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KNOWLEDGE NETWORKING: IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACEBUILDING ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

It is increasingly recognised that the mobilisation and exchange of knowledge between different sectors (such as academia, policymakers, and practitioners) and regions (between North and South as well as among conflict regions) can be of paramount importance in the field of peacebuilding. As a result, the number of knowledge networks in this field has risen dramatically in recent years. This article aims to shed light on these initiatives and their potential by analysing the structural factors that shape the possibilities for knowledge exchange in networks in the field of development and peacebuilding. It maps recent thinking about knowledge networking and draws on conversations with network participants in North and South. Attention is paid to conditions and characteristics of knowledge networks, including theoretical frames for understanding them and ways of categorising them. In addition, the article deals with obstacles for successful knowledge networking, including organisational structure and culture; power issues, competition, and contested knowledge; embeddedness, regimes, donor relations, and discourse; the social and political situation in postconflict regions; cultural issues; and the issue of knowledge changing over time. The final section of the article concludes by listing a number of factors that influence the success of knowledge networks.

Introduction

One of the most pressing issues faced by developing countries today is the preponderance of violent intra-state conflicts. The death and destruction brought by these civil wars present a serious challenge for social and economic development. The economic and social setbacks that are the result of fighting make countries vulnerable to renewed warfare. It is difficult to make the transition from conflict to peace without some measure of social and economic development, which offers people an alternative to fighting. As a result, about half of all postconflict countries revert back to war in the first decade of peace. Just like it is difficult to achieve sustainable peace without development, it is also difficult to achieve development without peace and security.

Thinking within the borders of traditional academic disciplines alone is not enough to meaningfully reflect and respond to these developments. To guide successful

development efforts in conflict-affected countries, an integration of different fields of theory and practice is required. The originally separated academic disciplines of development studies (which has traditionally focused more on economic issues) and conflict studies (which normally pays attention mainly to political and security issues) are being combined in order to make sense of developments on the ground and steer thinking about effective responses. As a result, the concepts of peace and security are understood more and more in connection with economic and social development, something to which the increasing use of the term “human security” testifies.

A similar development is taking place among practitioners who work in conflict-affected developing countries. Institutions such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) now recognise that “development cooperation itself needs to apply the lessons of experience, and improve its own flexibility and practices to maximise its contributions [...] in helping build peace and prevent violent conflict” (Wood 2001, 10). Conversely, it is recognised that development efforts in war-torn countries need to adopt the ideas and practices from conflict studies and peacebuilding in order to be effective.

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It is increasingly recognised that the mobilisation and exchange of knowledge between all these different entities is of paramount importance. In the words of Kofi Annan, “we realise more and more that knowledge is what makes the difference: knowledge in the hands of those who need it, and of those who can make best use of it” (Clarke and Squire 2005, 110). As a result of these developments, knowledge exchange is a hot item on the agenda of many organisations working in peacebuilding and development.

The number of knowledge networks in these fields has risen dramatically in recent years. Some of these networks bring together actors within a specific region or province within a country, such as the Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society in Mindanao, the Philippines. Many operate at the national level, such as the *Gruppe Friedensentwicklung* (FriEnt) in Germany. Others, like the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), are subregional in scope. Still others cover entire continents (*Coordinadora Regional de Investigaciones Economicas y Sociales* in Latin America and the Caribbean) or even operate worldwide (Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict). Some networks, like the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA), focus on a specific issue within the field of peacebuilding, while many others have a much broader content area.

Some of these networks are academic in nature, some consist exclusively of practitioners, others are policy-oriented. Many networks attempt to bring these different groups of people together in order to achieve cross-sectoral learning and knowledge exchange for the improvement of policy, practice, and research. Most of these initiatives are still in a relatively early phase, searching for the best modes of exchange.

This article sets out to take a closer look at knowledge sharing in the field of development and peacebuilding, mapping recent thinking about networking and exchange and drawing on conversations with network participants in North and South. It assesses some of the main characteristics, obstacles and conditions of successful knowledge exchange. In order to get some clarity of what exactly we are talking about, the first part of the article looks at conditions and characteristics of knowledge networks, including theoretical frames for understanding them and ways of categorising them. The second part of the article focuses on obstacles for successful knowledge networking, including organisational structure and culture; power issues, competition, and contested knowledge; embeddedness, regimes, donor relations, and discourse; the social and political situation in postconflict regions; cultural issues; and the issue of knowledge changing over time. The final section of the article concludes by listing a number of factors that influence the success of knowledge networks.

Conditions and Characteristics of Knowledge Networks

Before we zoom in on the analysis of knowledge networks, it is worth devoting a few paragraphs on the following question: can knowledge that is generated in one context be applied in another at all – or is all knowledge context-specific? One distinction that is often made in this regard is between explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge, where explicit knowledge can be processed in a way that makes it accessible to others and tacit knowledge cannot, or less easily.

Explicit knowledge can be codified or written down. It can consist of anything from the formal procedure for application to a European Union (EU) fund to the way a copy machine works. Because it can be recorded, it can be passed onto others who can add it to their own body of knowledge. The challenges concerning explicit knowledge relate to codification and recording processes (how can I process this knowledge in such a way that it is of the most use to others?) as well as dissemination (how can I ensure that this knowledge reaches the people who might need it?). These two facets are interrelated: to be able to reach the intended recipient, the knowledge has to be recorded in such a way as to make it attractive and accessible to this recipient.

The term “tacit knowledge” is less straightforward and has been used with different meanings. It usually refers to knowledge based on a person’s unique experience: knowing how to do something. According to some, it can be shared through communication. It may be possible to codify or write down part of it, for example in a manual or report. But there are also components of tacit knowledge that cannot be exchanged in written form. It may be possible to transfer such knowledge through face-to-face interaction such as training. As an example one might think of learning how to ride a bike. Although it might be possible to write down some principles, it is only through direct interaction that the skill can be taught.

A common way of conceiving knowledge exchange across contexts nowadays is seeing knowledge not as produced in one place and transferred to another – but as produced through interaction between and among practitioners and researchers, who are at the same time sources and users of knowledge (Baud 2002, 54). Knowledge production can be conceived as being basically conducted in two processes: first by translating local problem definitions to more generalised knowledge, and then by translating the results obtained from generalised knowledge back to the local context (Rip 2001, 14). What is perhaps most important in this conception is that although knowledge is not universally generalisable and applicable in every context, it (or parts of it) can often be translated to another context. This translation process requires an open mind: making explicit and calling into question one’s assumptions and perspectives can open a person up to other “mind frames” and “world views”, making translation possible.

Knowledge Networks

What are Networks? Why Networks?

Networks may exist locally, nationally, regionally or globally. A network is “a loosely structured form of cooperation, in which coordination is done through a horizontal exchange of information, lacking a clear hierarchy. It is composed of communication links between individuals or groups. The network notion stresses these linkages and allows participants to exchange information and attach meaning to it, thus transforming information into knowledge” (Rive Box 2001). The members of a network can be individuals or organisations “that are working toward a common goal, or whose individual interests are better served within a collective structure” (Deventer 2004, 1).

Networks are formed to extend the reach and influence of members and to gain access to sources of knowledge that could improve practice. They are based on complementarity, maintaining and profiting from the diversity of their constituencies (Benner et al. 2004, 197). By networking, participants can advance the work of their individual organisation and also promote the wider field of the network. Collaboration in networks may expose organisations to new ideas and knowledge, enhance and deepen critical thinking and creativity, and help avoid competition and duplication of activities. Networks may also enable individual organisations to address global problems through joint action. In addition, being a member of a network may add to an organisation’s credibility and influence and lead to new business opportunities. On a less material level, networks may be sources of inspiration, solidarity, unity and moral support. The light structure of networks may allow them to respond quickly to new situations and take new initiatives without going through a heavy bureaucratic process (Åhäll 2006). Some observers consider networks to be particularly suitable to deal with issues of conflict and peace:

Networks are becoming a favored organizational form wherever a broad operational field is involved (e.g. where links are being made between different regions, or between grassroots to international levels), where problems are so dynamic that rigid structured are not suitable, and where loose ties are preferable to formal organizational bonds. All these features are well known in areas or violent conflicts (Deventer 2004, 1-2).

Networks may be more or less oriented towards joint action, but all networks include knowledge sharing and dissemination. This article focuses on these knowledge exchange functions of networks. According to Stone (2005, 93) a knowledge network has two main functions: first, it coordinates the communication and dissemination of knowledge, acting as an intermediary between intellectual communities in different places. It provides “a space for discussion, setting agendas and developing common visions regarding ‘best practices’, policy or business norms and standards”. This helps to avoid duplication of effort and synchronises ‘communication codes’. This enables the network to speak with a collective voice, leading to its second main function: it can have

a greater ability to “attract media attention, political patronage and donor support than an individual or single organisation” (Stone 2005, 93).

Research on knowledge networks has often focused on scientific networks. However, in practice, and particularly in the world of conflict and development, the academia do not monopolise knowledge networks at all.

[F]or a variety of reasons – such as government cutbacks and funding formulas founded on tuition incomes – universities and their research institutes are rarely in the vanguard of identifying or prioritizing ‘global issues’. Instead, major think tanks and leading NGOs with their own innovative policy departments [...] are taking greater prominence [...]. Hence, the growing salience of national to global knowledge and policy networks (Mbabazi, MacLean and Shaw 2005, 157).

Indeed, a look at recent publications and their quotations reveals that in the field of postconflict development the thinking of institutions such as the World Bank is at least as influential for the practice as the research results of university staff. In fact, what is most interesting for the exchange of lessons, experiences and research results is not academic networking but networking across the sectors of academia, policy, and practice. Such exchanges usually have as an objective the improvement of practice and results in a particular field. The generation of new, synthesised knowledge through networking may be another objective, which ultimately also contributes to improved practice. In addition, knowledge networks often aim to shape public discourses, draw attention to issues, and influence the formulation of policies by governments and international organisations. For the purposes of this article, then, knowledge networks are defined as *networks in which the cross-sectoral exchange of knowledge and experience takes place around a particular set of issues in order to generate new knowledge, improve practice, advocate specific issues, and/or influence policy and discourse*.

A such defined network can take on various forms. It can be a very loose network in which varying participants exchange on occasion or it can be relatively institutionalised and structured, with a fixed membership, regular exchanges, and high coordination. Many networks combine their knowledge exchange function with other, more action-oriented functions.

Theoretical Frames for Understanding Knowledge Networks:

Stone offers several frames in which knowledge networks can be understood. The first is the concept of *epistemic communities*. Epistemic communities are made up of “professional consultants, researchers, scientists” who “share common ideas for policy and seek privileged access to decision-making fora on the basis of their expertise and scholarly knowledge” (Stone 2005, 94). Epistemic communities may also include national and international civil servants who team up with scientists to develop ideas for a certain policy terrain. They also have common beliefs about the nature of their science

and the criteria for validating knowledge. Epistemic communities derive power and influence from their high level of training and expertise (Stone 2005, 94). [See also the special issue of *International Organization* on epistemic communities (Vol. 46, No. 1, 1992).]

Another approach is that of *discourse coalitions and communities*. This approach locates discourse at the interface of power and knowledge. Discourses “generate ‘effects of truth’, that is, naturalising specific ways of thinking and normalising certain ways of doing things” (Stone 2005, 95-96). They are “more or less coherent sets of references that frame the way we understand and act upon the world around us” (Hilhorst 2003, 8). This shared discourse defines the boundaries of the community by determining what is normal, or right, and what is not. Discourse coalitions are groups that seek to impose their discourse in policy domains. Their goal is reached when their discourse shapes the way a society conceptualises the world or a particular problem (Brock et al. 2001; Hajer 1995).

Knowledge networks can also be viewed as *hegemonic projects* and sometimes even as *counter-hegemonic projects*. This approach considers knowledge and discourse as “tools of power used by dominant interests in maintaining the capitalist order” (Stone 2005, 96-97). The concept of “embeddedness” plays a role here: knowledge and ideas lend their influence from being embedded in the dominant order. Ideas do not have independent power, as suggested by the discourse approach, but obtain power from their relation to dominant groups and interests. This relation of ideas and interests takes place via networks: “what becomes considered to be the truth involves gaining control over material resources and this includes knowledge networks. The emphasis is on [...] intellectuals playing a central role in hegemonic projects where specific sets of ideas are funded, generated and disseminated by foundations, think tanks, publishing houses and NGOs”. In this approach, knowledge and discourses are seen as directed and strategic resources (Stone 2005, 96-97).

All of these approaches contain elements that are useful for the analysis of knowledge networks. Whether one or the other type of network is prevalent depends very much on how conflict ridden an issue is. With regard to more “technical” issues, we may find epistemic communities. In highly politicised fields, discourse coalitions are likely to dominate. Some types of networks, like partnerships between institutions developing neo-liberal thinking, may be more easily understood from the hegemonic perspective. The *Embeddedness, Regimes, and Discourse* section of this article will return to the discourse perspective, linking it more specifically to donors, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other actors working in development and peacebuilding.

Categorising Knowledge Networks

Knowledge networks can be categorised in various ways. Dimensions that characterise a network include the discourse that dominates them and the way in which that discourse affects their functioning, and the technology that they use to facilitate

knowledge exchange. Other dimensions will be elaborated in more detail in this section: the degree of cooperation and organisation; a network's focus and objective; issues related to coordination; ownership and accountability; and the level of network exclusiveness.

Degree of Cooperation and Organisation:

One way to distinguish between knowledge networks is to look at their activities: do they limit themselves to the knowledge component or do they also engage in common advocacy or even common project implementation?

Another dimension is the way networks are organised. Depending on their degree of cooperation, objectives, and history, networks may be organised in various ways. At one extreme of the organisational spectrum, an organisation may look like a spider web: a strong centralised network consisting of a central board and secretariat, surrounded by circles of members in various levels of involvement from full to partial membership. In this type of network the secretariat coordinates the exchange of knowledge and selects and edits knowledge based on standards of quality and focus. Strong centralised networks are usually found in formalised environments in which sufficient means can be generated to pay for the relatively high coordination costs. They tend to be exclusive in that not everyone can become a member.

At the other extreme is the fish-net or cell-structured network, which often exists in informal societies or contexts that are threatening. Such a network is characterised by low organisation and coordination. It is inexpensive but it depends on the commitment and activity of its members. Most networks will fall somewhere in between these two forms (Deventer 2004, 7-8).

Deventer draws attention to the fact that the two dimensions mentioned – activities and organisation – are often interrelated. Networks formed with high expectations on the benefit side (ranging from merely gaining information to increasing the impact of activities, obtaining resources and gaining collective legitimacy) are likely to carry out more pro-active functions (ranging from knowledge exchange to advocacy and collective interventions) and, as a result, need a higher degree of institutional formalisation (Deventer 2004, 6-7).

Exclusiveness:

Many knowledge networks have been said to be too exclusive. Often, for example, they remain within the North. According to King (2005, 72-75) many development agencies have been more concerned with “improving their own capacity rather than with improving the quality of engagement with the South”. The first circle of sharing is usually within the organisation; the second is with other players in the North; and only third are the Southern partners and other groups outside the North:

it could be suggested that the new assumptions of 'genuine partnership' between North and South would have made it mandatory to start the explorations of knowledge sharing with the primary actors in the so-called recipient countries. [...] [Instead,] a good deal of the initial knowledge management and knowledge sharing in the agencies has actually taken place behind the protection of an intranet, reinforcing the view that it is the agency's own staff development that is the primary objective (King 2005, 72-75).

Even when knowledge networks do cross the North-South border, or when they are South-South networks, exclusiveness can be an issue. Unequal access by different parties who could benefit and contribute may be the result of different organisational capacities, including time issues but also things like access to internet. It may also be a consequence of politics, particularly in conflict areas where some organisations or individuals may not want to engage with others because they are considered to be allied with one or another of the conflict parties.

Inclusiveness and the broadening of a network are not necessarily positive, however. There is a balance that needs to be found. One needs a certain critical mass to start a lively, sustained interaction, and it is undesirable to exclude important actors – but the group of people which is brought together can be too large as well as too small. If the group is too small, the chance is great that the following may occur.

- There will be little exchange, because there are too few people to participate. Participants' positions will be quickly known to each other and no longer surprising, so the interest to participate will rapidly decline.
- If only people with a similar background participate, opinions may not differ sufficiently to generate creative ideas.
- If only a small fraction of the potential constituency participates, people will turn to other fora where these people do meet.
- Importantly, the network may lose legitimacy due to unequal access (Jenne and Verkoren 2005).

On the other hand, a network can also be too inclusive. By asking too many people with different backgrounds to join, communication could falter. The reasons are that:

- Chances increase that individual contributions are beyond the interest of the majority of members;
- People hesitate to engage themselves because they do not see a common denominator which brings participants together;
- In the case of online exchange, the larger number of people may generate so many messages that they will no longer be read by the other members of a network. A community would then drown in its own flow of information, if not skilfully channelled into different subgroups and discussion threads (Jenne and Verkoren 2005).

The issue of exclusiveness also relates to the extent to which a network provides access to other networks. If a Southern, grassroots network is able to link up with international, often donor-driven networks, then this can be a vital function for its members.

*Focus and Objective:*¹

It is not only the community that could be too exclusive or too inclusive. It can also be the topic or theme of discussion which may be too narrow or too broad. If the area of discussion is too narrow

- it will not stimulate a broad enough flow of information;
- the interaction may be less creative since creative ideas often result from the combination of hitherto uncombined elements;
- a too narrow content would only attract the “usual suspects” who already know each other pretty well; little cross-fertilization would take place.

If the subject matter is too broad (“Conditions for peace on earth”), however, then

- the interaction remains too vague and becomes uninteresting for serious people;
- it attracts, on the contrary, people with lunatic ideas; and
- it becomes very difficult to arrive at common products which bind the group together.

Some networks have a very specific objective. They have been created to prepare a specific event or the next annual report, to elaborate a new strategy, or to coordinate a specific project. “Common products” can be joint publications containing lessons learned or recommendations, joint projects or programmes, the organisation of an event, a broadening of the community, or the start of a new one in a different field or region. Aiming for such a specific outcome can make a community more attractive and active, as participants feel they are working towards something concrete that will serve their interest. Being too specific about the intended outcome of the exchange, on the other hand, severely limits the creativeness of the process and the possibility for arriving at unexpected conclusions.

Networks working toward a specific outcome often function well, because they have a clear focus, their activity is time-bound, and the participants have an obvious common interest. The problem is often that the knowledge generated during the project is not captured and not passed on to future teams with a similar task. There is also little exchange with other teams that perform similar tasks at the same time. For such an exchange the community should be broader, but as a consequence, the objective then becomes more diffuse.

To harness the great potential of project oriented task forces, it can be envisaged that a larger network organises itself as a task force which sets itself a series of challenging objectives with a specified time schedule. It can also accommodate different projects, carried out by different subgroups, at the same time.

Without a specific aim, interaction quickly becomes spurious. But with a too narrowly defined objective, a network may not survive its own success. It may fall apart

once the aim has been realized, without making sure that the accumulated insight is passed on.

In some cases a common product is way beyond what a network aims to achieve. Many networks are created for the exchange of knowledge and experience per se. But there is always an implicit assumption that this exchange will lead to better results, if not through joint activity, then through the improved functioning of the individual participants who are enriched by the exchange.

Coordination of Exchange:

A coordinating party is required for a network to function well. This can range from one person spending a few hours a week on the network to an entire fulltime network secretariat. The coordinating party moderates online interaction, processes information, and facilitates direct contact between members by putting them in touch with each other and by organising face-to-face meetings.

The role of the coordinator is crucial. A network needs one or more persons who feel a special responsibility about the forum which they have joined or created, who facilitate exchange, organise events, and start discussions on governance matters where necessary. At the same time, the selection of a coordinator can present problems. There may be competition over this position, particularly when the coordinating party is also the recipient of external funds for the network. Experience shows that the NGO selected to coordinate the network acquires a power position from being the recipient of donor funds for the network. This can have an adverse effect: the coordinating NGO may be reluctant to jeopardise its newfound power and start monopolising rather than sharing knowledge as a result.

Even if a network does not assign the coordinating function to one of its member organisations but creates a separate secretariat, problems may arise. In one case encountered in Africa, the role of the network secretariat was subject to much criticism from within the network. The secretariat had begun competing with its members for funds to carry out projects – rather than facilitating the work of its members and channelling acquired funds their way. The position of power that individuals and organisations derive from being at the funding interface is recognised by practitioners² and researchers (Hilhorst 2003) alike. This makes democratic governance of networks a priority – but not always a reality.

Ownership, Accountability and Legitimacy:

This leads us to more general questions of power and domination (see also the second and third sections under the Obstacles to Optimal Knowledge Exchange heading). When a knowledge network is analysed, the question of who dominates it – and what that means for the character of the knowledge that is exchanged, the granting of access to potential members, and the use the network has for participants – cannot be ignored. Knowledge networks can be Northern dominated and donor-driven, but they can also

come into existence from the bottom up, as a result of Southern organisations coming together to meet a shared need. As one donor representative pointed out in a conversation, donor-initiated is not necessarily the same as donor-driven; what matters is who sets the agenda (Conversation with Erica Zwaan, Cordaid, The Hague, 22 December 2005). Indeed, some donor-initiated networks are perceived to be very useful by the participants (such as the ICCO partner network in Liberia).

Related to coordination and ownership is the issue of accountability. Because networks are relatively fluid and consist of many different actors, it is difficult to hold them accountable for their actions and the way they use the resources of donors and participants. In other words, “networks as diffuse, complex and weakly institutionalized collaborative systems are neither directly accountable to an electoral base nor do they exhibit clear principal-agent relationships. Therefore two traditional mechanisms of accountability are not applicable in networks: electoral accountability and hierarchical accountability” (Benner et al. 2004, 198).

Nevertheless, networks do devise their own mechanisms of accountability. Often they introduce democratic elements, electing representative bodies of governance. Codes of conduct or constitutions are sometimes developed. In addition, networks are usually accountable to donor organisations that demand transparent practice and reporting. In many cases, the coordinating organisation is asked to conduct monitoring and evaluation, but the way this is carried out depends on the cooperation of the network members.

A related issue is legitimacy. Many networks face internal and external discussions on the legitimacy of the network’s leadership and representative structures. Sometimes, the way in which representatives are selected is subject to criticism. Accusations that a network leadership un-transparently assigns representative posts to friends are not unheard of. Network secretariats are positioned at the interface of the internal network and external stakeholders. This presents them with issues of legitimacy and representation. On the one hand they represent the interests of their members; on the other, they strive to maintain a particular reputation externally.

The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) can serve as an example. It consists of a number of national networks. These networks lend the WANEP secretariat its legitimacy and the secretariat exists to support them. However, the secretariat also demands a certain measure of quality from the national networks in order to maintain its reputation and retain donors. The national networks on their part obtain legitimacy from being a part of the wider WANEP network. Ensuring quality is something they have to do in return for this. The WANEP secretariat is constantly struggling to find the right balance between maintaining the autonomy of the national networks and ensuring a bottom-up decision making structure on the one hand – and making sure that the national networks live up to the quality standards and principles of WANEP on the other (Interviews with 35 WANEP members in Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, February 2006).

To conclude, knowledge networks can be quite different. Some combine knowledge exchange with other common activities, where others do not. Some have high levels of coordination and organisation, while others are more loose and informal. A network may be highly focused in terms of content, or be a platform for the exchange of just about everything.

Like every other social phenomenon, knowledge networks also have power aspects. They may be dominated by a particular discourse coalition or group of actors, exclusive in terms of membership, or donor-driven. It is important to take these characteristics into account in an analysis of knowledge networks.

Overall, knowledge networks are increasingly recognised as an important way to increase learning and exchange. However, they are not always successful – far from it. Stone and Maxwell (2005, 1), for example, have concluded that “access can be unequal, transaction costs high, and sustainability problematic”. The next section will address some of the obstacles that prevent knowledge networks from being efficient and effective.

Obstacles to Optimal Knowledge Exchange

As we have seen, it is widely recognised that knowledge networks can be an important way to extend the reach and influence of organisations and to gain access to sources of knowledge that could improve practice. We have also seen that in response to this recognition, knowledge networks are developed. However, in order for knowledge networks to function successfully, a number of important obstacles need to be overcome. This section looks at these obstacles. It also pays attention to ways of overcoming these obstacles. This will lead to a number of success factors for networks, which are formulated at the end of the article.

Intra-Organisational Obstacles

The main intra-organisational obstacle to successful knowledge exchange is an organisation’s learning capacity. Knowledge networks may function well, and organisational members may participate actively and come across useful new knowledge, but if the organisation’s learning capacity is limited, so will its ability to make use of this knowledge. Organisations with low learning capacity tend to be stuck in routines and find it difficult to change their way of working in response to new insights. Some of the conditions that promote organisational learning include space and time for interaction, reflection and discussion; an atmosphere of safety in which to discuss feelings, uncertainties and assumptions; organisational flexibility that leaves room for individual initiatives and experiments; and exposure to external parties and ideas. (Verkoren 2006) This section looks at the factors that make it difficult to achieve these conditions:

organisational capacity, work and time pressures, organisational structure and work culture.

Organisational Capacity:

Among Southern NGOs and grassroots organisations, the level of organisational capacity varies widely. Organisations with low capacity face a lack of funds, are understaffed, have a lack of skills, and have insufficient access to infrastructure such as the internet. Language issues also play a role, as does lack of proficiency in ‘technical’ terminology. These issues present a serious obstacle for learning and knowledge exchange. For this reason, capacity building is an increasing priority among Northern and Southern players alike.

Knowledge exchange can itself contribute to capacity building by making available tools, training and access to donors. The knowledge exchanged might include information about whom to contact for what, how to frame messages in order to draw attention, and how to raise funds. Where capacity of participants or potential participants is an issue, knowledge networks would do good to explicitly include the transfer of this kind of process knowledge. This includes the translation of documents into local languages and jargon-free versions. [The Central and Eastern African organisation Peace Tree Network (PTN) has begun to do this (conversation with Frederic Kama Kama, Peace Tree Network, Nairobi, 28 November 2005).] This includes building the learning capacity of participating organisations by raising awareness of the importance of, and requirements for, learning, and making available instruments for learning and monitoring and evaluation (M&E).

Intimately related to organisational capacity, funding is a big constraint for knowledge sharing. The results of knowledge sharing are long-term, indirect and difficult to measure, making donors reluctant to fund it given their increased emphasis on direct-impact, measurable activities. Many donors do not appreciate the value of research and knowledge sharing (Based on conversations with 52 peacebuilders in Kenya, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, November-December 2005 and January 2006). In the words of Britton (2005, 6),

[d]onors, whilst increasingly requiring evidence of impact and learning, still use the delivery of outputs and financial probity as the bottom line measure for their ‘return on investment’. Most donors require the use of the Logical Framework Approach (LFA) as a planning framework and there is significant evidence that this acts as a constraint to learning at least at the project and programme level. The constant pressure for NGOs to demonstrate results generates an understandable concern about publicising or even sharing lessons learned and programme experience.

This is also related to the competition for funding: “The reluctance to be open about learning may be particularly strong where a programme has not achieved what was

promised in funding applications for fear of the repercussions that may result” (Britton 2005, 6).

More general financial constraints on the part of Southern NGOs lead to another challenge for learning and knowledge sharing: the loss of qualified personnel to better-paying international NGOs and government agencies, particularly after they have ‘upped their value’ through training. This is an issue that is mentioned again and again by local NGO staff. They plead for donors to make room for higher salary payments (which are usually considered as ‘overhead’ anyway by donors and often not funded) in order to retain staff. [Based on conversations with 52 peacebuilders in Kenya, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, November-December 2005 and January 2006.]

Work Pressure, Time Management and Cost:

An often-mentioned obstacle to learning and knowledge exchange is work pressure and a lack of time. NGO staff see the importance of knowledge sharing and are willing in principle to engage in exchanges, but time constraints often prevent them from doing so. This is problematic since time for reflection and interaction is one of the conditions that promote successful exchange and learning.

The problem is compounded by the increasing emphasis by donors on “direct-impact” activities. Things like networking and reflection are not considered to have a direct impact on development and peace and are thereby effectively discouraged. There is a pressure to limit overhead and minimise resources not spent directly on projects. Particularly organisations that are dependent on project financing find that there is very little room to take a step back from the daily practice of project management and reflect on lessons learned.

At the same time, as we saw above, attention to the importance of learning is increasingly recognised in the development field. This means that the staff of international NGOs face contradictory pressures (see table 1 below).

Table 1. Contradictory Pressures on the Staff of International Aid Agencies

EFFICIENCY	LEARNING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply standard procedures • Concentrate on large scale projects • Keep gender, environmental and other impacts in mind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapt to local circumstances • React in a flexible way • Give local staff larger role • Take political situation into account • Show experimental attitude

Time is money, and knowledge exchange and learning are often considered as an extra cost to the organisation: “the more information is available, the more essential it is to have pathways through it via summaries [...] [and] reviews. There is a major cost to this kind of editing” (King 2005, 76). The same goes for the maintenance of regular cross-organisational contacts, participation in discussion meetings, and the like: they are time-intensive and therefore costly. Although it is recognised that the benefits from such

an investment may well be worth the cost, these potential benefits are still vague and ambiguous. This is inevitable since the whole point of learning is that the outcome will be new and unknown.

The situation is compounded by the fact that for people working on conflict, there is always a sense of urgency and a need to respond to rapidly changing circumstances. In addition, the issues dealt with are often political in nature, adding politics to the pressures that bear upon staff members and managers. More so than in the private sector, the work of managers in the public sector, be it governments or NGOs, is to a large extent politics- and incident-driven (Noordergraaf 2000, 262).

To an extent, these obstacles are such that they will never be fully removed. However, two types of efforts could help limit them. The first is working to gain recognition of the fact that in the long term, learning and efficiency are not contrary but mutually reinforcing. Lobbying donors with this message could be one important step in the right direction. The second effort is trying to devise organisational structures that limit these problems and stimulate learning. The next section will pay attention to this.

Organisational Routine and Structure:

The Dutch NGO Hivos writes in its 2003 *Knowledge Sharing Strategy*: “An oft-heard obstacle to knowledge sharing is work pressure and a lack of time. For this reason, knowledge sharing must be included in the normal policy cycle and integrated into the regular work schedule” (Hivos 2003, 4). How can this be achieved?

For one thing, making contributions to knowledge exchange and learning could be made part of job descriptions and performance appraisals. A recent *Economist* publication about innovation puts it as follows: “It is not enough to have original thinking. It must be recognised, valued and put into practice. [...] A lack of innovation usually indicates that managers at all levels lack the awareness or motivation to spot the potential of the ideas floating around their organisation. They may see original thinking as a threat and therefore discourage it” (Syrett and Lammiman 2002, 37-38).

Characteristics of an innovative organisation are generally considered to include a diverse workforce, opportunities for casual exchanges, and an encouragement to share information (Fagerberg et al. 2004; Syrett and Lammiman 2002; Senge 1986). These facets need to be reflected in personnel policy as well as the shaping of organisational structure and routines. Overall, organisational flexibility is vital: management has to be open to changes in direction as a result of learning and suggestions from staff. In the field of development and peacebuilding, this bears also upon the donors: demands for rigid planning and strictly holding aid recipients to their earlier plans can limit flexibility and learning.

Regular exposure to external parties and ideas could also be integrated into work routines. Opportunities for the training of staff could be increased and they might be encouraged to engage in action research. In addition, exchanges with academics, policy makers and representatives of other organisations could be facilitated.

Work Culture:

Structural changes cannot be the whole story. At least as important is an organisation's work culture: rules, habits, consultation styles, language, communication, the use of symbols, and definitions of reality (Boonstra 2004, 3). Adjustments to organisational routines can create space for changes in work culture, but it is these latter changes that eventually make the difference. "Research [...] provides further support for an emphasis that is less on devising management systems to 'control' learning or to 'manage' knowledge, more on finding new ways to encourage people to think creatively and feed their thoughts back into the organisation" (Kessels and Harrison 2004, 2).

Changing culture is difficult, however. Uncertainty and a resistance to change are a facet of every organisation. Most people desire certainty and stability, and fear the unknown (Boonstra 2004, 4). As we saw above, a culture that stimulates learning is one that fosters an atmosphere of safety in which to discuss feelings, uncertainties and assumptions. A culture of cooperation and exchange, rather than one of competition, contributes to this. Trust is a central concept: without trust, people will be unwilling to share doubts, question assumptions, and make innovative suggestions.

There may also be a fear that openness will be taken advantage of by intra-organisational competitors. To put it differently, free speech is a basic precondition for sharing knowledge and learning. Trust, a cooperative culture, the rewarding of knowledge sharing, and an atmosphere tolerant of mistakes all contribute to this (Sauquet 2004, 382-3). Create such an atmosphere is not an easy task, nor is building trust. The element of power necessarily plays a role in this, both within and among organisations. As we will see below, power can be both negative and positive.

Power Relations, Competition, and Contested Knowledge

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Power issues can present another set of obstacles to knowledge networking. The workings of networks may be limited by people possessing political power, who feel threatened by the network. This can be because of the network's independent links to donors and other external groups, which run counter to a government's desire to monopolise such connections. Power may also be exercised by donors who impose conditions upon recipients and thereby determine the course adopted by a network. As we saw above, individuals or organisations that are assigned to coordinate a network and receive funding to do so also obtain a power position. Powerful actors may also support and strengthen knowledge exchange initiatives, and networks often aim to influence the agendas of those holding power in order to get their objectives met. Networks may themselves be "empowered" by gaining access to policy channels or by building their capacity to act more effectively.

The possession of knowledge itself also constitutes power. McNeill (2005, 57-58) writes that "inter-institutional rivalry is common within the multilateral system, and

institutions gain international prestige partly by having good ideas. Ideas are thus an important source of power.” He gives as an example the extent to which the economics discipline combined with multilateral institutions such as the World Bank go to acquire both the power of ideas and the power over ideas. This happens through the *framing* of the discussion in an economic discourse. “An effective frame is one that makes favoured ideas seem like common sense, while unfavoured ideas are unthinkable” (McNeill 2005, 58).

For knowledge to provide power, it needs to be the kind of knowledge that is desired by others: translatable and useful. The need to make knowledge translatable and accessible is the reason why its packaging is important. In the words of Ivanov (1997), “the importance of the players in global and even regional networks depends primarily on their ability to provide an essentially *local* knowledge input to policy formulation and implementation, but in such form as to make it compatible with the dominant networking discourse” (emphasis in original). The risk of this is that all network participants will end up adopting the dominant terminology and rhetoric irrespective of their perspective, leading to a “sterile globalistic cosmopolitanism, which leaves no room for multifaceted vision of the community discourse, making it utterly biased in relation to the resolution of practical problems.” As we will see in the section on discourse below, this is a real possibility in the development field.

Power also produces and influences knowledge. Those who possess power determine to a large extent what is considered true. Dominant discourse coalitions or hegemonic projects (see this article, sections *Knowledge Networks* and *Embeddedness, Regimes, and Discourse*) exercise the power to impose their definitions and interpretations of reality upon others. In the words of Hardy and Phillips (2002, 10),

actors exercise power by ‘fixing the [...] meanings that create a particular reality and by articulating meaning in ways that legitimate their particular views as ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’; link the actions and preferences of other actors to the achievement of their interests; and make particular socially constructed structures take on a neutral and objective appearance.

Some network participants may be more vocal, or have better developed positions, than others, and therefore influence the course of action that a network adopts. Particularly when such groups form a coalition with other influential players, they may succeed in imposing their discourse on the community.

What arises from this is that those who have the capacity, means, experience, and legitimacy to impose their preferred solution upon others determine to a large extent what happens in a network. In general, Northern participants will be better positioned to do so than Southern participants, and better-funded actors will be more likely to have power than less well-off ones. This means that opportunities to get the most out of knowledge networks are unequal. To understand a network it is important to take this dimension into

account by putting the network in its political and cultural context (see below) and by asking questions like: “who benefits from the network?” and “who is seeking to influence the network?”

Competition among civil society groups plays a role as well. It has the effect of constraining knowledge exchange initiatives, as it may lead to unwillingness to share for fear of giving away one’s competitive advantages. The will to work together, and the acknowledgement that networking is important, is not always there. Within networks competition over sources of funds often plays a role.

In situations of conflict transformation, even more so than in “normal” circumstances, knowledge is never uncontested. Post-conflict development involves not only “technical” questions but certainly also political ones. The analysis of the conflict that lies at the basis of proposed solutions will be different depending on the allegiances of the analyst. This insight relates to the concept of “discourse coalitions” that we saw in the *Knowledge Networks* section of this article. Different groups are continuously at odds with each other, trying to impose their own understanding of the situation on others. When one discourse coalition becomes dominant it can be understood as a hegemonic project.

Contested knowledge can present a severe obstacle to successful exchange and networking. On the other hand, it may also lead to fruitful discussions about the different points of view. The network could then function as a forum for dialogue as well as of exchange. Whether this occurs depends on the willingness of the participants to open up to other points of view and on the skill of the coordinator to guide the discussion in a constructive direction. It may be necessary to start off by simply acknowledging and comparing the different understandings of reality of the participants³, before any further interaction can be undertaken.

Embeddedness, Regimes, and Discourse

Any network should be linked in an appropriate way to a wider environment, to neighbouring communities and similar initiatives in other countries or regions. If this is not the case, a network remains quite isolated. Insights generated in similar networks might not be taken into account, resources will not be pooled, results cannot be compared, and ideas will remain less widespread. Moreover, the chance that insights generated or transferred in the network will actually be used by policymakers or practitioners will be limited.

On the other hand it is also possible that a network is too embedded in one particular region, political stream, discourse community, regime or hegemonic project, in which case it loses credibility and becomes part of a political project rather than a more neutral vehicle for knowledge exchange between participants from different backgrounds and with different points of view.

Although not much has been written about the embeddedness of networks, the literature on NGO embeddedness provides some insight into the issue, particularly considering the fact that NGOs are crucial participants in knowledge exchange networks in the field of peacebuilding. The literature on the embeddedness of NGOs has focused particularly on the funding regimes and discourse coalitions of which they are a part.

Funding Regimes:

“Follow the money”, informant “Deep Throat” said in the film *All the President’s Men* in order to point journalist Bob Woodward, who was about to uncover the Watergate scandal, in the right direction. The quote is often used to signify that whoever has control of the resources determines to a large extent what takes place: not only the direction of policy and practice, but also working methods and even the language that is used. In the business of development and peacebuilding, it is the donors who dominate the working environment. A term that is often used in this context is “funding regime”.

A regime is a set of “implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures around which actors’ expectations converge” (Keohane 1991, 108). These norms, rules and procedures prescribe certain actions and imply obligations – even though these obligations are not necessarily legally enforceable (Keohane 1991, 110). The norms, rules and procedures in funding regimes are created and maintained largely by the actors that subsidise NGOs: state ministries, multilateral funding agencies, and intermediate agencies such as large Northern NGOs that themselves receive donor money and pass this on to Southern partner NGOs.

Over the past decades there has been a trend for donor money to be increasingly channelled through NGOs rather than through governments in developing countries. Co-financing schemes were implemented in which large Northern NGOs became vehicles for spending donor money in cooperation with partner NGOs in the South. This profoundly changed the position of NGOs vis-à-vis the state.

In addition, NGOs face an increasing need for resources due to the internationalisation of the field and the rapid growth of the number of NGOs and other agents operating in the market, such as consultancy firms. Competition for funds becomes stronger. As a result, NGOs have begun adopting business-like practices and professionalised staff and operations, sometimes at the expense of their content and autonomy. This loss of independence is compounded by the forced adjustment to the policies and conditions of resource holders (Krieger 2004) – which, incidentally, have recently also been increasingly pushing for the ‘professionalisation’ of recipient organisations.

As a result of these developments, a new closeness has developed between funding agencies and NGOs. Already in 1996, Edwards and Hulme (1996) identified funding regimes as a threat to NGOs independence (in an article entitled “Too Close for Comfort?”), noting that official funding was becoming increasingly important for NGOs, and fearing that this would politicise them. Government funding appears to have come

with increased conditionality, imposing priorities on NGOs. This has meant that NGOs have been forced to work in particular countries and issue areas. A notable trend has been for donors to demand increased focus on poverty impact at the expense of other social change goals (Mitlin et al. 2005, 2).

The trend of increasing embeddedness of NGOs in funding regimes may also lead to a development where NGOs that were focused idealistically towards the achievement of a particular societal goal, even if this meant engaging in political opposition and advocacy, become less political and more opportunistic, doing whatever donors are willing to fund in order to secure the continuation of their organisation. NGOs have grown more distant from social movements as they became closer to government agencies as a result of their increased dependence on official subsidies. From organisations working for social change they become project deliverers for donors. As a result NGOs may become less pronounced and more similar to one another. Rather than political actors with their own social agendas, they become donor subcontractors.

In addition, official donors increasingly emphasise direct-impact activities at the expense of NGO performance in areas like institutional development and advocacy (Edwards and Hulme 1996), and, as we have seen above, require reporting procedures that do not stimulate learning. The trend among donors towards demanding concrete, measurable results (often in response to political pressures demanding evidence of the usefulness of development cooperation funds) has continued in the years that followed, making the work of NGOs engaged in peacebuilding, which is usually hard to quantify, more difficult. It also potentially makes networking difficult because this type of activity is also difficult to measure.

A related issue that is mentioned by the staff of Southern NGOs is a dependency on short-term funding. Donor funds are often tied to time-bound projects with specific objectives. Activities like reflection, discussion, networking, and improving organisational capacities for long-term M&E and learning are often not part of these projects. They are considered “overhead” and are often not financed. [Based on conversations with 52 peacebuilders in Kenya, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, November-December 2005 and January 2006.]

Discourse:

Discourse plays an important role in knowledge exchange. “By privileging certain visions of society and discarding others, discourses frame and construct certain possibilities for thought and subsequent action” (Grasdorff 2005, 31). Discourse becomes dominant through a combination of *coercion* (peer pressure, wanting to remain part of a group, or seeing the use of the discourse as a way to get funds), *conviction* (people find the discourse convincing), and *seduction* (it is attractive for people to be part of the discourse coalition) (Hilhorst 2003, 75).

These elements of coercion, conviction and seduction characterise the interaction among researchers, national donors, multilateral donors, politicians, and NGOs that has

led to the rise of a particular “development” discourse. The background of the discourse of “development” is formed by the idea that “social change occurs according to a pre-established pattern, the logic and direction of which are known”, and that the West is leading the way in this evolutionary process, “exhibiting the most advanced stance of human perfectability” (Grasdorff 2005, 34). [An interesting description of the invention and spread of this concept is provided by Eric Van Grasdorff (2005, 42-47).] This discourse has been adopted by funding agencies and become part of funding regimes. It is characterised by a specific language, in which concepts like “development”, “empowerment” and “ownership”, but also “accountability”, “output” and “impact”, figure prominently.

One possible consequence of this dominant discourse is that it hides the political nature of development activities by casting them in a neutral, technical language. Development interventions inherently lead to social and political change, both intentionally and unintentionally, but this facet of development is obscured by the use of seemingly technical terms. This is what Ferguson calls the “anti-politics machine” (Ferguson 1994). By way of illustration, Mitlin et al. (2005, 13) note that where NGO staff in the 1970s and 1980s were well familiar with the radical writings of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, writers who focused on underlying structures of oppression, today the bookshelves in NGO offices often display more sector-specific, less political and more technical texts.

When one hears representatives of Southern grassroots organisations speak, their fluency in the discourse of development is sometimes striking. To explain why they have adopted it, one merely has to “follow the money”. It is the language of the donors, and to qualify for funding local actors have to use it in funding proposals, in monitoring reports, and at partner conferences. Thus, the adoption of “development speak” has a strategic undertone (Hilhorst 2003, 57). More generally, dominant discourses reflect the gap between North and South in terms of knowledge generation. Most of the well-resourced institutes and well-trained researchers are in the North and many members of Southern elites study there, making it inevitable that much of the discourse is driven by Northern perspectives and perceptions. Writing about Africa, Grasdorff (2005, 50-54) notes that the debt crisis and structural adjustment programmes starting in the 1980s have cut off funding for African universities and publication structures, and describes how this combined with a Western control of media to lead to a ‘re-colonisation’ of knowledge transmission, production and dissemination.

In addition to the general phenomenon of “development” discourse, donors also impose more particular discourse trends, often following the political preferences of the moment. As a result of their embeddedness in funding regimes, NGOs are less able to put forward alternative discourses, and concerns grow that “becoming public service contractors [...] [is] tying NGOs into mainstream approaches to a greater extent than ever before” (Mitlin et al. 2005, 8). Recent trends in these mainstream discourses and approaches include the increasing dominance of the neoliberal agenda, the hegemony of

the poverty reduction agenda in international aid, and most recently the prominence of the security agenda and attempts to tie it to the poverty agenda (Mitlin et al. 2005, 8-12). To Southern actors it is usually known that particular donors have certain preferences, and in anticipation of this, fund-seeking organisations frame activities in a particular way in their funding applications.

A notable development in the peacebuilding field has been the “securitisation” of peacebuilding and postconflict development. Since September 11, 2001, there is an increasing emphasis on security at the expense of other facets of peacebuilding work. Within the field of peacebuilding US and other Western donors have shifted their focus towards military-oriented activities like security sector reform, at the expense of more socially oriented initiatives. Southern organisations argue that security sector reform can only be addressed if the underlying issues that cause the insecurity in the first place are dealt with as well – if not, then security sector reform can even strengthen authoritarian regimes. The same is true for disarmament: people carry arms because they feel insecure, and therefore disarming them doesn’t solve the whole problem. These arguments are now not usually taken up. [Based on a conversation with Ms. Jebiwott Sumbeiyo (programme officer), Africa Peace Forum (APFO), in Nairobi on 29 November 2005.]

At the same time, local actors do have a role to play in the use and the shaping of discourse. Discourses get reinterpreted at the local level, at the interface with other discourses that exist locally and internationally, drawing together fragments from both modernity and tradition. Local actors master multiple development notions and use them for their own ends. They “reshuffle, circumvent, and accommodate” discourses (Hilhorst 2003, 81).

NGO leaders, through whom development activities and funding enter a locality, are often the actors that find themselves at the interface of international and local discourses. In that capacity they function as “brokers of meaning”, mediating between different knowledge systems (Hilhorst 2003, 189-191). These actors also derive power from the knowledge of international discourse, seeking to make parties dependent on their brokerage services and being able to manipulate development discourse to fit their own local political agendas (Hilhorst 2003, 100).

Discourses, then, are used and reproduced both unintentionally and intentionally. What is important about this is that in both cases they shape reality in a very direct way. Discourses have unintended consequences for “confirming, accelerating or altering social change” [...] It is through actors’ use of multiple discourses that social patterns are negotiated, power distributed and development shaped” (Hilhorst 2003, 100-101).

Donor-Driven Projects:

Of course, the discourse that dominates relates to the activities that are predominantly carried out. Northern-dominated discourse goes hand in hand with donor-driven projects. According to Southern NGO staff interviewed by the author, donors often announce ‘we have money for this and that’, instead of asking ‘what is needed’

(Based on conversations with 52 peacebuilders in Kenya, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone, November-December 2005 and January 2006). This ties organisations down. They are in no position to turn down money and thus have to go along. As a result, structures are created that are not used because the community was not involved in them. This reflects a lack of recognition of insider expertise. External experts are brought in that do not really understand the situation. Often they miscalculate, assume, generalise, or do not know the local context. The analysis of people on the ground is often not taken seriously, possibly because they do not have university degrees. When a donor-financed programme is evaluated, donors usually do not look for an expert within the country, someone who knows the terrain, implications, practices, and (political) obstacles, and who might as a result use the right indicators to determine success or failure. An example of an outsider who doesn't understand the situation is an external evaluator in West Africa who asked why staff did not commute more between regions, showing a complete lack of understanding for the condition of infrastructure.

Someone who is thoroughly familiar with a situation will feel it when change begins to occur. This may not always be tangible and will go unnoticed by external observers, and donors' reporting formats usually do not capture it. NGO staff nonetheless try to translate these kinds of changes into the necessary format, but part of the knowledge gets lost in the translation process.

Southern partners are also sometimes to blame, for taking the easy road of saying what the donors want to hear in the hope of getting their money. Or they simply take donors' claims for granted and do not study the situation themselves. According to some Southern NGO workers, their colleagues should be more assertive in making clear what is wrong with donors' demands. They sometimes have to be strong and resist donor policy preferences. A thorough knowledge of the community provides such strength as it makes arguments better-founded and convincing.

One reason why Southern NGOs are not more assertive may be, in the words of Mawdsley et al. (2002, 12-13), "a deep lack of self-confidence within Southern NGOs, inhibiting them from advancing their own agenda more openly and positively." They suggest that this may be explained by "older colonial and postcolonial/developmentalist hierarchies, and the systematic ways in which Northern, 'formal' (scientific and management) ideas have been privileged over local ways of seeing and doing things." Formal, documented, and scientifically tested knowledge has been presented to Southern actors as the definition of 'legitimate' knowledge, discarding more traditional types of knowledge. Mawdsley et al. (2002, 12-13) add that the lack of self-confidence of Southern NGOs "also reflects the relative lack of access that Southern NGOs have to certain forms of information and knowledge, such as university research."

Another problem may be that some NGOs have little interest in challenging the accepted wisdom. According to Mawdsley et al. (2002), many of them were created not out of a particular need or ideology but in response to funds becoming available in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result they do not have a particular agenda to advance, apart from

self-preservation, and “acquiesce to working only or mainly at their paymasters rather than their clients demand”. As a result, “Northern NGOs may be committed to listening to their Southern partners, and through them to the voices of the poor, but many of their Southern partners are prepared to tell them whatever they want to hear” (Mawdsley et al. 2002, 5).

An additional factor that may play a role in the domination of Northern discourse and priorities is the ‘professionalisation’ of Southern partners: “[a]s Northern NGOs have withdrawn from their previous levels of direct development work, and the number of Southern NGOs has exploded, they have had to find appropriate ways of working together. This has tended to mean that these Southern NGOs have to conform to certain organisational practices” (Mawdsley et al. 2002, 15). These practices include financial accounting procedures and M&E systems. Such procedures demand time and skills, and are often considered by Southern NGOs to be inappropriate – this is particularly true for the demand for direct and measurable impact in M&E and reporting. All this leads Southern NGOs to attracting and building technical knowledge (information and communication technology, Western management procedures, financial accounting, English language skills, development jargon) at the expense of local knowledge (Mawdsley et al. 2002, 17-18).

NGOs’ Local and Political Context:

NGOs are “both *part of* and partially *apart from* broader processes of development”. They should “always be understood in terms of their relationships to the state and market, as well as by historical changes *within* civil society, such as processes of citizenship formation and new/declining forms of popular mobilization” (Miltin et al. 2005, 3 and 4, original emphasis).

NGOs are involved in interventions to change societies, but they are also part of those societies. Their actions have intentional and unintentional consequences for the context in which they operate – and vice versa. Hilhorst (2003, 4) writes that “everything happening in and around NGOs has a bearing on the politics of power within the organizations, the politics of organizational legitimation and, finally, the politics of (local and global) development.”

Local actors’ room for manoeuvre, or the social space available to them to fulfil their projects, is restricted by the presence of other actors in development. It is also limited by the memory of previous interventions, which shapes the scope of actors’ demands and aims. Associational patterns also play a role: state-society-NGO relations make up the context of NGOs’ actions. Family standing and tribal affiliation often cut across and determine these relations. Finally, NGOs are fitted into local politics; local constituents shape NGOs’ identity and goals. All this modifies the idea of a linear, step-by-step policy and implementation model: in reality actions are shaped by personal perspectives, social relations, and everyday politics (Hilhorst 106-119).

Social and Political Situation in Postconflict Societies

Achieving an active interplay between scientific community, civil society, the private sector and political society is difficult in conflict areas due to high levels of mistrust between groups and individuals. In addition, such regions are often plagued by a scarcity of resources, low security and weak or bad governance – none of which provides an enabling environment for knowledge exchange. Fear may prevent people from speaking freely, and practical issues such as low internet connectivity, electricity cuts, bad roads and a lack of vehicles limit exchanges.

Next to that, people working in war-torn areas often have a high sense of urgency and work overload, and a tendency to engage only in “direct impact” activities. It is perceived that the people need to see a “peace dividend” in the form of direct physical progress in order to build support for peacebuilding processes. Knowledge exchange activities appear to be of secondary importance. Nonetheless, local NGO workers recognise the importance of learning from own experience as well as knowledge and lessons from other places. When people begin to see learning and exchanging as an integral part of action, then this is likely to benefit their work as well as others.

More generally network participants from developing countries are at a disadvantage because of the weak enabling environment that results from the problems described above. Inadequate political commitment from weak or authoritarian governments and the lack of a research culture also play a role in creating this disadvantage. These issues make it more difficult for Southern actors to participate in a network, even if it is effective in disseminating knowledge. All this compounds the obstacles mentioned so far for Southern participants and amplifies the fact that networks are more likely to revolve around international research agendas and Northern policy concerns.

Capacity building is a central strategy towards changing this situation. Improving the learning and research capacity of Southern organisations and individuals will upgrade their position as full-scale participants in networks. Networks themselves can play an important role in this capacity building exercise. Better developed participants can share their experience and assist others as they develop their capacity.

Cultural Issues and Tradition versus Modernity

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Expectations and realities of knowledge and information sharing are likely to be very different in different circumstances and cultural settings:

in some situations where specialist knowledge is a very scarce commodity, there may well be strong temptations to retain rather than share. In other settings, where age is an important marker of status, hopes of knowledge networking across the boundaries of seniority may prove to be naive [...]. Equally in civil service

structures, such as Japan's, where the generalist is regarded more highly than the specialist professional or technical personnel, it may also be problematic to install a culture of networking and knowledge sharing (King 2005, 75).

A background to the whole discussion of discourse and culture forms the idea that the world has dominant and less dominant knowledge systems. Knowledge is power and, since the 'North' or the 'West' are politically and economically dominant, their concepts of knowledge dominate as well. Perhaps the knowledge networks by their very nature emphasise 'Western', rationalistic knowledge over other types of knowledge:

the expansion of knowledge networks as 'sites of authority' potentially accelerates 'normalisation of the dominant discourses of power' [Rai 2005]. Networks systematise knowledge generated by diverse individual and organisational knowledge actors and impose a rationality that gives precedence to a particular conception of knowledge – usually of a codified, technocratic, secular, westernised society. Participation is informally restricted through boundary drawing discourses by the network to exclude or devalue indigenous knowledge that does not conform to techno-scientific criteria (Stone 2005, 99).

Most people agree that the knowledge of local people is invaluable: they have used it to sustain themselves throughout the years. No one can better judge the best ways to deal with local circumstances and traditions than the people living in the locality itself. However, peacebuilding interventions are often based on Western concepts of conflict resolution, mediation, and institution building. Why is this? Part of the story is that the indigenous traditions often referred to are not as strong as people think: they have eroded with the advent of colonialism and 'modernisation', and become segmented.

It is also important to understand that if there is a clash between Western and indigenous knowledge then this is not so much a contradiction between parts of the world as it is a clash within countries and communities: between those who have been educated according to Western standards, and those who have not; between the youth, who have access to new sources of knowledge through information technology, and the older generation who stick to traditional knowledge; between politicians who maintain the Western-style state apparatuses installed by colonialism, and traditional authorities at the local level.

One reason why local, indigenous knowledge appears to be losing ground in the dynamic interaction between different traditions is that most of it is not written down. Many non-Western communities have an oral tradition, which has contributed to the fact that traditional knowledge was not captured in modern education. People in Africa and other developing regions are often not used to reading newsletters and reports, even if they are educated NGO staff members. It is simply not part of their tradition. But written information is what Western stakeholders, like donors, base their work on.

Traditional peacebuilding methods in many non-Western countries are not as systematic as Western tools and concepts. They sometimes include symbolic acts, like land cleaning or exchanging gifts to validate an agreement and build trust. The knowledge on which they are based is not systematised but often more intuitive and based on experience and tradition. Such methods and knowledge are difficult to reconcile with Western standards of scientific validity.

Efforts to exchange tacit knowledge through direct interaction might be less prone to the kind of rationalisation described above and thereby have less of a Western bias. However, such exchanges will be very difficult across cultures as there is less of a shared context that makes the tacit knowledge explainable and understandable.

These and other cultural issues are impossible to resolve entirely, but it helps to recognise them and make them explicit during exchanges.

Knowledge Changing over Time

Earlier in this article we addressed the extent to which knowledge is context-specific. In that section, context was implicitly defined primarily in terms of space. However, one may also consider context in terms of time, and ask: in how far is knowledge specific to a particular period of time?

Often, knowledge is implicitly or explicitly considered to be cumulative: it builds up over time. One piece of knowledge adds to another and expands the knowledge base. This is not always the case. Knowledge has a short “shelf life” and often the knowledge of yesterday is not longer relevant today because the world may look radically different. The paradigm has changed, fashion and language are different, different discourse coalitions dominate, and packaging has changed. In the field of conflict transformation and peace building, the relevant knowledge has dramatically changed with the end of the Cold War, and partly perhaps again after 11 September 2001, which changed the discourse.

As a result, saved up knowledge may turn out to be irrelevant, more quickly than we might think. It is therefore a continuous challenge to keep databases – and other tools to store knowledge and make it accessible – “clean” of outdated knowledge in order to prevent them from becoming unworkable.

This time-specificity may also bear upon the mode of knowledge exchange. Old-fashioned ways of presentation or exchange of knowledge could be an obstacle to the development of new forms.

Views of knowledge exchange as a linear process that builds up an ever-increasing and cumulative body of knowledge are therefore not realistic. Knowledge that was once generated and exchanged will continue to be modified by users as time goes by. Modes of knowledge exchange will continue to develop.

This does not mean that all knowledge from the past is useless; it merely suggests that the social and historical context of the time should be taken into account when a particular piece of knowledge is considered.

Conclusion

The obstacles to successful knowledge exchange are numerous. However, this article has attempted to not only describe the obstacles but also suggest solutions. These suggestions will not remove the obstacles entirely, but they might make them easier to deal with. More generally, it is important that knowledge networks make the obstacles explicit and take them into account in their design and mode of operation.

Building on the theory presented in this article, what characteristics of knowledge exchange networks are important for their successful functioning?

1. The network has a clear *added value* in that it brings (more or less tangible) benefits to participants that they otherwise would not have gained. It has a membership that has a *need* for the network and participants are motivated to participate actively. The network does not exist in isolation but has sustainable links to activities carried out in reality.
2. There is a clear *purpose*; a shared mission by all parties involved. This has been translated into a clear set of objectives. Without a specific aim, interaction quickly becomes spurious. However, with a too narrowly defined objective, a community may not survive its own success. It may fall apart once the aim has been realized, without making sure that the accumulated insight is passed on.
3. From the outset, there is *clarity* about the limits and possibilities of the network. There has been sufficient discussion about what the network can do, and expectations are not unrealistic. Similarly, there is clarity about the process. Lines of communication and dissemination are clear and systematic (but flexible).
4. The *participating organisations have the capacity to learn* and to use the network for some purpose. They are able to apply the knowledge gained from network participation in their own work. This requires both a will and space to change work methods and try new things. The members also have a work culture that stimulates learning. The network supports learning processes within member organisations.
5. Participants have *time* to engage in meaningful exchanges.
6. More generally, the network contributes to the *capacity building* of its members. This helps to deal with issues of power and inequality, and ensures that members can get the most out of their participation in the network.
7. The network provides *room for discussion and reflection* upon actions. Room is also created for *self-organisation* – participants who link up can start all kinds of initiatives together.

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- | [8.](#) There is an atmosphere of *safety* in which to express doubts and criticisms and manage uncertainties; in other words the network constitutes a safe setting for knowledge exchange.
- | [9.](#) There is *trust* among the members and between participants and funders. Without the confidence that everyone is in it for the larger good there will be a tendency to withhold knowledge in order to strengthen one's position.
- | [10.](#) There is *openness* to different points of view, different values, and different interpretations of reality.
- | [11.](#) *Embeddedness*. Any network should be linked in an appropriate way to a wider environment, to neighbouring communities, similar initiatives in other countries or regions. If this is not the case, a network remains quite isolated. Insights generated in similar networks might not be taken into account, resources will not be pooled, results cannot be compared, and ideas will remain less widespread. At the same time, the network should not be embedded to the extent that it cannot operate autonomously.
- | [12.](#) The network is *democratic and inclusive*. It is not controlled by a single set of interests. Members may have unequal capacity and strength but they have an equal voice. Those who coordinate the network are accountable to the members.
- | [13.](#) The network strives to *mitigate power issues*. It has mechanisms in place that regulate conflict and prevent personal issues from taking the foreground. The stronger members have a genuine desire to contribute to open exchange and facilitate the capacity building of other members. They inevitably influence the network more strongly than weaker members do, but they do not impose their own views at the expense of openness and diversity.
- | [14.](#) *Diversity of views*. The network's knowledge exchange function is not hampered by the constraints of a discourse coalition or hegemonic project. The network may engage in advocacy but its "common voice" does not prohibit the coexistence of different opinions. *Cultural issues* are recognised and discussed in the network.
- | [15.](#) *Results*. Networks may generate "common products". These could be joint publications containing lessons learned or recommendations, joint projects or programmes, the organisation of an event, a broadening of the community, or the start of a new one in a different field or region. Many communities are created for the exchange of knowledge and experience per se. But there is always an implicit assumption that this exchange will lead to better results, if not through joint activity, then through the improved functioning of the individual participants who are enriched by the exchange.
- | [16.](#) The right *balance* has to be found between *inclusiveness* and diversity on the one hand, and *focus* and direction on the other. This goes for content as well as membership, as the next two points elaborate.
- | [17.](#) *Content balance*. If the field of discussion is too narrow, it will not stimulate a broad enough flow of information and interaction may be less creative since creative ideas often result from the combination of hitherto uncombined elements. In addition, a too

narrow field would only attract the “usual suspects” who already know each other fairly well; little cross-fertilization would take place. If the field is too broad (“Conditions for peace on earth”), however, then the interaction remains too vague and becomes uninteresting for serious people, and it becomes very difficult to arrive at common products which bind the group together.

18. *Membership balance.* If only people with a similar background participate, opinions may not differ sufficiently to generate creative ideas. Moreover, if only a small fraction of the potential constituency participates, people will turn to other fora where these people do meet. On the other hand, by asking too many people with different backgrounds to join, communication could also falter. The reasons are that chances increase that individual contributions are beyond the interest of the majority of members; people hesitate to engage themselves because they do not see a common denominator which brings participants together; and there may be an information overload – unless the information is skilfully channelled into different subgroups and discussion threads.
19. *Facilitation and moderation.* Sustaining networks requires considerable time, effort and resources. There should be at least one person who is enabled to spend time on the facilitation of the network. Some kind of secretariat will have to be set up that coordinates and organises the flows of knowledge, preventing information overload and scatter. It follows that funding is required. However, a network can also be overmoderated, if a moderator has a narrow view of the purpose of the group, takes decisions in an authoritarian way and stifles discussion rather than stimulating it. There is only a narrow space between channelling a discussion smoothly into a constructive direction and pressing people into a straightjacket which would exclude any spontaneous detours, exchanges or personal remarks. The role of the moderator is crucial, since all the other dimensions mentioned in this list depend on a moderator who assures that the group avoids the many possible pitfalls.
20. *Tacit as well as explicit knowledge* is exchanged; the network brings people into contact with each other who can share experiences, but it also attempts to draw experiences together into codified knowledge that can be distributed more easily. People involved in networking and knowledge sharing tend to agree that a combination of face-to-face and online interaction is the best way to achieve this (Based on conversations with researchers and practitioners in the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and East and West Africa over the course of 2005 and 2006).
21. Knowledge sharing needs to occur *on a regular basis*, otherwise information provided may already be outdated. Strategies working today may not work in a few months’ time, particularly given the dynamics of conflict situations.
22. The participating organisations have a sense of *ownership*. It is their process and not something that has been imposed by donors or governments.
23. The network is *flexible* and capable of responding to changes in the environment.

- | [24.](#) The network does not strive to be an overall, comprehensive knowledge system, but aims to offer a *stimulating framework* that facilitates exchange and access to knowledge sources.
- | [25.](#) The network establishes *links with existing networks* in order to prevent duplication and maximise knowledge benefits.
- | [26.](#) The network operates in an *enabling context*. It is not obstructed by governments, conflict parties or other organisations. The basic infrastructure is present and there is some level of safety and security. The political environment fosters free speech and freedom of movement. If the context is not so enabling, creative ways are found to deal with constraints, such as bad infrastructure, illiteracy, and a hostile political context.
- | [27.](#) The *funding structure* of the network has the following characteristics:
- [There is sufficient funding for networking and knowledge sharing activities, even if the direct impact of these cannot always be shown.](#)
 - [At the same time, the network is accountable financially.](#)
 - [Donors do not impose particular kinds of knowledge or particular modes of knowledge exchange.](#)
 - [It does not provide a position of power to one organisation at the funding interface, but ensures that the funds benefit the network as a whole.](#)
 - [It does not enhance competition between members.](#)
 - [Donors engage in knowledge exchange with the network, thus contributing to the knowledge processes inside it and linking it up to other networks.](#)
 - [Donors take the knowledge generated in the network seriously and make use of it in their policy formulation as much as possible. This will increase the relevance of the network and give participants an incentive to continue contributing to it.](#)

Notes

1. This section is based in part on an earlier publication by the author with Gerd Junne (Jenne and Verkoren 2005).
2. Based on conversations with researchers and practitioners in the Netherlands, United Kingdom, and East and West Africa over the course of 2005 and 2006.
3. The Split Screen project <<http://www.netuni.nl/splitscreen/>> of the Network University is an example of this. The project facilitated an online process involving Netherlands-based Palestinian and Jewish youth who compared their different interpretations of the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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