Can Knowledge Trigger Change?

H*i*vos
people unlimited

Introduction

The developmental challenges facing the world are daunting. Extreme poverty and social exclusion persist. Socio-economic inequality and fundamentalism are on the increase, exacerbated by the adverse effects of climate change and the global crises of food, fuel and finance. In this rapidly changing global socio-political landscape, the development sector is struggling to address such dilemmas.

This **Knowledge Programme Briefing Note** argues that there is an acute and pressing need for new perspectives and knowledge on the changing terrain and dynamics of development and social change. It contributes to the debate on knowledge and change by sharing and discussing the insights emerging from Hivos' experiences. Furthermore, it positions Hivos' knowledge endeavours in the aid and knowledge for development discourse, drawing on a mix of Hivos practice, policy and Knowledge Programme research.

Defining knowledge

Knowledge is difficult to define as a concept and is the subject of longstanding and unresolved debates. There are a range of perceptions in which a great diversity of issues is emphasized. A simple working definition of knowledge will be used in this note: *knowledge is contextualized and interpreted information*. Information is tangible data consisting of hard numbers and facts, independent of context and easily transferable. Context is needed to build knowledge from information. Sense-making and interpretation (collective or individual) are essential to transform one into the other. Knowledge therefore has an inherent dimension of perpetual action: human beings continuously interpret and make sense of what happens around them. (Wenny Ho (2011), Hivos/IKM Think Piece).

The difficulties of defining knowledge notwithstanding, it is critical to how we think and act. Knowledge development, intake and usage gives meaning to our actions and ability to influence our surroundings. How much – and in what way – we value knowledge depends on, among other things, time and context.

The Hivos Knowledge Programme aims to integrate diverse expressions of knowledge and the many and varied ways of knowing. This includes academic, activist, as well as educational and cultural expressions of knowledge. Hivos contributes to the enhancement of the effectiveness and sustainability of development interventions through the advancement and development of knowledge.

Knowledge for change

Knowledge empowers people to effect change. What that change contributes to can vary widely. The Hivos Knowledge Programme focuses on how knowledge can capacitate people to contribute to social transformation processes: changes in attitudes and values sustained over time. We particularly, but not exclusively, reflect on how civil society - the sphere outside the state, corporate sector and family where people *organize* themselves to pursue their individual, group or common (public) interests - contributes to change. This includes knowledge capacitating social movements, implementing viral campaigns and empowering activists working in authoritarian settings.

Example

The women's movement and the struggle for their rights in Nicaragua, 1998 – 2008

From 2008-2010, Hivos and ISS facilitated a research programme to analyze Nicaragua's women's movement and the strategies developed during the last decade to defend and extend women's rights, in particular in its struggle against the prohibition of therapeutic abortion. This tier of the Knowledge Programme involved academics, practitioners and activists.

The study accommodates the broad participation of the movement's leaders through diverse knowledge exchange activities and reflections at the national and local level. Extensive and frank debate enabled in-depth exploration of important aspects such as: the background and strategies of the movement, its relationship with different social and political actors, the strength of the movement and challenges for the future. The study also incorporates the voices of the autonomous regions of the Caribbean Coast and their assessment of, and perspectives on, the movement.

The methodology and outcomes of this project have been captured in a video. This footage is used frequently by the women's movement in their workshops, forums and other gatherings in both Nicaragua and abroad. You can watch the video on our Vimeo channel.

Hivos' wide-ranging knowledge activities include brainstorming, debates, research, documentation, dissemination and creative encounters such as barCamps, summer schools, workshops, writeshops and knowledge dialogues.

The politics of knowledge

Knowledge does not lead to change per se. Furthermore, where change occurs it may not always be what was envisaged or even something positive. Consequently, the politics of knowledge – how thinking is translated into action of various kinds and which ideas are considered legitimate – is vital to processes of social transformation. Certainly, knowledge building results in increased political, economic and social capital. At the same time, knowledge can be used as a countervailing force or employed to solve problems. We also see it used to legitimize and serve political goals. In other words, knowledge can contribute to change or it can be used to maintain the status quo. One thing is sure, knowledge is never neutral.

Such power dynamics play a significant role within knowledge processes. Knowledge matters and, as discussed, who owns it counts, as does the context, timing and location of the knowledge. In practice, then, an awareness of the politics of these processes is essential when designing and implementing knowledge programmes. This is particularly relevant to the development sector, where power dynamics have often complicated knowledge endeavours.

The aid sector operates in a problem-solving environment. Driven by the pressure to keep funds flowing and to come up with results, it is focused on finding quick fixes for complex problems. This is also reflected in the tendency to work with 'good practices', which, in fact, are usually a disparate set of solutions drawn from diverse and often very different circumstances. This pressure and standardisation calls for, and results in, research that supports the fundamental premise that this type of aid works.

Example
'Know-How', 'Know-What' and the Politics of Knowledge for Development

Michael Edwards reflects on how knowledge can trigger change in his speech *'Know-How', 'Know-What' and the Politics of Knowledge for Development'*. He believes that, at present, the politics of knowledge is weighted heavily towards 'know-what' (technical knowledge in the form of information and ideas) and skewed towards the interests of elites and away from the decisions that promote development as social transformation. Edwards argues for an improved balance between 'know-what' and 'know-how' (knowledge-making capacities and the power to use them in practice).

He proposes two solutions: The first is to recognize that technical knowledge declines into technocracy unless there is investment in the knowledge-making and interpretive capacities of the broadest range possible of the population; a range that includes the most disadvantaged or excluded groups. This promotes accountability and feedback and challenges the accepted notions of what is needed or effective. In addition, it encourages diverse groups to bring their own ideas to the table.

The second solution acknowledges the importance of 'know-what' to development and social change. This is because not all forms of knowledge can or should be democratically created and controlled, either because the processes involved are too slow, they are vulnerable to interest-group manipulation (even by well-intentioned donors and other agencies), or because there are scientific questions, the answers to which are not simply matters of opinion. Visit our website for the full version of Michael Edwards' paper.

Hivos believes there is another way. If we encourage the flow of knowledge – both existing and new – from both North and South, then there will be a counterweight to the quick fixes and false promises of the current aid system. It is on this basis that Hivos has designed the Knowledge Programme.

Knowledge development methodologies

There are various forms of knowledge development methodologies. Hivos has applied a methodology called knowledge integration. By integrating various forms of (new) knowledge - academic, practitioner, educational and cultural expressions of knowledge - new insights can be created and strategies formulated that contribute to the development of new policies and practices for the development sector. This process of knowledge production stems from a series of ad hoc but integrated interactions. Four stages can be elaborated from this process, namely: knowledge development, transforming new and existing knowledge into appropriate and effective strategies, knowledge dissemination, and advancing the application of these knowledge-based strategies.

The processes described are also called knowledge co-creation. This type of knowledge production links different groups working in different knowledge domains such as policymaking, academia and development practice, bringing them together in a strong interactive process of knowledge production for problem solving. Co-creation has proven to be valuable, but it is also a complicated process that is vulnerable to variations in notions of time, ways of working, knowledge systems, organisational cultures, reward systems, etc. It requires substantial investments in intangible processes of knowledge development, something that doesn't sit well with, for instance, the output driven development sector. Certainly, crossing domains can be and often is experienced as a major challenge. Yet, when taken seriously, co-creation bridges gaps and challenges assumptions. It is vital to comprehending the complexity of development and intervening effectively.

Example
Hivos Knowledge Programme

The four stages of knowledge integration are reflected in the Hivos Knowledge Programme. We undertake research with diverse organisations and individuals, as well as our regional partners, in order to develop new knowledge. We work on key questions in the areas of civil society building, pluralism, democracy promotion, rural development and digital activism. We work hard to transform existing knowledge – both academic and practice-based – into appropriate and effective strategies. For instance, we reflect on the role of civil society but, at the same time, we also illustrate how strategies can be altered to become more active (See Hivos Briefing Note on Aiding Civil Society). We debate the concept of pluralism but also share practices of pluralism. Knowledge dissemination is an important element of our programme. This is done through activities such as network seminars and regional workshops. We provide platforms for regular dialogue and opportunities for all involved to share their experiences, and we are building a knowledge network via outreach media such as our website, policy briefs, e-newsletters and other publications. Beyond sharing, we aim to advance the application of these knowledge-based strategies (and to improve these strategies based on experiences). For instance, in order to apply one of our key insights, namely, to adopt a more fluid and inclusive approach to development – encompassing all elements of society – real change was required. By employing knowledge integration in this way, Hivos believes that knowledge can and does trigger change.

Example
Knowledge Programme on Small Producer Agency

Globalisation and particularly the food crises of 2007-08 and 2010-11 have renewed interest in agriculture and small-scale producers. Much of this interest has focused on connecting producers to markets. Governments, donors and the development community, as well as many in the private sector, have embraced the 'pro-poor market' concept with the expectation that market inclusion will allow small-scale producers to survive and even prosper in the face of major changes in agriculture and food markets. A Global Learning Network has been established to critically reflect on this agenda. The network provides a space combining action research and learning on some of the critical challenges faced by small-scale producers in globalised markets. How do small-scale producers make good choices in the face of the new opportunities and risks associated with these powerful external agendas? How can they build the capacities to act on those choices? Has producer agency been overlooked in the push to 'link them to markets'? This exercise in co-creation connects leaders and practitioners from the worlds of academia, farming and agribusiness, from Latin America, Asia and Africa. It brings added value through the sharing of insights across roles and regions.

Knowledge partnerships

Hivos works with multiple knowledge actors on different levels and in different contexts: academics, development professionals, activists, policymakers and people from the business sector. Our work takes place at both an institutional level (i.e. with academic institutions) and with individuals that have strong networks (i.e. policy entrepreneurs).

Over the years, we have experimented with different partnership frameworks – from regional teams to learning networks to virtual networks – in order to maximize the added value. By engaging multiple actors, especially in longer term processes, we can encourage new ways of thinking and working. In practical terms, added value means producing a partnership that delivers more in terms of process and/ or outputs than traditional partnerships do. As the example "Digital Natives with a Cause community?" shows, the results of this innovative approach can be exciting but, more importantly, actionable.

Becoming a knowledge actor

Becoming a knowledge actor is a rewarding but also complicated process. Defining and designing knowledge roles takes considerable time and effort. For Hivos, this process must be combined and balanced with our other roles– in donor/grant-making and advocacy. However, a well-designed knowledge programme can nurture innovation and provide crucial support to any organisation, particularly if a platform is created for exploration and experimentation. While success in development can never be guaranteed, chances of success can be increased by providing resources for innovation and research, and by supporting partners in the development and improvement of their capacities by promoting knowledge exchange within the sector.

The Hivos commitment to knowledge development

Hivos believes that investment in the development, deepening, dissemination and application of knowledge can make a difference to international cooperation.

Knowing what you change

New perspectives and knowledge on the changing terrain of development and social change are needed. By rethinking both practice and theory – guided by rigorous learning processes based on a clear understanding of the greatly varying circumstances on the ground – we can begin to understand and tackle urgent complex problems. Hence, Hivos' commitment to knowledge development.

Changing what you know

Knowledge for change means not only learning more about what change is, but also changing ways of knowing. This process stimulates new ideas, practices, strategies and alliances. However, it also creates new discrepancies, dilemmas and conflicts. Hence, Hivos' openness to new theories and knowledge practices and its willingness to share.

Let's do it differently together

Since 2007, Hivos, together with its key-partners, has made substantial efforts in the domain of knowledge and change. Hivos has attracted many academic, NGO, policy and business partners in this process. After more than four years of intensive dialogue encompassing theory and practice, we are convinced of the need for cooperation between these different actors. Co-creation offers an opportunity to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of development interventions, and multi-actor partnerships have the potential to revitalise knowledge networks and offer new approaches to development. This will not only stimulate and mobilise a critical mass of researchers for development purposes, but it will also create an infrastructure for civil society actors to apply knowledge in their practices.

Example
Digital Natives with a Cause community?

The Digital Natives with a Cause? programme is a joint initiative by Hivos and the Centre for Internet and Society, Bangalore. It focuses on understanding how citizen agency can be stimulated and power balances challenged by approaching these issues from the combined perspectives of technology, youth and engagement. Digital Natives with a Cause? is a research inquiry that reveals the ways in which young people ('digital natives') in emerging ICT contexts make strategic use of technologies to bring about change in their immediate environments. Ranging from personal stories of transformation to efforts at collective change, it aims to identify knowledge gaps in scholarship, practice and popular discourse relating to the increasing usage, adoption and integration of digital technologies in processes of social and political change. It works with multiple vocabularies and frameworks and produces dialogues and conversations between digital natives, scholars, practitioners, development agencies and corporate structures in order to examine the nature and practice of digital natives in emerging contexts in the Global South. The digital native community was born out of a process including three workshops, which brought together around 80 people from Asia, Africa and Latin America, to explore key questions that could provide new insights into Digital Natives research, policy and practice. The workshops were accompanied by a 'Thinkathon' – a multi-stakeholder summit that initiated conversations and shared learning. The conversations, research inquiries, reflections, discussions, interviews, and art practices are consolidated in a four-part book. See http://digitalnatives.in
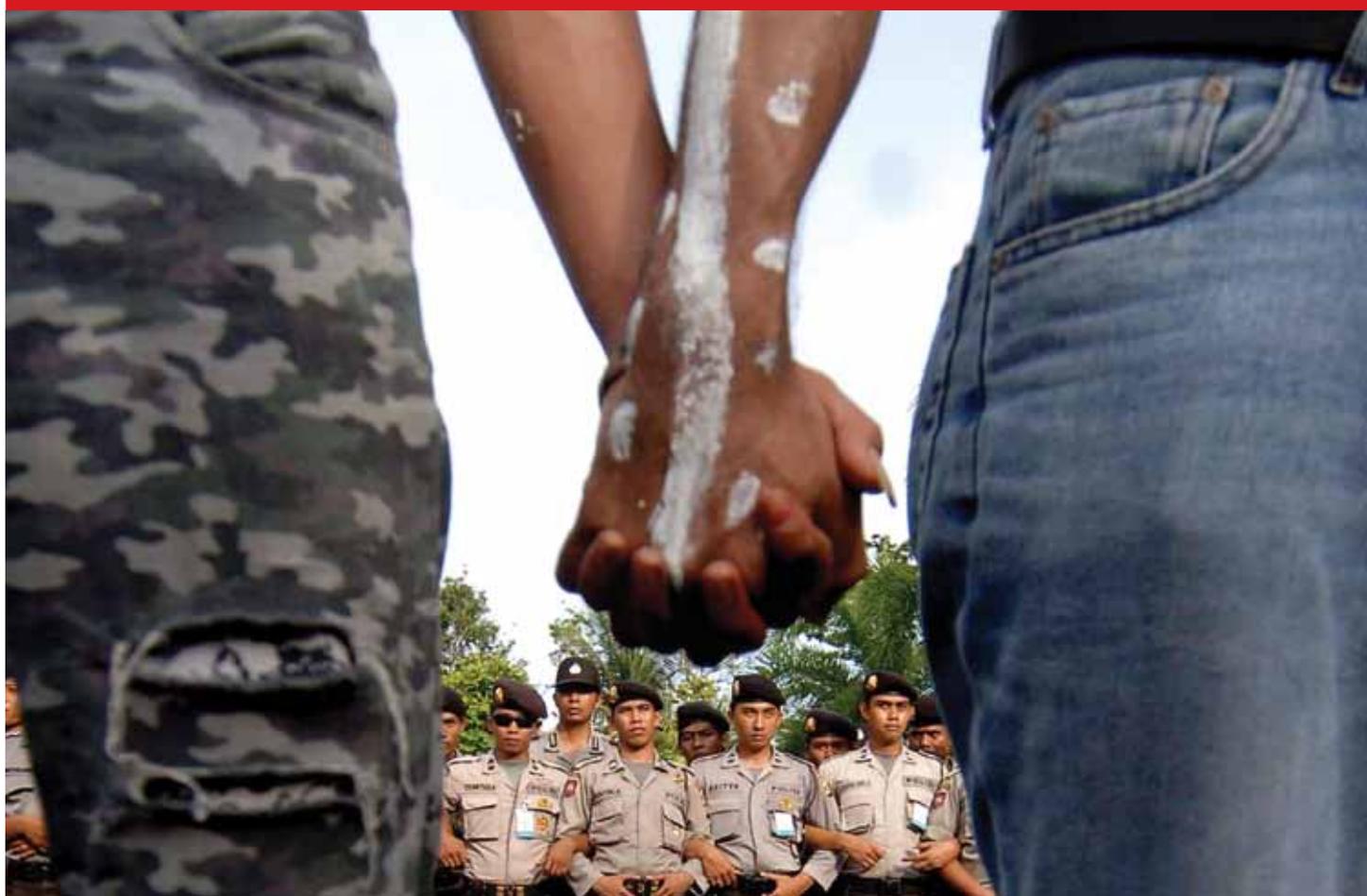
There's still a lot to learn…

The role of knowledge in development cooperation has been gaining importance in recent years. The development sector has transformed from a predominantly basic services-oriented, capital-intensive sector into one that plays a more facilitative role, including grant-making, advocacy and knowledge. However, it is still falling short of addressing the many complex challenges it faces.

From urgency to action

There is an increased urgency for knowledge intensification and increased professionalization within the sector. Recent reports by multilateral organisations, donors and ministries confirm this need; however, huge gaps exist between the demand for knowledge for development and the need for knowledge that empowers change in practice. Hence, Hivos' explicit approach to and investments in knowledge development.

New approaches

Complex societal challenges require new approaches to solution-finding. Increasingly, it is recognized that it is impossible to be aware of all aspects of such complex, unstructured social problems. Instead, a deeper understanding of what is at hand is required, along with agile facilitators who build on what is already known and are able to differentiate between types of situations, problems and interventions. In addition, we can learn from experiences in other sectors, such as the health sector, where knowledge integration/co-creation processes have been at the forefront of developments (Wenny Ho, Think Piece 2011).

Playing the long game

Social transformation and knowledge development for change are long term processes. However, this does not sit well with a results-oriented sector with short term cycles. Public scrutiny also demands straightforward and short-term communication products. Despite this, investment in a long-term knowledge strategy is an investment in change. Hence, Hivos' long-term support for knowledge development that encourages positive change.

Example
Theories of Change

An important part of Hivos' research tests key assumptions underlying our work and that of many international NGOs. The Civil Society Building programme (CSB), for instance, addresses three main questions: (1) How can we understand the dynamics of civil society formation and the role of local actors in this process?; (2) How do external actors contribute to this process?; and (3) How does civil society building as a process contribute to structural changes in unequal power balances in society? See our CSB publications for insights on these questions.

Hivos is also engaged in a process to reflect on methodologies of change. The Theory of Change methodology offers 'tools for thought' to help make social science theory practical and accessible and to encourage critical questioning and analysis of underlying assumptions about change. See the Theory of Change portal.

Example
Civic Explorations

The Civic Explorations programme offers a space to reflect on the changing dynamics of citizen action in a globalizing world, through research and dialogue. Politicians and policymakers have turned the spotlight on the citizen. The agendas and theories of change that underpin this new starring role for the citizen are manifold and often conflicting. Support and research strategies for citizen action seem at odds with reality, not least because of the absence of citizens themselves in their own narratives of change. Existing frameworks for explaining and researching citizen action are in urgent need of updating. This is evident in attempts to understand the implications of digital activism, often hyped yet under-researched; or recent developments in the Middle East, which have left the world grappling for explanations.

Example

Pluralism Knowledge Programme

The Pluralism Knowledge Programme provides civil society actors concerned about the rise of fundamentalism with input for new strategies. It addresses Hindu fundamentalism in India, radical political Islam in Indonesia and ethnic tensions in Uganda. The programme is undertaken in cooperation with the Kosmopolis Institute (University for Humanistics), the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society and the Patna Collective (India), the Centre for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (Indonesia) and the Cross-Cultural Foundation Uganda. The knowledge is generated by mixed teams of academics and practitioners in the three countries.
The programme generates and disseminates knowledge on a significant scale through papers, workshops, summer schools and dedicated websites (http://pluralism.in/ and http://crcs.ugm.ac.id/pluralism). The establishment of a 'Religion, Gender and Politics' online forum on openDemocracy.net has evolved into a virtual meeting place for researchers and practitioners in the field of pluralism. The Pluralism Knowledge Programme has fostered significant improvements in civil society organisations regarding reflective practice. At Hivos itself the Pluralism and other Knowledge Programmes are influencing internal strategic thinking. Of course, challenges remain, not least the translation of knowledge into action. Ongoing dialogue and patience is needed to increase understanding of each other and to bridge existing gaps between our different realities. Strengthening cooperation between academic and civil society partners remains central to the continuation of the programme, alongside improving the visibility of the programme in media, policy circles and academia.

Further information

The third Briefing Note in this Hivos Knowledge Programme series will be published shortly: Hivos Knowledge Programme Briefing Note – Civil Society in West Asia.

To find out more about the Hivos Knowledge Programme and other aspects of Hivos practice and policy – and that of our partners – see the following websites and recent publications:

Main website:
www.hivos.net

See also:
http://digitalnatives.in
http://pluralism.in

Many of our publications can be downloaded for free from our website. Others are available via publishers' websites.

Suggested reading includes:
Ho, W (2011). Like a Bridge over troubled waters: Dialogues of policy, practitioner and academic knowledges, Hivos/IKM.

Edwards, M (2010). 'Know-How', 'Know-What' and the Politics of Knowledge for Development, Hivos.

Stremmelaar J. & R. Berkhout (2010). 'A knowledge journey: The story of the Hivos' Knowledge Programme', in *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* volume 6, issue 3 (Taylor & Francis2010).

Video 'Knowledge & Change' (2010) Hivos.

Demeijer F. & J. Stremmelaar (2010) Knowledge & change. Theory and practice of development dilemmas pocket booklet, Hivos.

Stremmelaar J. (2009). 'Knowledge integration for development: The Hivos approach', in *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* volume 5, issue 1 (Taylor & Francis).

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