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

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Chapter 9. Conclusions and recommendations

9.1 Overall conclusions

9.1.1 The role of local non-governmental organisations in peacebuilding

The literature on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and peacebuilding theorises that they have an added value because of their closeness to local communities. As a result they are able to complement high-level peace processes with peacebuilding and reconciliation work among middle-level leaders and in communities at the grassroots. In addition, NGOs are seen as important elements of civil society, which in turn is considered vital for democracy building as it organises civilians and acts as a check on government. From this perspective the support of civil society in postconflict, developing, democratising societies has become increasingly popular among Northern donors. Civil society and NGOs are also considered to help people develop civic skills and ‘social capital’. Social capital comes about through increased links among people and leads to relationships, trust and joint action. (Putnam 1993) All of these are important for peacebuilding.

Indeed, local peace NGOs bring people together, particularly at the community level, for dialogue and reconciliation and in this way they contribute to social capital. The majority of their activities consists of activities like community dialogue, mediation training and peace education. Particularly the larger, stronger Southern NGOs (SNGOs) engage in advocacy and lobby towards policymakers as well. However, in most cases little attention is paid to thinking and work on a more macro and political level. Considering that many see the added value of NGOs particularly at the ‘lower’ levels of society this is in itself perhaps not surprising, but there are two problems. First, there is a lack of reflection on how individual activities add up and relate to the larger aim of building sustainable peace in a society, and this means that in the final instance, the work of peace NGOs may not systematically contribute to peacebuilding. Second, the political, pro-democratic ‘check’ role that NGOs play according to the theory is often absent in reality.

There are various reasons for this. In many conflict-affected countries governments are unwilling to give NGOs much political space. In

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addition, the way in which SNGOs are funded plays an important role. Civil society support by Northern donors does not tend to stimulate an independent civil society that is able to play a political role. Rather, the funding chain through which money flows from Northern governments and international organisations via Northern NGOs (NNGOs) to SNGOs makes SNGOs implementers of Northern policy. They focus on projects asked for by donors and do not think autonomously about what is needed and how projects relate to larger aims. As SNGOs are often founded as a consequence of the availability of external funds for certain activities, rather than through a bottom-up process, many organisations have limited local constituencies. More indigenous, independent groups do exist – but the dilemma is that groups that are rooted in society are often also rooted in conflict and aligned with one of the warring parties.

In response, donors have made neutrality a condition of funding. But this may have gone too far. Neutrality is never entirely possible, and building sustainable peace entails addressing unequal power structures. Doing so is an inherently political activity. Depoliticising civil society groups and forcing them to focus exclusively on micro-level policy implementation prevents them from addressing the wider structural issues that obstruct peace in the long run.

The dependency of many SNGOs on short-term project funding and their related lack of capacity for reflection on wider, more long-term issues make it even more possible for them to pay attention to macro issues affecting conflict and peace and to reflect on the way in which their activities fit into this larger picture. As a result some question their overall impact. (Anderson and Olsen 2003) More attention to learning strategies – by organisations individually as well as together with other actors in peacebuilding – is therefore important. Such joint reflection could also contribute to peace directly (see below). However, it is only possible in a structural context that creates space for independent, open-ended learning.

Southern peacebuilding NGOs were the original unit of analysis for this study. However, in the course of the project it became increasingly clear that these organisations and their learning processes cannot be considered apart from the context in which they operate, particularly the relationship with their donors but also the structural differences between North and South regarding research capacity and knowledge recognition, and political issues both within the countries in which the SNGOs operate and internationally. This growing insight, informed to a large extent by interviewees from SNGOs who drew attention to these issues, contributed to a widening of the focus and needs to be included in future analytical models.
9.1.2 Forms of peace and conflict knowledge

Theoretical discussions about types of knowledge distinguish between tacit, explicit and implicit knowledge, between academic and practitioner knowledge, and between indigenous and external knowledge. This study has linked each of these to the field of peacebuilding by NGOs. Table 2.4 at the end of the second chapter mapped the forms these types of knowledge take in the field of NGO peacebuilding and the challenges that each form brings when it comes to learning and sharing. Explicit knowledge, often in the form of publications, websites or databases, brings challenges of access, translation to the context, application, and renewal and adjustment as a result of it being tested and of situations changing. In rapidly changing conflict situations explicit knowledge is quickly outdated and tacit knowledge is particularly important. Not all knowledge can be documented easily and tacit knowledge often only emerges through interaction — when people become aware that they have knowledge that others may benefit from. Tacit knowledge brings challenges of wider sharing, which often involves turning it into explicit knowledge (and requires specific strategies like networking). Implicit knowledge of norms and culture may facilitate knowledge sharing in peacebuilding, where people from various different backgrounds interact. It involves openness to the values and world views of others and willingness to question one’s own assumptions and views — in other words, it involves joint third-order learning.

Both practitioner and academic knowledge are important in peacebuilding. Practitioners – NGO staff members – possess vital knowledge of local circumstances, of the way these change, of the way methodologies work out in practice, and of local ideas, priorities and tools for peacebuilding. Academics are able to compare such knowledge to knowledge and theories produced elsewhere, helping practitioners to abstract from their concrete experience and reflecting on larger questions – such as ‘am I doing the right thing’? In this way, academic institutions can function as ‘scaffolds’ of learning (Smid and Beckett 2004). However, communication difficulties exist between practitioners and academics. They have different organisational cultures and different ideas about what constitutes valid knowledge generation methods (see chapter eight). It is suggested that dynamic knowledge networks could

369 Smit 2006, Sauquet 2004, Ramalingham 2005
370 Rip 2001, De la Rive Box 2001, Whitley 1984, Court and Young 2003
provide an avenue for joint academic-practitioner knowledge creation. (De la Rive Box 2001) I will come back to this below.

Regarding indigenous and external knowledge, the theory mostly focuses on inequality between the two and a lack of recognition by Northern actors of valuable indigenous knowledge existing in the Southern societies in which they intervene. Such issues of recognition overlap with those existing between academics and practitioners about the validity of knowledge generation methods and the resulting knowledge: indigenous knowledge is often seen as un-scientific and therefore less legitimate. In addition, oral traditions in many societies mean that local knowledge is often not documented.  

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The Southern peacebuilders consulted for this study mainly emphasise the equal importance and complimentarity of both indigenous and external knowledge. They would like to gain external knowledge but stress the importance of learning in interaction and combining outside knowledge with their own, indigenous knowledge. In order to better do so, they would like to have more time and skills to do research and to reflect upon their practice. In this way they would generate locally relevant knowledge that might be usefully combined with external concepts and methodologies. In other words, there is a need for local peace NGOs to make space for interactive learning. This includes doing research in communities about the needs. More knowledge about the priorities of beneficiaries would increase the legitimacy of local NGOs and make projects more locally relevant and grounded. This is important as such legitimacy is often an issue. SNGOs financed by external donors are primarily accountable to those donors, not to the communities in which they work, and the activities they choose to engage in are often intimately tied to the preferences of NNGOs and their back donors – preferences that may flow from partner consultations but are at least as much the outcome of policy processes of Northern ministries and international organisations. In response, Southern peace NGOs want to be able to more strongly voice their own priorities and lessons, and those of their constituencies. However, they often find it difficult to formulate these due to a lack of time and capacity for reflection on practice, research, and the documentation of lessons and findings.

Knowledge of a conflict is never neutral. Conflicts are characterised by conflicting visions of past and future. Most people identify to a greater or lesser extent with one of the sides, leading to bias. Even what appear to be neutral facts may in fact be stakes in a political struggle. As data

are difficult to obtain in a context of instability and violence, different statistics usually circulate, and estimates given often depend on the political programme of those providing them. Even when people agree about the raw data, discussions arise about how to interpret these. People have a need to justify the role they have played and may have an interest in hiding or exaggerating facts. As a further complication, trauma tends to warp memories and perceptions.373

For Southern peacebuilders, working together on a common ‘truth’ about the conflict is seen as an important step towards peaceful coexistence. Beyond that, arriving at joint visions of peace is part of peacebuilding.374 However, such thinking about larger ideals and longer-term aims does not receive much attention in most peacebuilding strategies. Even NGOs whose daily job it is to work for peace often lack an integrated vision of the kind of situation they are working towards, and the way in which their activities contribute to it. One of the things needed to achieve such visioning are better knowledge strategies on the part of NGOs: ways to know more about the baseline situation, about the needs of the people for whom they work, about the activities of other organisations, and about existing ideas and theories of peacebuilding. Improved knowledge strategies may also enable NGOs to learn more about the impact of, and linkages between, their activities and the extent to which they contribute to the overall aims of ending violence and building lasting peace. All of these aims are considered important by the staff of local peace NGOs, but at the same time these staff say they are not able to give learning, reflection and exchange the attention they feel they should.

Improving learning for peacebuilding, Southern peacebuilders emphasise, would involve not one-way knowledge transfer but an interactive learning process through which people and organisations can jointly arrive at new knowledge that can improve their work. This requires time and space for research of the context, analysis of the results of one’s own projects, and interaction with other actors – NGOs, researchers, policymakers – about the way in which different activities contribute to the larger aim of peace. Such interaction is also important in order to prevent duplication of activities and ensure that different actors work in a complementary way towards a shared larger aim. In fact, to have various actors that play a role in peacebuilding agree on such a shared aim would be part of peacebuilding itself.

374 Pouligny 2005, Culbertson and Pouligny 2006
Organisational learning by Southern peace NGOs

The literature on organisational learning theorises that learning can take place at several different levels or depths: first-, second- and third-order learning. First-order learning is the passive internalisation of a predetermined set of knowledge, while second- and third-order learning actively involve the learner and his experiences. These constitute learning from practice and take place in cycles of action and reflection: a person acts, reflects on how this went, may search for additional knowledge to compare his lessons with, then plans for renewed action. Such learning from practice is particularly relevant for SNGO staff who tend to have action-oriented learning styles and do not read much. Second-order learning takes place at the tactical level and involves asking ‘how can I do this better?’ Third-order learning, by contrast, takes place at the strategic level: ‘am I doing the right thing?’ In order to start reflection on macro issues and the contribution individual NGOs make to larger peacebuilding aims, third-order learning is needed. This includes a willingness to openly question one’s own assumptions and world view.

Involving others in learning may help strategic learning, because comparing with external knowledge may lead to more abstraction and deeper reflection. Knowledge exchange meetings, networks, and training and education programmes may play such a role, and indeed, some do. However, as is discussed below, they face various constraints. In line with the idea of other people supporting deeper learning, Southern peace practitioners emphasise learning in interaction. In their field this usually includes interacting with people from different geographical, cultural and organisational backgrounds, including the staff of NNGOs who fund their activities and pass on policy ideas and preferences. Interactive learning involving people from North and South requires translation processes that help bridge cultures and knowledge systems. For this, once again, an open mind is needed and a willingness to question one’s assumptions and even world views – in other words, the characteristics of third-order learning.

Organisational learning theory states that organisations may support learning processes, and learn as a whole, by creating space for learning and exchange, by rewarding learning, by being open to failure, by having a leadership that sets the right example, and by having a

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cooperative (rather than competitive) culture\textsuperscript{376}. How does this compare to the practice of local peace NGOs?

As Figure 9.1 illustrates, Southern peace NGOs engage in various learning activities. These activities are affected and shaped by the structural context of the organisations. Some aspects of the learning practice of the SNGOs are, in reality, stronger than others. As a result, the model provided at the end of Part One depicting ideal-type knowledge processes in and around a Southern NGO is now adjusted in line with what has been found in this study.

Figure 9.1: Adjusted picture of knowledge flows in and around Southern peace NGOs

The figure shows that inside the light blue rectangle, which represents the Southern peacebuilding organisation, some parts of the learning cycle function better than others. The steps in the cycle that function

\textsuperscript{376} Boonstra 2004, Britton 2005, Taylor et al. 2006
relatively well have been made green. The pink-coloured steps do not function so well. NGOs are action-oriented and have difficulty finding time and resources to reflect on the implications of their work and do research into their own work and into the situations of their beneficiaries. As a result, they are largely unable to produce generalised knowledge that could be disseminated to other organisations, knowledge institutions, and donor agencies, and thereby contribute to global debates and policymaking.

To some extent Southern peace NGOs are able to gain new knowledge and to compare their experiences with others – often through networking with other NGOs and through training programmes – and the insights gained from those activities are applied in new programmes. But more in-depth reflection and theorising, as depicted in the pink boxes, are often lacking. In other words, strategic, third-order learning does not take place. This can be explained by a number of factors, including the difficulty of strategic reflection in a context of conflict, the lack of room given by donors for deeper-level learning and for thinking on the wider context (see the next sections), and the general lack of capacity for research, reflection and documentation that SNGOs face.

Outside the organisation, the figure depicts knowledge exchanges with other actors. Interviewees deemed interactions with other NGOs, beneficiaries, and state and international actors central to the learning processes of Southern peace NGOs. However, again we can see that some interactions function better than others. The pink arrows represent flows this study has not looked at in detail, and although hypotheses may be made it is difficult to make any statements about them. The thick blue arrows depict knowledge flows that are relatively strong, while the thin blue arrows are much weaker. The following observations can be made with regard to knowledge exchange by Southern peace NGOs.

- *Other SNGOs*: Interaction with other SNGOs takes place regularly through conferences, meetings and networks. Networks of peace NGOs are in fact widespread. Such knowledge exchange among colleagues is considered important and may be considered a strong point of Southern peace NGOs. However, as is discussed below, is also constrained by a number of issues.

- *Donor NNGOs*: Interaction with donor NNGOs takes place but, given the structural characteristics of the aid regime (see below), the direction of knowledge flows is often one way.

- *Beneficiaries* are often mentioned as sources of knowledge but little systematic research is done to find out about their needs.
and preferences for action or to garner the potential of their traditional conflict management practices. Many organisations visited feel more work needs to be done in this regard. Knowledge also flows the other way: from SNGOs to their beneficiaries. These flows primarily take the form of peace education, mediation training, vocational training for former combatants and other forms of capacity building to prevent future conflict. In fact, such knowledge transfer is the chief method of peacebuilding for most NGOs working in this field.

- **Knowledge institutions**: Little exchange takes place with knowledge institutions. Reasons for this include that Southern knowledge institutions are undercapacitated, that they pay little attention to development and peace research (or more generally to practice-oriented work) and that NGOs and academic institutions have different organisational cultures that lead to (perceived) contradictions in their approaches towards learning and make cooperation difficult.

- **Governments**: The extent to which Southern peace NGOs interact with governments depends not only on the extent to which governments are open to cooperation with NGOs, but also on the nature of the NGO in question. Stronger organisations are active in lobbying and advocacy and some also engage in the capacity building of local and national government employees. 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 own. Somewhat surprisingly, in the interviews little mention was made of knowledge flowing the other way: from governments to NGOs.

To conclude, a lot of second-order learning takes place in interaction with colleagues, beneficiaries and, particularly, other SNGOs. However, third-order learning is difficult due to constraints that limit the capacity of Southern peace NGOs have for reflection, research and documentation.

**9.1.4 Factors that constrain and support the learning of Southern peace NGOs**

The lack of capacity of the SNGOs studied for learning, research and documentation is grounded in a number of factors. For reasons
explained below, often little funding is available for these activities. In addition, interactive knowledge exchange is inhibited by the realities of a conflict-affected society characterised by social cleavages and mistrust, low resources and bad infrastructure. Conflict also shapes the kind of knowledge that is exchanged: its contested and rapidly changing nature makes documentation and learning difficult. A context of conflict may be more conducive to superficial, tactical learning than to deeper, strategic learning that involves asking difficult questions regarding one’s assumptions and past actions.

The sense of urgency experienced by people working for peace in unstable environments contributes to an emphasis on action at the expense of reflection. A short-term focus that results from project cycle funding prevents the institutionalisation of longer-term reflection and learning. Being open about failure is difficult in a situation where future funding often depends on the demonstration of ‘results’. High staff mobility makes it difficult for organisations to retain knowledge. Competition plays a role in knowledge exchange between NGOs: as organisations compete for the same sources of funding, they are often reluctant to share knowledge for fear of losing competitive advantage. In addition to these local factors, more structural, macro-level factors constrain the possibilities SNGO staff have for third-order reflection and learning.

9.1.5 Power differences, donor relations and North-South dynamics

At the global level, more structural issues constrain the opportunities SNGOs have for learning. Inequality between Northern and Southern societies when it comes to research capacity and the recognition of knowledge as ‘valid’ contributes to the difficulty Southern peace practitioners have in strengthening their contribution to global policy debates. Various factors combine to create and maintain this structurally unequal situation:

- **Recognition of knowledge:** Indigenous knowledge in developing countries is often seen as less rational and scientific and therefore less legitimate than knowledge that fits into ‘modern’ knowledge systems. This lack of recognition of the potential value of different knowledge systems has at the same time been reinforced by and contributed to the erosion of traditional knowledge systems in the face of the ‘modernisation’ of social, economic and political systems of developing countries.
- **Research capacity:** There is an enormous inequality between the developed and developing worlds when it comes to scientific research outputs. This means that development and peacebuilding programmes in the South are most often based on Northern research findings and ideas. Southern research that does take place is often very abstract and theoretical and does not immediately lend itself to application. There is very little interaction among researchers and practitioners in the field of peacebuilding in the countries visited.

- **Knowledge policy:** Initiatives by donors to stimulate Southern knowledge generation are not linked to policymaking, which often remains top-down. ‘Knowledge for development’ policies tend to be aimed at Southern governments and universities, and do not include practitioners such as NGO staff. The knowledge management policies of NNGOs are mostly internally oriented and do not explicitly include partner organisations in the South.

- **Donor discourse:** The aid regime and dominant discourse forces Southern NGOs to speak the language and jargon of NNGOs and back-donors. They need to do this in order to get funding proposals and progress reports approved. This limits the scope for local concepts and visions to trickle through into policy and practice.

- **Short-term funding and deliverables:** The aid regime is increasingly characterised by short-term funding and an emphasis on ‘deliverables’. These characteristics clash with the requirements for learning and two-way knowledge exchange among stakeholders, namely flexible funding that is not tied exclusively to projects and measurable outcomes so as to create space for research and learning; and long-term partnerships based on trust and mutual dependence.

- **Depolitisation of NGOs:** The aid regime has led to an increasing ‘professionalisation’ of Northern and Southern NGOs which have moved from social movements that play a political role towards service providers or sub-contractors implementing official development policy. At least in the field of peacebuilding, civil society support is used more as a tool for the implementation of policies than as a way to create an independent civil society with its own political activities and views. This denies the political nature of peacebuilding: achieving lasting peace often requires changing the power balance and is therefore not a neutral, technocratic development activity – in contrast with the dominant discourse which casts development as a neutral, value-free activity. As a result of this
approach, there is little attention for social, political or cultural peculiarities – and local knowledge – while a universal, technical language and toolkit are promoted. This leads to some tension in the field of peacebuilding, in which on the one hand the need to be neutral and apolitical is emphasised, while on the other it aims to ‘empower’ marginalised groups and thus to change power structures. Although even relatively technical development work has political components, these issues play a particularly strong role in peacebuilding. Indeed, many Northern and Southern peace-oriented actors recognise the inherently political nature of peace work. At the same time, however, most of the work of the Southern organisations visited is funded through the regular development chain, which is characterised by the apolitical discourse and service delivery chain just described.

- **Top-down policy:** Although intentions are often good, the aid regime leads to donor-driven projects and top-down policy making. In spite of policies stimulating Southern research, this structural situation constrains the ability of Southern NGO actors for third-order learning. After all, strategic learning is only possible if one is able to influence strategy at all. Top-down policy implementation also limits the possibilities NGOs have for producing knowledge and contributing to international policy debates. Whereas needs-driven programming would stimulate local research into the circumstances of communities, donor-driven projects do not. Even well-intended capacity building programmes often reflect the inequalities inherent in the regime and have difficulty realising Southern ‘ownership’.

These structural issues limit the agency of NGOs. However, several kinds of initiatives may contribute to expanding their agency by changing these structural constraints.

### 9.1.6 Initiatives to improve the learning processes of Southern peace NGOs

Initiatives to help NGOs deal with constraints and improve their learning processes include knowledge sharing networks and training programmes that try to build on knowledge of participants. In this study networks received particular attention. It is very common among Southern peace NGOs to form networks. Networks facilitate knowledge sharing and joint learning. Participants are inspired by each other’s
successes and learn from each other’s failures. Through networks they may gain access to contacts, materials, and possibilities for funding. In addition networks may provide a larger critical mass of organisations which, if they speak with a common voice, may have a stronger message that reaches more people – including policymakers. Organisations in the South with little access to Northern policy forums may be able to get their views across via their Northern network partners. Importantly, network members also note that networks have the potential to facilitate joint strategic thinking about the way the activities of various organisations contribute to larger aims.

The extent to which this potential is achieved varies. Networks are plagued by the same limitations as the knowledge strategies of SNGOs more generally – competition limiting open exchange, bad infrastructure, and the lack of room SNGOs have for strategic thinking and independent action. Through joint action some of these issues may be overcome as networks use their critical mass to address structural issues. However, working for structural change would involve criticising and tackling existing power structures and policies – in other words, it would involve playing a political, activist role. Civil society peacebuilding networks struggle with this as they are often funded by the very actors that maintain current structures. More generally, some favour a cooperative approach and hope to achieve gradual change through engagement rather than activism.

The success of networks in facilitating knowledge processes is influenced by various factors. They relate to things like the capacity of the member organisations, the added value and focus of a network, its governance structure, its context and its funding structure. Particular issues that emerged include the difficulty of open knowledge exchange in the face of conflict, power differences, and competition among NGOs. These issues are probably even more salient in conflict-affected areas than in others, thereby affecting the peacebuilding field particularly strongly.

Experiences with the ACTS programme and the International Steering Group of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) suggest that networks that bring together NGOs at a regional or even global level are less vulnerable to being constrained by competition and power issues among the participants than networks within a given country. Although national-level networks enable second-order learning, global networks make possible third-order learning by providing a safe space for discussion and reflection – less hampered by direct rivalry – and because the comparison with other contexts leads to
a higher level of abstraction and brings in fresh perspectives. The funding regime also plays a role in increasing or decreasing competition among local actors. In addition, working on a joint identity that is based on an overriding, uniting goal helps to minimise competitiveness within networks.

9.1.7 Global networks

Thus, cross-border networks that bring together peace NGOs from different parts of the world have the potential to facilitate third-order knowledge processes. GPPAC is an interesting example that covers all continents. Generally it is found useful for knowledge exchange, facilitating reflection through discussions during network meetings and online interaction. Another important function of the network is that it gives local NGOs the opportunity to make their voice heard more widely and contribute to global discussions on peace and conflict. At the level of concrete activities participants hope that it will enable joint action in the face of broader issues that individual NGOs cannot deal with on their own.

In these ways global networks have the potential to address the more structural issues that have an impact on global conflict and peace, thereby expanding the agency of individual NGOs and jointly contributing to the larger goals of stopping war and building peace. This would entail a political role for networks, in addition to their function of exchanging knowledge to improve the local-level practice of member NGOs. GPPAC has begun to do this at the UN peacebuilding commission and in some regions vis-à-vis governments. A network can be a powerful tool to carry out such lobby and advocacy work more effectively. It represents a larger number of people than an individual NGO does and can therefore have a stronger voice. Discussions within GPPAC show that this is not easy. Some members fear that upsetting powerful actors may endanger funding and other forms of support. In regions such as Central Asia, where political authoritarianism is a major issue, political activity can even endanger organisations and their staff.

The conclusion mentioned earlier that peace NGOs need to better link their individual activities to the bigger picture of peacebuilding is also something that emerges as a clear issue for a global network like GPPAC. Joint priority setting, identified by members as a shortcoming, requires 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.

The stage and form of civil society in the countries under study also plays a role. Civil society is weakened by conflict and most NGOs are relatively new. Many NGOs are highly dependent on specific individuals, and as a result networks may become either groups of friends or platforms for competition among influential people. To some extent, network governance structures and procedures can help mitigate such issues. But there is a deeper issue at play, namely that of the limited local constituency of many organisations and the legitimacy of civil society groups that are externally driven. As mentioned, strengthening the downward accountability towards beneficiaries, rather than the currently predominant upward accountability towards donors, is needed. Part of this could be enabling local organisations to do more and better research into the needs of their communities and the impact of their work.

9.1.8 Involving knowledge institutions

The theory on the role of academia versus that of practice in development identifies a gap between the two fields and sees networks of researchers, practitioners and policymakers as a helpful tool for the bridging of this gap. In the Southern postconflict countries visited, the gap appears to be even larger and there is little interaction between NGOs and knowledge institutions. Few universities in these countries pay attention to peacebuilding and development, and capacity building is needed in these academic fields. On their part, NGOs could benefit from the involvement of universities who could function as learning ‘scaffolds’ and play a role in the needed research into the needs and knowledge of communities and the effectiveness of peace projects.

In this regard, the ACTS Master programme is an interesting case. Through action research, ACTS promotes organisational reflection and learning and thereby to facilitate the learning cycle portrayed in the light blue square at the centre of Figure 9.1, 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

377 Rip 2001, De la Rive Box 2001, Court and Young 2003
exchanges can already be observed. ACTS also aims to diminish North-South inequalities in knowledge recognition and generation, and to strengthen the voice of practitioners in global debates. In this sense it focuses explicitly on changing structural inequalities. Particularly significant from the perspective of involving knowledge institutions is that ACTS is an academic programme that leads to a Master’s degree. In offering the programme, NGOs and local universities cooperate.

The fact that ACTS has managed to get universities involved in its programme, which they have accredited as a Master course, is promising. However, the case study shows such academic-practitioner cooperation can also be difficult. There are differences in organisational culture between NGOs and academia, which 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. The two-year length of the course helps to develop group solidarity. Action research 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 is what stimulates third-order learning, which involves the questioning of the assumptions and world views of the learner, thereby also facilitating learning across (organisational and geographical) cultures.

9.1.9 Ways in which Northern actors may support the learning of local peace NGOs

The structural aspects that limit the learning of Southern peace NGOs and their role in global policy debates are not set in stone. The relationship between Northern and Southern NGOs provides an entry point for a different approach that helps to increase the agency of SNGOs by changing these structural factors. Truly reciprocal North-South NGO partnerships do exist, perhaps even more in peacebuilding than in other development sectors, because of the nature of peace work in which much depends on things other than money. Some NNGOs and SNGOs have established relatively equitable partnerships and policy dialogues. Northern organisations involved in such partnerships see them as being part of a network of equal actors. Compared to a chain
through which policy flows downwards and accountability upwards, in a partnership network both policy preferences and accountability flow both ways. This makes for learning by both partners, as well as joint learning to create new knowledge.

Things that have made such partnerships possible include trust between partners, flexible arrangements regarding timelines and planning, and core institutional funding rather than tied project funding. In other words, two-way exchange requires a structural climate that allows for the development of long-term partnerships beyond concrete, output-oriented projects. The way an NNGO itself is funded plays a role in this regard. If the NNGO is dependent on project funding that is tied to specific objectives, then it has little choice but to pass these objectives on to SNGOs, leaving little space for exchange over content and direction. Other structural factors that may play a role include the extent of specialisation of both Northern and Southern partners (less specialised organisations may leave their partners more freedom of action), transparency and trustworthiness on the part of the SNGO (increasing mutual trust and making it possible for an NNGO to be flexible), political factors (donor governments with a strong political interest in a developing country are likely to leave NNGOs and SNGOs with little policymaking leeway), and the capacity of SNGOs (to which I return below).

A genuine dialogue about policy is also stimulated when NNGOs are willing to think out of the box and respect indigenous notions, processes and time frames for organisational development. On the other side of the partnership such dialogue is helped by SNGOs that are open to external ideas and suggestions for efficiency and effectiveness. In addition, space is made for reflection and learning when NNGOs allow for failure or incomplete success on the part of their Southern partners. Self-confidence within Southern NGOs also plays a role. As we have seen, indigenous knowledge has been discredited in many developing countries for quite some time, and being familiar with modern or Western notions is considered to be an advantage. When Southern NGO staff recognise the value of the knowledge possessed by themselves, their colleagues and their beneficiary communities, this may give them a stronger position in the exchange with external actors. For this, they need stronger capacities for reflection and for the formulation and dissemination their findings.

Regarding the capacity of Southern partners, genuine two-way exchange is easiest between relatively equal partners – in other words, with strong SNGOs. It is also the stronger NGOs that tend to be able to do research
into the needs of communities and that feel secure enough to turn down programmes that they feel do not meet these needs. As the majority of Southern peace NGOs does not fall into this ‘strong’ category, capacity building is an important activity – as long as it tries to take into account the principles of ownership and partnership. This is a bit of a ‘catch 22’ because these principles are most difficult to realise with weak organisations who may not be so certain of what they know and want and due to their strong dependency on donor funds may be more than willing to say whatever they think NGOs want to hear.

Thinking about possible ways out of this ‘catch’, our attention is drawn back to the importance of research, reflection, and organisational learning capacities. Capacitating organisations to research local conditions, to draw lessons from experience more consciously, to document or otherwise store these lessons inside the organisation, and to share experiences with others would strengthen the position of NGOs in exchanges over policy and practice and lead to more relevant and effective activities. In line with theories about capacity building (but not necessarily with its practice), such capacity building would not start from scratch but aim to build on the knowledge that people already possess, helping them to develop this knowledge, compare it with other ideas, and to document and disseminate it. The ACTS programme is an illustration of the form that such an effort may take.

Action research may be used to help peace practitioners study their own practice, compare this with relevant theories, exchange with others and develop new knowledge as a result. In this way, action research may reinforce the learning cycle and related knowledge interactions depicted in Figure 9.1. Initiatives like this have the potential of strengthening the voice of Southern actors and practitioners in global policy discussions. In the case of ACTS the fact that practitioners can gain a Master’s degree may further facilitate this, as such a degree may cause others to take them more seriously. Another interesting facet of the programme is that it involves local universities, thereby strengthening the links between knowledge institutions and NGOs and helping build knowledge capacities more widely than within NGOs only. Although the ACTS programme is still in a very early stage, and is experiencing difficulties in the cooperation between NGOs and academia as well as with regard to the application of action research, it gives food for thought about ways forward.

In addition to learning-oriented capacity building and different forms of partnership between NGOs and NGOs, other ways in which Northern actors may support the knowledge and learning strategies of local peace
NGOs include participating in networks, helping link actors around the world and supporting the development of Southern knowledge institutions and the recognition and dissemination of Southern research findings. 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 provides them to global, and Northern, policy forums. In the case of ACTS, the importance of engaging Northern actors is illustrated by the need participants have 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.

9.1.10 Overall concluding remarks

The overall research question of this study was: What are the challenges and opportunities Southern peace NGOs are confronted with in accumulating, mobilising and disseminating the knowledge that is needed to make optimal policy decisions, carry out activities in an effective way and adjust to continuously changing circumstances?

Southern peace NGOs engage in various learning and knowledge sharing activities. They are particularly active in organising exchanges with other SNGOs – particularly in their own country and region – in order to facilitate joint, interactive, second-order learning. Third-order, strategic learning – which involves thinking about wider issues of conflict and peace, the role of the organisation within this big picture, whether it is working on the right assumptions, and what else is needed for structural change – is more difficult. Such third-order learning would be helped by increasing the research done by SNGOs, improving both the capacity of Southern knowledge institutions and their cooperation with SNGOs, and interacting with people from different parts of the world in order to compare one’s situations with that of others and achieve a higher level of abstraction and learning.

However, Southern peacebuilders are unable to create room for such strategic learning activities, due to a number of structural constraints factors that limit their agency. These include:
• Conflict, which leads to bad infrastructure, low resources, a high sense of urgency (leading to short-term focus and making it difficult to take the time to step back and draw lessons for the longer term), distrust among actors (which inhibits sharing), and a disincentive to openly question views and past actions (needed for deeper learning)

• Competition among NGOs over funding, which limits their willingness to openly share knowledge with one another and which is compounded by conflict-related distrust

• Funding regimes, in which SNGOs are often implementers of policy developed in the North rather than independent civil society actors, thereby limiting their ability to think about wider strategies or about the needs existing in communities

• A weak knowledge base in developing, conflict-affected countries, in which knowledge institutions are weak and pay little attention to issues of peace and development

• Global inequalities with regard to knowledge generation and recognition, in which Northern knowledge systems and discourses dominate over Southern ones

• Oral traditions, in which knowledge is often not documented, thereby limiting its wider sharing

• Low capacity on the part of Southern peace organisations, including a lack of abilities for research, documentation and knowledge dissemination.

Opportunities for local peace NGOs in trying to increase their agency for learning and knowledge generation are

• Coming together with other peacebuilding actors for joint reflection and strategising, which may be facilitated by networks

• Networks and training programmes that focus on the joint creation of new knowledge, including its documentation and dissemination

• Action research, a methodology that can support not only organisational learning but also the participation of Southern practitioners in global theory development and policy debates

• Forms of cooperation between NGOs and knowledge institutions in conflict-affected countries, which can contribute to capacity building on both sides and increase the knowledge base of these societies

• More equal partnerships with NNGOs, based on mutuality, trust and long-term relationships, in which knowledge flows in both directions and policy is developed jointly
• Capacity building programmes that do not transfer pre-existing knowledge but equip participants with the tools to learn, document and share.

These conclusions translate into a number of concrete recommendations for various peacebuilding actors and initiatives. These recommendations are provided in the next section.

9.2 Recommendations

9.2.1 For Southern peace NGOs

In order to increase the legitimacy and relevance of activities, as well of the strength of an SNGO in its interactions with Northern actors, it is necessary to pay ample attention to ‘downward accountability’ towards constituencies: the communities for whom projects are intended. Increasing the knowledge base of organisations with regard to these beneficiaries and their ideas and priorities is part of this. It is important to try to convince donor organisations of the need to make space for this kind of interaction and research.

Southern peace NGOs need to do more explicit thinking on the ‘big picture’: what are the overall aims of peacebuilding and how do the activities of individual NGOs contribute to these aims? This includes joint reflection with other NGOs and non-NGO actors regarding the complementarity of activities. It may also entail using creative ways of impact assessment, building on what is already being done in this area.

Southern peace NGOs may try to gain a stronger position in the interaction with donor agencies by

• working for longer-term partnerships by building trust and continuous dialogue, keeping in mind that organisational transparency contributes to trustworthiness
• strengthening the knowledge base of the organisation through action research into its own work and through interaction with beneficiaries, paying attention to the documentation of findings and lessons so that these may be shared with others and contribute to building a body of theory that is practitioner- and Southern-generated. Linking up with local and international knowledge institutions – universities – could be part of such a strategy
connecting with other SNGOs in networks and arriving at joint positions and plans
questioning the action priorities of donors, demanding attention for alternative views and the local knowledge possessed by SNGOs and beneficiaries, and if necessary, turning down projects. This requires a true motivation for peace (rather than prioritising organisational survival or personal interests) but also a capacity to propose alternatives. The latter in turn requires a capacity to research local needs and set priorities independently from donors
last but not least, by making space for research, networking, reflection and documentation, all of which should become part of standard practice and be included in programme proposals sent to prospective donors

In capacity building programmes (both those provided and those attended) priority should be given to those activities that aim to strengthen the knowledge generation of participants rather than those that merely introduce pre-existing concepts and ideas.

9.2.2 For Northern NGOs with partners in the South

In the selection of partners it is important pay attention to their constituency. Even if a group does not comply with the organisational model of an NGO it may be a suitable partner if it is rooted in local communities and reflects the priorities and needs of those communities.

Funding regimes that enable more equitable partnerships are likely to lead to more locally relevant activities and ideas. Instead of imposing external ideas and programming priorities, two-way partnerships create room for local knowledge and priorities to be taken into account. In this way, North-South partnership in the true sense of the word can help prevent externally-driven peacebuilding activities and the fostering of organisations with limited local constituencies. This, however, takes time to invest in relationships and learn about the nature of the partner organisation. With the development of a relationship, either the partner is found unreliable or unresponsive to local needs, or the opposite occurs and trust grows, making a more equitable exchange possible.

NNGOs should support the development of the learning and research capacity of their Southern partners, invest in ICT development and internet connectivity, link SNGOs up with knowledge institutions, and
make external knowledge available. Using networks, external actors may facilitate joint research projects, as GPPAC is doing around peace education and ACTS is doing more generally.

Although building the capacity of local actors for research and documentation is important, another way to achieve a more balanced knowledge relationship is by looking for ways of knowledge documentation and dissemination that are less centred around written information – given the oral tradition prevalent in many non-Western societies. Making more use of tools like radio, art, video, film, theatre, or games in exchanges is something that could be explored much more.

NGOs may stimulate networking or other forms of cooperation among SNGOs through the way the funding regime is given shape. Competition among SNGOs over funding is an obstacle to sharing and networking. NGOs may start to think about ways to offer financial aid that support rather than discourage cooperation among Southern partners. They may stimulate coordination and joint planning on the part of SNGOs, with an eye on the ‘big picture’ and the way in which organisations contribute to it. However, this is only useful if the SNGOs are given some leeway in setting project priorities.

Part of such a strategy may be to fund networks of SNGOs, although it is important to keep an eye on who in the network is the recipient of funding and what kind of power position this accords that person or organisation. Emphasising participatory and accountable decision-making structures for the partner network is therefore important.

9.2.3 For ‘back donors’

Many of the difficulties identified in this study are related to the lack of influence SNGOs have on the peacebuilding policies they implement. This limits the relevance of their activities and is due to the chain model of funding and policymaking, which remains largely top-down. Back donors (Northern governments and international organisations that finance the work of peace NGOs) should think about ways to open up policy making. This may include thinking about alternatives to the chain model, such as a network model in which various actors – including back donors themselves – involved in peacebuilding jointly exchange, learn and strategise.

The ‘knowledge for development’ policies of back donors should pay more attention to the integration of practitioners – not only industry and
business, but also NGOs – in these policies. This would increase the practical relevance of the work of knowledge institutions and build broader societal knowledge bases.

More recognition of, and reflection on, the political nature of development, peacebuilding and civil society is needed. Pretending that these are neutral activities may be convenient from the perspective of preventing confrontation with powerful actors both in developing countries and internationally, but it does not eventually serve the aims of peacebuilding, democratisation and development and it constrains the role that Southern NGOs can play domestically.

9.2.4 For peace NGO networks

Networks of peacebuilders may pay more attention to their potential roles as learning ‘scaffolds’ by documenting knowledge and the outcomes of joint learning and by involving knowledge institutions. Training or action research-oriented academic courses may be built into such networks, as ACTS has done, in order to contribute to capacity building and strengthen the position of peace NGOs in global exchanges of knowledge.

In functioning as platforms for knowledge exchange, networks should not try to pre-determine the content of sharing but rather provide a flexible framework for members to come together and share about whatever issue they deem most relevant at a given moment.

Networks have the potential of amplifying the voice of NGOs, speaking on behalf of many rather than few. They may use this strength to address the structural constraints peacebuilders face: macro-level power structures and policies that maintain conflict, prevent sustainable peacebuilding and limit the role of NGOs. Doing so, however, risks jeopardising funding and more cooperative strategies vis-à-vis policymakers. Each network has to find its own solution to this. This may even include separating a network into a more activist body and a more professional one.

In the selection of members networks should pay attention to the constituencies of organisations – do they work on behalf of local communities, donor interests, or their own organisational survival? In addition, democratic governance inside networks, including transparent procedures for admitting new members and for the selection of
representatives, may help reduce issues of power, competition and distrust among civil society actors.

9.2.5 For training programmes

Rather than transferring pre-set concepts and methods, training programmes for peace practitioners need to focus on facilitating reflection and knowledge generation by the participants. Action research may be a helpful tool in this. In addition, it is important for capacity building activities to include the building of capacity for (action) research, exchange, documentation, and dissemination. Thus, actors providing capacity building may consider moving towards programmes that combine elements of action research, training and networking. This would facilitate organisational learning and knowledge generation on the part of peace practitioners and strengthen their voice in global theory development and policy debates.

Taking such recommendations and initiatives into account may help capacity building and knowledge exchange initiatives to be developed in a way that is more sensitive to the local context and that builds on existing expertise, while increasing the effectiveness of local actors by introducing access to peacebuilding knowledge and organisational skills.

9.2.6 For knowledge institutions

Southern universities may play a larger role in the knowledge processes of NGOs by participating in research into the needs and circumstances of beneficiaries, carrying out baseline studies, and developing methodologies for impact assessment. This should not be a way of ‘outsourcing’ but be connected to the learning of the NGOs themselves. Universities may also play a part in the continuing education of NGO staff members, functioning as ‘scaffolds’ that enable deeper level reflection, learning and theory development. Action research and other methods that build on the practical knowledge of participants could be explored in this regard. Universities in Southern conflict-affected countries need to pay more attention to ‘practice oriented’ education and research in order to be more relevant for practitioners. This is also important from the perspective of conflict prevention: if education does not match the skills required by a society, than this can lead to unemployment, grievance, and conflict.
9.3 Follow-up and further research

The following strategies and topics for further research remain or have emerged from the study.

Research strategies that would further refine and improve the conclusions reached in this book include a longer-term observation of knowledge flows and learning activities taking place in and around a Southern NGO. Such observation would add to the findings from interviews, which are likely to reflect the bias of the interviewed, and may bring issues to the surface that SNGO staff themselves do not realise are important. An additional strategy for improving the current findings would be to revisit the case studies of ACTS and GPPAC in a few year’s time to see how they have developed would be very interesting. In addition, analysing other initiatives that aim to facilitate learning, knowledge generation and sharing would add to the picture.

Research topics that remain include the following. First, researchers may more closely analyse the issue of how donor-recipient partnerships may be give shape in different ways. It has become clear in this study that different forms of partnership between those providing and those receiving funds for peacebuilding are to different extents open to the knowledge of recipients and conducive to joint learning. I have looked at this mainly from the perspective of the Southern partners at the receiving end of donor funding. More research on different approaches to partnership of different donors, and on examples of different partnerships, would enrich this thinking.

Second, the study of learning by NGOs would benefit from more research about the ways in which monitoring and evaluation (M&E) can be used for learning. Better connecting the M&E of NGOs with their organisational learning would involve making M&E a central part of work rather than an added activity that receives little priority. Such integration of M&E and learning proves difficult in practice. A study that collects experiences organisations have gained in this regard would contribute to thinking about M&E and learning. It could look at questions such as: how to make sure that M&E results in information that staff members want and need to improve their practice? How to ensure that M&E facilitates and documents, rather than overlaps with, processes of learning and monitoring already taking place? How to reconcile the goals of accountability and learning?

Third, future research may pay attention to finding alternatives to written documentation. In this book we have seen that the oral traditions
of many Southern societies limit the extent to which NGO staff members document knowledge, and how this in turn weakens the position of Southern actors in global exchanges of knowledge. In response a need was identified to build capacity for documentation. However, we may think more about the different forms that this documentation may take. Non-written forms, such as film, may better match the oral traditions of some, and new technologies may play a role in creating these forms. Powell (2006: 530) writes that “[w]ithin the foreseeable future, developments in ICT will enable a capacity to handle oral information that will match current capacity for the written word.” Researching such developments would be interesting with an eye to the future.

Other ways in which ICT may support the learning of SNGOs represent a fourth topic for further research. In addition to technologies for the documentation of knowledge, research could also look at the way ICT may be used to promote the participation of all relevant parties in knowledge generation and exchange. This would include studying low-cost, accessible forms of connectivity that are open source and avoid long-term dependence on suppliers.

A fifth area for further research is what may be termed ‘knowledge for peace’. In this study I have noted that knowledge is part of conflict and that, conversely, discussing different interpretations of the conflict as well as of the shape peace should take is an important part of peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. This means that reconciliation has an important knowledge component. However, I have not really been able to find out how exactly knowledge exchange and joint learning processes may contribute to peacebuilding directly (rather than via the increased effectiveness of learning organisations). Initiatives such as the ones mentioned in section 5.1.1 could be studied in more detail: The Dialogues Politiques project by the organisation Environmental Development Action in the Third World (ENDA) in Dakar, Senegal; in Brazil, the visioning activities of the Landless Workers; the Reflect Programme of Action Aid; and the Netherlands-based Split Screen project.

A final and more macro-level field of study that would merit additional research is the response of different countries to tensions between knowledge systems. All developing countries are confronted with tensions between traditional, indigenous knowledge and new types of knowledge coming from the West. Different countries have responded to this in different ways. Analysing these different responses, and their results, would be an interesting research project.
Whether or not it leads to such further research, it is hoped that this book may make a small contribution to improving the learning, and thereby the actions, of Southern peacebuilding NGOs, and perhaps other organisations as well. An effort will be made to ensure that the findings and recommendations of this study reach those who may put them to use. They will be discussed with the organisations co-funding the research that led to this book, with other NNGOs, with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs as a ‘back donor’, and in as far as possible with the Southern NGO staff that were interviewed for the study.