learning of Southern NGOs. More concretely, is GPPAC, the global network examined in chapter seven, facilitating all the interactions depicted in Figure 3.5? Like the national and regional networks looked at earlier, GPPAC focuses primarily on the facilitation of interactions among civil society groups – and as the chapter shows this can have clear added value in itself. However, the
network does so with the aim not only to exchange knowledge, but also
to jointly have a stronger position in interactions with other actors,
particularly states, regional organisations (ECOWAS, ASEAN) and
international organisations (UN). In its more externally-oriented
activities, then, GPPAC focuses mostly on powerful actors that help
create and maintain the structure which shapes the agency of civil
society. In this sense it is similar to most individual peace NGOs and
networks, although, because of its scale, it has access to higher level
policy forums, such as the UN Peacebuilding Commission.

However, thinking back to the finding of the Reflecting on Peace
Practice project in chapter one367 that peace NGOs need to better link
their individual activities to the larger goals of ending war and building
peace, this is also something that emerges as a clear issue for the Global
Partnership. Joint priority setting, identified by members as a
shortcoming, would require structured reflection on the larger, structural
issues affecting conflict and peace, and the way in which the variety of
individual activities of NGOs and networks involved in GPPAC may
add up in addressing these issues. Thinking about individual and joint
impact is closely tied to this. However, impact assessment, agreeing on
priorities for action and achieving a division of labour are very difficult
for any diverse group of organisations coming together in a network.

Although knowledge generation – through the dissemination of stories
from civil society peacebuilding practice – is a GPPAC activity, it does
not actively engage knowledge institutions. An initiative that does so is
the ACTS programme, analysed in chapter eight. Linking back to the
first question posed above, this programme fits into another common
category of initiatives to support learning: training courses. However,
ACTS goes further than regular NGO training programmes in several
ways. First, it does not aim merely to introduce new concepts but
focuses on the implementation of these concepts in the practice of
NGOs. Through action research, ACTS hopes to contribute to
organisational reflection and learning and thereby to facilitate the
learning cycle portrayed in the light blue square at the centre of Figure
3.5 (page 153), as well as exchanges with others around this square. At
the current stage of the programme it is difficult to establish the extent to
which organisational learning cycles have improved, but some
indications of individual learning and fruitful exchanges can already be
observed. Space is created for third-order learning by the emphasis of
AR on self-reflection and by the ‘safe space’ the seminars provide. (As
is mentioned below, there is little direct competition among the

367 See in particular section 1.4.5
participants and comparing across countries makes it possible to reflect on a more abstract level.)

A second difference between ACTS and other training initiatives for peace NGOs is that ACTS aims to help diminish North-South inequalities in knowledge recognition and generation, and strengthen the voice of practitioners in global debates. In this sense it focuses explicitly on changing structural inequalities. It is too soon to say anything about how this is working, except that for research outcomes to reach their intended audience, they need to be of a certain quality. For a programme that aims to help peace practitioners develop the learning capacity of themselves and their organisations it is difficult to set entry requirements to guarantee the intellectual quality of participants, while at the same time aiming to support those who may otherwise be marginalised. ACTS is searching for the right balance in this regard.

A third difference between ACTS and other NGO training programmes is that ACTS is an academic programme leading to a Master’s degree. This is also where the universities come in. The cooperation between NGOs and universities is an interesting facet of the ACTS programme, because despite the potential of such cooperation in terms of developing the overall capacity and role of Southern actors in knowledge generation, it is very rare in the countries studied. In that sense, the ACTS case sheds light on the fourth question above: how can knowledge institutions be better involved in supporting the knowledge and learning strategies of local peace NGOs working in (post)conflict countries – and the knowledge base of these countries as a whole? The fact that ACTS has managed to involve universities in its programme, which they have accredited as a Master course, is promising. However, the case study shows that such academic-practitioner cooperation can also be difficult. There are differences in organisational culture between NGOs and academia, which lead to partly real, partly perceived differences in teaching and research approaches. These differences may help explain why such interactions are so rare in the countries studied. It will therefore be interesting to continue to follow ACTS to see how the cooperation between NGOs and universities develops.

Another reason why it would be interesting to revisit ACTS in a few year’s time is to see in how far the action learning experience of ACTS participants has indeed led to better ‘third-order’ learning, reflection and documentation of knowledge on the part of these people and their organisations. Interesting in this regard is that one of the obstacles to learning and exchange by peace NGOs, competition and distrust (see chapter five), seems to have been overcome at least partly in ACTS,
where these issues do not play a large role due the fact that participants come from different countries and are therefore in less direct competition. In addition, participants are bound together by a sense of joint identity. The two-year length of the course helps to develop group solidarity. AR as a method may also be a binding force in that it explicitly recognises the knowledge people have, which may create mutual respect and stimulate discussion about experiences. Such an atmosphere of high trust and safety stimulates third-order learning, which involves the questioning of the assumptions and world views of the learned, thereby also facilitating learning across (organisational and geographical) cultures.

In addition to local factors that inhibit learning, such as inter-NGO competition, earlier chapters emphasised that more structural factors constrain the agency of Southern NGOs as well. These structural factors are intimately tied to global power structures and a discourse that is dominated by ‘the North’, external, Northern actors need to be involved in changing them. Thus we are led to the third question, regarding the role Northern actors may play in supporting the knowledge and learning strategies of local peace NGOs. The case of GPPAC shows that one of the potential benefits Southern NGOs see in being part of a global network is the access that this gives them to global, and Northern, policy forums. In the case of ACTS, the importance of engaging Northern actors is illustrated by the need identified by people involved in the programme for additional accreditation of the Master programme by a Northern institution. Another illustration of the importance of linking initiatives in the South to actors in the North is the hope of ACTS that it will gain access to North-based knowledge forums and journals for the dissemination of its research results, so as to reach the people shaping discourse, debates and policy. The fact that one of the partners in ACTS is based in Europe may prove very helpful in this regard. As with ECCP in GPPAC, this Europe-based partner has also been best able to secure funding for the programme. More on the role of funding, and on that of external actors more generally, can be found in the overall conclusions and recommendations below.