

## **A knowledge journey: the story of the Hivos' Knowledge Programme**

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This case study describes what has been learned about knowledge co-creation from the Knowledge Programme of Hivos. It argues that knowledge is an invaluable tool to navigate the turbulent development landscape. In 2007, Hivos started to develop a knowledge programme. Four years on, some key insights in the field of knowledge and change are shared. The process of knowledge development may be even more important than its direct outputs. Investing in knowledge development processes contributes to a longer term critical perspective in a sector dominated by short-termism.

### **Introduction**

In 2007 Hivos started to develop a Knowledge Programme to address some of the complex developmental challenges related to its mission. How to understand and innovate support for civil society building? How to promote pluralism in times of growing intolerance? Hivos is an international non-governmental organisation based in The Hague, The Netherlands. The Knowledge Programme started with the assumption that the development sector needs new knowledge and, more specifically, appropriate knowledge to tackle specific knowledge gaps. Thereto ad hoc financing of knowledge creation is not enough, so Hivos decided to dedicate considerable resources to the development of knowledge on issues imperative to the work of civil society organisations (CSOs) and the development sector at large. To achieve its goals Hivos worked closely with CSOs and academic centres worldwide. The strategy used was called knowledge integration. By integrating various forms of (new) knowledge – academic knowledge, practitioner knowledge, 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. To this end, Hivos initiated knowledge programmes focused on specific themes related to its mission.<sup>1</sup>

Four years on, we would like to offer some reflections on our knowledge journey, and in particular what we have learned about the knowledge development process.

### **Knowledge co-creation**

A key insight is that collaborative ventures between academics and practitioners have proven to be valuable. Their value lies in the process of co-creation that leads to new insights, new relations, new ways of working and better development policies. In this short piece we will focus on the methodological side.<sup>2</sup>

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As far as our methodological approaches to knowledge development are concerned, we have found that practitioner-academic collaboration is very valuable for knowledge for development. It enriches academic debate and gives new impetus to practitioner's reflections on what works and what does not.

### **Developing new relationships**

In all programmes we aimed to foster relations between academia and practice, and where possible to also include policymakers and business. We explicitly engaged a wide range of actors, beyond the Hivos network and beyond the aid chain. For example, we explored non-aided civic agency through the Civic Driven Change process.<sup>3</sup> In the Knowledge Programme Small Producer Agency in the Globalised Market,<sup>4</sup> we have facilitated dialogues between people from academia, practice and business to stimulate new ideas about the role of small producers in development in a debate that is stuck in binaries between rights-based and market-based approaches.<sup>5</sup> This programme with the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)<sup>6</sup> got underway in 2009 with the establishment of a global peer-to-peer learning network of farmer organisations, agribusiness, academia and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), led from Bolivia by Diego Muñoz of Mainumby Ñakurutú.<sup>7</sup> In April 2010 the network met near Geneva to debate the issues relevant to small-scale producers in globalised markets looking ahead, in the next twenty years. They identified some of the key knowledge gaps and established multi-stakeholder working groups with a plan of action to take the learning network forward. While it is too early to predict the outcomes of this programme we can already note that new relations have come into being that trigger new ways of addressing key issues.

### **Adding strings to our bow: new ways of working**

Participatory research methods to document and reflect on social movement dynamics have proven to be valuable tools for strategizing, empowerment and conflict resolution. For instance, the Civil Society Building Programme has explored working with a *Dialogues of Knowledge* research methodology. This methodology turns people who would traditionally be the objects of research into subjects. A case in point is the Nicaraguan women's movement. This movement is persisting in the fight for women's rights in a difficult environment, characterized by persecution, intimidation and political violence. The movement has already been the object of various international academic research programmes. The Dialogues methodology, however, put the movement activists at centre stage and enabled them to reflect on their experiences. The complex process that followed uncovered controversial, sensitive and at times painful issues and it enabled key actors in the movement to deepen the understanding of the dynamics that they themselves are a part of and to become more conscious of their own development. The impulses that this generated are already influencing their ways forward

### **Knowledge and change**

At the start of the programme we positioned the generation and dissemination of knowledge as having a developmental value in itself. Since then we have been heavily debating the relationship between knowledge and change. Various perspectives have emerged. In its most basic form, we assumed that new insights developed, once disseminated, would find

their way into policies and strategies. Questioning this process has been an important part of our Knowledge Programme from the start. As Nishant Shah so aptly puts it:

In itself knowledge doesn't transform anything. Knowledge can be mobilised/translated into an action of transformation. Knowledge and agency can lead to empowerment; knowledge without agency can lead to disempowerment, even entrenchment. (Shah, 2010, p. 103)

Alan Fowler also questions the relationship between knowledge and change:

Does knowledge trigger change? I believe it's a questionable starting proposition. When knowledges are 'packaged,' they are often treated as commodities which can be applied to change. But knowledge can also be used selectively by power holders to maintain the status quo, that is to prevent change. But, you could argue – and this is sort of a counterfactual – that the fact that nothing has changed is also a change. If you use knowledge to stop change in a dynamic environment you're affecting change by trying to stick where you are. In other words, knowledge always influences change but not necessarily in the way intended. It's a paradoxical and uncertain relationship. (Fowler, 2010, p. 125)

What the ongoing reflections on the relationship between knowledge and change seem to have in common is that the usefulness of knowledge is not defined in terms of its direct applicability in development programmes, as is commonly the case with knowledge interventions in the aid chain. On the contrary, quite a few emerging insights of the programme seem to question rather than affirm dominant programme approaches.

For this reason, much value lies in the questioning that the knowledge process induces, distinct from actual content or knowledge itself. For example, the value of questioning civic pluralism<sup>8</sup> has provided new avenues for action, which are different from a traditional strategic approach. In this, we are not arguing for a pure process-orientation, but we do argue that if you invest substantially in the process of knowledge development it is more likely that new insights (rather than reproductions of existing theories) are generated. This also leads to the next point that knowledge development is a long-term process which cannot be cut short for the sake of short-term outputs. Although we do agree that outputs are important, we also consider that this is not as straightforward as it seems. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section below.

### **Dissemination for whom?**

Initially, we considered that the knowledge outputs of the Knowledge Programme would include more traditional formats, such as books, academic articles, policy briefs and knowledge events such as conferences, debates and workshops. These were to be the main vehicles for dissemination and create visibility for the programme. So while we had a non-linear approach to knowledge development, we did have a quite linear idea of knowledge dissemination. This proved to be problematic. As the Mid-Term review of the Knowledge Programme states: 'The programme proceeds on the basis of two logics and theories of change that do not easily fit' (Pasveer 2010, p. 9).

To illustrate this, academic and NGO output strategies have different rhythms: NGOs tend to focus on short-term outputs while there is a systematic academic hesitation to publish emerging findings. There are a number of inherent tensions in these different rhythms, namely the practitioner's quest for answers versus the academic's quest for new questions, and the ethics of academic writings versus the need to come up with implementable answers in the language that average practitioners can understand, preferably with concrete recommendations. These tensions lead to manifold questions being raised: how to combine

an implicit theory of slow change with the requirement to produce quick and visible wins? What may count as a result? How to deal with process-as-result? How to translate between regional processes and sectoral issues? How to communicate results (Pasveer 2010)?

Initially we tried to promote the best of both worlds, for example by striving for rigorous academic analyses coupled with concrete recommendations. In practice, this often led to sub-optimal results. While trying to connect with an emerging audience of brokers and intermediaries who navigate between academia, policy and practice, we were searching for a knowledge output that would cater for their needs. This insight demanded new strategies on communication and dissemination of programme results. Three strategies seem to be bearing fruit. First, we have recognized the value of what we call intermediate products. These include interviews, stocktaking reports, blogs and personal reflections. Second, we have decided to also publish separately in academia and domains of practice to promote a larger uptake of our work. Third, we are finding whole new forms of sharing, ways of knowing and facilitating knowledge dialogues. For example we are doing a meta-analysis of digital conference weblogs in the Digital Natives with a Cause?<sup>9</sup> programme.

### **The digestion of knowledge**

The Knowledge Programme was also supposed to feed into Hivos capacity building and learning processes, both related to our partners and our staff. One prominent avenue here is our capacity building work within Hivos and partners to better reflect on theory and practice of development interventions. It was envisaged that programme results would stimulate ongoing critical reflection and systematic learning. So far, we have found that this process is underrated in sector in an eternal to-do mode. This is not to say that there is no learning and reflection taking place, but often the systemic element is underrated and underutilized. The Knowledge Programme set out to fill the gap and while we are meeting a growing group of like-minded people, we still struggle to find spaces for systemic reflection. One reason is that most capacity building initiatives centre around the issues of today and within the bounds of the development sector, while the Knowledge Programme focuses on the issues of tomorrow whilst looking beyond the sector. This tension is likely to be resolved over time. We have been able to engage with more strategic capacity building initiatives, including partner trajectories around strategy development and theory of change, that seem more probable to be future-proof.

### **Knowledge@Hivos**

We started off with a quite straightforward theory of knowledge and change that promoted academic-practitioner collaboration for new insights in some of the ‘bigger’ questions related to the development field. We had to find our path, whilst making it, a process that continues to date. We started out with ‘traditional’ partnerships between our head office and prominent European universities and research centres that evolved into modalities of global on- and offline learning networks worldwide. Along the way, we have picked up valuable do’s and don’ts about how knowledge can be used to promote the kind of social change that Hivos is looking for.

The evolution of the Knowledge Programme has also sparked a debate of a future Hivos as a knowledge actor rather than focusing on financing civil society – a role under pressure. Originally the Knowledge Programme was positioned at arm’s length of ‘regular’ operations, over the years it has come to be seen as a central pillar of the Hivos strategy. A next

phase is likely to see the Knowledge Programme move closer to our regular development programmes. Practical modalities will include development programmes and regional civil society funds with research components, partnerships with Southern think tanks in the civil society realm, and the financing and execution of transdisciplinary research projects on themes related to Hivos' strategy. One example of this is a joint project between the Institute of Social Studies, Hivos, the University of Quito and the Bolivian NGO Lidema on the nationalization of extractive industries, supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

## Epilogue

There are several things that stand out from what we have described above. We have learned that knowledge development as a process is probably even more important than its direct outputs. The added value of the Knowledge Programme lies in developing new perspectives and relationships that stem from the productive use of fields of tension in joint action between academics and practitioners, between Northern and Southern actors, within and beyond the aid chain. We have learned that whatever process you design, you should always question it while implementing it. Questioning and testing assumptions is at the heart of knowledge interventions in a complex field such as the development sector. Our experiences confirm that the value of knowledge initiatives particularly lies in a longer-term critical perspective in a sector dominated by short-termism. Space for reflection is becoming rarer, while the sector seriously needs to address the knowledge gaps it is faced with for it to survive. More specifically, we have become aware that new ways of working also ask for new ways of sharing. Disseminating knowledge experiences with an emerging audience requires new strategies.

So while this knowledge journey has only just started, we have tried to share some key insights from our own experience. We look forward to hearing yours. Don't hesitate to contact us for sharing stories and experiences. We will also make sure that we keep reporting, through our website, [www.hivos.net](http://www.hivos.net), and this journal.

## Notes

1. For more information about the Hivos Knowledge Programme, please read an earlier article published in this journal called 'Knowledge integration for development' (Stremmelaar 2009).
2. If you want to get a sense of new and/or existing but better validated insights, read Hivos' publications at [www.hivos.net](http://www.hivos.net).
3. The Civic Driven Change (CDC) Initiative is an ongoing process of thinking, debating and writing aimed at examining and sharing a perspective of change in societies that arises from its citizens rather than states or markets. It is supported by a group of Dutch private aid agencies (Hivos, Cordaid, ICCO, Oxfam-Novib, SNV, IKV-Pax Christi) that value the potential of creating a strong civic narrative, which extends beyond local conditions and circumstances. The initiative is coordinated and hosted by the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague (Netherlands), represented by Dr Kees Biekart and Dr Alan Fowler, and the process is facilitated by Context, international cooperation, represented by Fons van der Velden.
4. This Knowledge Programme has set out to map, elicit and integrate knowledge on the dilemmas confronting small-scale producers in global, regional and national markets. It aims to work with different actors to bring new voices, concepts and insights into the global debate. It thereby seeks to support the development community, policymakers, producer organizations and businesses in their search for better-informed policies and practices.
5. See for instance, Murphy, *Changing Perspectives: Small-scale farmers, markets and globalization* (IIED/Hivos 2010). This paper looks at some of the big dilemmas confronting small-scale

producers. It revisits five decades of changes in policies, behaviour and practices and highlights some areas of debate that have changed in light of the 2007–2008 global food crisis.

6. <http://www.iied.org>
7. <http://www.mainumby.org.bo/en/>
8. The Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme is an academic-practitioner collaboration that focuses on understanding pluralism in relation to fundamentalism. Bringing together academics and practitioners around the issue of pluralism, the programme aims to develop civil society based strategies to increase spaces for pluralism in practice.
9. 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 looking at these issues from the combined perspectives of technology, youth and engagement.

### Notes on contributors

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Remko Berkhout coordinates the Civil Society Building knowledge programme. He previously held various advisory and management positions with national and international civil society organizations in Bangladesh, Mozambique and India. He holds a Master of Science degree in Sociological Economics from the Erasmus University of Rotterdam. He is interested in Institutional Development, civic strategies for social change and change management.

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