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Impact and lessons learned

This article looks at the learning which has been generated by the ACTS programme and the extent to which it has met its objectives.

TWO

Action learning for peace?

Applied Conflict Transformation Studies as a capacity development approach

by DR WILLEMIJN VERKOREN and ALEXANDRA MOORE

Applied Conflict Transformation Studies (ACTS) is a Master's level programme for peacebuilding practitioners that is offered in parts of the world that are affected by conflict. In response to a number of challenges that peacebuilders face, particularly the lack of opportunities to engage in strategic reflection about their work, ACTS focuses on practice-based learning within an academic framework. Action research (AR), which focuses both on people's work and their own role within it, is central to the course. This article explores the lessons that can be learned from ACTS as it has been implemented between 2005 and today. In particular it asks whether ACTS provides a model for peacebuilding capacity development that may inspire other initiatives, and whether AR turned out to be an approach that can foster analytical and reflective practitioners, foster more effective and strategic peace practice, and enable practitioners to contribute to the generation of new academic theory. The article finds that AR indeed has enabled practitioners to be more reflexive and has helped them become more strategic in their work. However, there have been a number of challenges in developing the AR approach, such as building the capacity of teaching teams and developing a

common understanding of the approach and its value with all the implementing partners. If this is achieved, another aim of ACTS may come closer to being realised, namely to strengthen the role of Southern practitioners in theory generation and academic and policy debates. This is an area which requires much more attention in the future. Finally, the article asks whether a capacity development programme such as ACTS can extend its influence beyond the participants to change the practice of organisations and other key players. It is still rather early to determine this, but scattered evidence suggests that the programme has achieved some limited changes in projects and organisations.

Introduction

Applied Conflict Transformation Studies (ACTS) is a Master's programme for peacebuilding practitioners that is offered in parts of the world that are affected by conflict. It was initiated by Responding to Conflict (RTC), a UK-based non-governmental organisation (NGO), and developed and implemented with a consortium of partners: the Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT) and Paññāsāstra University in Cambodia, the Nansen Dialogue Network and Novi Sad University in the Balkans, and the Coalition for Peace in Africa (COPA) in East Africa. Since 2005 the Master's programme has been offered in two regional centres: one in Cambodia for participants from all over Asia, and one in Serbia for participants from the Balkans (and later on also from the Middle East). As the programme was developed there were three main aims in mind. *The first was to develop the capacity of peacebuilding practitioners to engage in their work; the second was to support and promote effective and strategic peacebuilding work; and finally to develop theory and new knowledge about peacebuilding processes from the perspective of*





those who are engaged in the actual work. To do this ACTS focuses on practice-based learning within an academic framework to offer a programme suited to the needs of practitioners. Action research (AR), which focuses both on people's work and their own role within it, is central to the course. The underlying idea is that by using action research methodology in their own work environments, and comparing their findings with existing thinking in the field of peacebuilding, the participants not only become more effective in their practice but also contribute to global theory development from a Southern, practitioner perspective. In this way the programme aims to bridge some of the divides in the peacebuilding field between universities and the field, and between North and South.

This article explores the lessons that can be learned from ACTS as it has been implemented between 2005 and today. In particular it asks whether ACTS provides a model for peacebuilding capacity development that may inspire other initiatives. It will look at the specific theories of change which underpin the programme and ask to what extent have these theories proven correct? In particular, has action research turned out to be an approach that can foster analytical and reflective practitioners and more effective and strategic peace practice? Have changes been able to move from the individual practitioner to their organisations and colleagues? And has ACTS been able to strengthen the voice of practitioners in the generation of academic theory?

This article has been written by two people who have been involved in the ACTS programme in different roles and at different stages. Dr Willemijn Verkoren is assistant professor at Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands and has accompanied the development of ACTS as a learning consultant since 2005. Alexandra Moore is the Programme Coordinator for RTC and has been involved in the development of ACTS since its initial stages. The article also draws heavily on the thinking and reflections of many colleagues, in particular Dr Vesna Matovic, the RTC Programme Manager for this work. She has taught in both ACTS centres and previously worked for the partners in the Balkans to

develop the course. Clearly then, we are not neutral observers and we have tried to be conscious of the possible bias that this may bring to this article.

The article begins by giving a short history of the ACTS course in section one: how did the programme come into being? In order to elaborate on the question *why* ACTS came into being, section two discusses the importance of learning for peace practitioners. Section three goes on to examine the theoretical background of ACTS: what theories and research findings have informed the approach taken? More specifically, section four outlines how these theories and ideas have translated into theories-of-change that have shaped the programme. In other words, what did we think ACTS would accomplish? Section five explains how these theories were translated into practice: what does the course look like and who are the participants? In section six, the theories of change are compared to the results we have seen so far. Have the theories proven correct, and has the programme met its aims? Finally, the concluding section discusses what all of this implies for capacity development initiatives more generally.

1. How did ACTS come into being?

Responding to Conflict (RTC) is a UK-based NGO that has been working on conflict transformation for over fifteen years. It has focused on the provision of training courses to peacebuilders from around the world as well as longer-term programmes of work with partners in various conflict-affected regions of the world. In Birmingham, UK, various courses have been offered, ranging from short week-long courses to the three-month *Working with Conflict* course. RTC's approach, whether in programmes or courses, is based on a participatory, experiential learning methodology that builds on the experiences and knowledge of those they work with.

By 2001 RTC had been working with peacebuilders for over eight years and the organisation felt it





was time to take stock of how it was doing. During research trips in 2001 and 2002 RTC staff and associates visited various peacebuilding practitioners from Kenya, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka and Serbia to find out how people had been able to use the training they had received from RTC in the past and to identify what challenges and needs remained for practitioners. One of the key needs that people voiced was for opportunities to access more in-depth skills and knowledge, and to think about the complex issues and challenges they were working with. Many were thinking about further study and some had already gone on to Bradford University in the UK or the Eastern Mennonite University in the US to do a Master's course. These courses had been valuable to them – but, they said, not to the communities they left behind, as their education had not explicitly been linked to the practical work they were returning to.

This led to the idea for a learning programme that “..develops and articulates the experience of people working for peace, human rights, democracy and justice, builds new theory from practice and tests it in the fire of reality” (RTC 2004). During the consultation phase of ACTS there was much debate about whether ACTS should be an academic programme. On the one hand this seemed like a natural option for an advanced learning programme, but at the same time it was recognised that the challenge would be to balance the needs of practitioners and their ways of working with the necessary demands of an academic course. It was finally decided that a Master's degree would provide the structure and rigour to allow people to undertake their research and refine their thinking. However, the difficulty of balancing practitioners' needs with academic requirements is an issue that has remained with the programme.

In 2005, the first courses began in Novi Sad, Serbia, for participants from different parts of the Balkans and in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, with participants from South and South-East Asia. In each ACTS Centre, ACTS is run by a consortium of three partners: the local NGO, which coordinates the programme, the local university, and RTC.

2. The importance of learning for peacebuilding NGOs

“Am I doing this thing right?” and, more fundamentally, “am I doing the right thing?” are questions most people ask themselves from time to time. And indeed they should as asking such questions leads to learning and improvement. In the complex and dynamic work of peacebuilding, they are particularly important, as the potential price of doing the wrong thing is high and renewed violence could ultimately be the result. However, finding answers to these questions is not easy. Doing so entails an open mind and a willingness to question previous decisions and ideas and learn from our mistakes – something which in a context affected by conflict is particularly difficult because of the implications this may have. It also requires a willingness to think about how we as individuals affect a given situation, and the assumptions we bring about the work. More practically, it is hard to obtain the knowledge needed to answer the questions in a satisfactory way. This requires research, reflection and exchange, all of which are particularly difficult in a conflict-affected and resource-deprived context.

The characteristics of violent conflicts have changed significantly since the end of the Cold War, as is reflected by the term ‘New Wars’ (Kaldor 2006). Increasingly wars take place within, not between countries. Often they are fought by groups that are confusingly difficult to define, hiding amongst civilians and exhibiting the characteristics of rebel forces, sectarian groups, terrorists, warlords, and criminals. Government forces, too, engage in plunder and smuggling, and integrate militias and private security providers into their ranks. Increasingly civilians have been targeted by the fighting groups on all sides. All this takes place in a context of globalisation and a weakening of national states' ability to provide for the security of their citizens. Deeper understanding about this new and changing context of conflict, and about the strategies that





do and do not work is needed, if conflicts are to be successfully transformed. Those working in the midst of conflict, such as peacebuilding NGOs, struggle to understand it, to adapt their analysis as the context changes, and to articulate why their actions do, or do not, contribute to changes in the situation.

A recent study found that “NGOs best equipped to deal with security threats were those which [...] had a strong analysis of the context” (Goodhand 2006: 107). Such NGOs are able to make sense of the conflict in which they work and to understand how changes in their context affect the work that they do. In other words, they are able to learn continuously, and this helps them to continue to be relevant and to see opportunities for engagement when they arise. Similarly, another study of nine successful South Asian NGOs showed that “the success of these NGOs was in part attributable to their willingness to embrace new learning and invest in developing their capacity as ‘learning NGOs’” (Hailey and James 2002: 398).

However, learning is difficult in conflict settings for a number of reasons. NGO staff often work in a context of urgency, by necessity have action-oriented working styles, and as a result can find it difficult to create the time and opportunity for reflection and learning. In conflict-torn societies, the content of knowledge itself is usually contested as many narratives will exist within any given situation. In addition the mistrust and suspicion that often prevails between organisations working in these areas, as well as competition for resources, can hamper knowledge sharing. Structural inequalities also constrain the opportunities for learning and reflection that local Southern NGOs (SNGOs) have: the low research capacity of Southern knowledge institutions, a lack of recognition of indigenous knowledge, and the imposition of Northern policy priorities as part of the way the funding of NGOs is organised¹. All these issues contribute to a lack of opportunities for Southern peacebuilders to reflect systematically on the role and place of their activities in the wider spectrum of peacebuilding, to analyse the effect of their interventions and ask whether they are doing the right thing, to study the

needs and priorities of beneficiaries and collect existing ideas and methodologies of peacebuilding, and to document and share lessons learned.

The learning strategies of organisations are a relatively new field of analysis, which originated in the business sector in the early 1990s, reflecting an increasing emphasis on the ‘knowledge economy’. Some years later, the development sector began to take up the issue as well. However, this body of thinking remains largely confined to internal learning mechanisms and knowledge flows inside organisations in the global North. From a study of British development organisations, Ramalingham (2005: 26) concludes that these organisations’

“focus on internal knowledge work belies the fact that [they rely] on activities in the South as a key source of their most valued knowledge, and that eventually, all knowledge that is ‘value generating’ must by necessity be tied back to a level of [knowledge sharing] with those in the South. [...] Learning between agencies and Southern partners, and between agencies and beneficiaries, is a clear gap in the knowledge and learning strategies [of international development organisations]”.

3. Theoretical background

A number of theoretical discussions and academic research findings have a bearing on the ACTS programme and its aims. In this section we will look at some of the discussions regarding the importance of learning for peacebuilding NGOs, different types of learning (in particular, tactical versus strategic learning), how peacebuilding NGOs in the field tend to learn, and whose knowledge is considered to be important. Together, these theoretical and empirical findings provide a background to the theories of change used by ACTS.

3.1 The road to improving effectiveness

One way to categorise the various activities of NGOs is according to the diagram below, often referred to as Key People, More People. The model

¹ Below, these issues are discussed in some more detail.





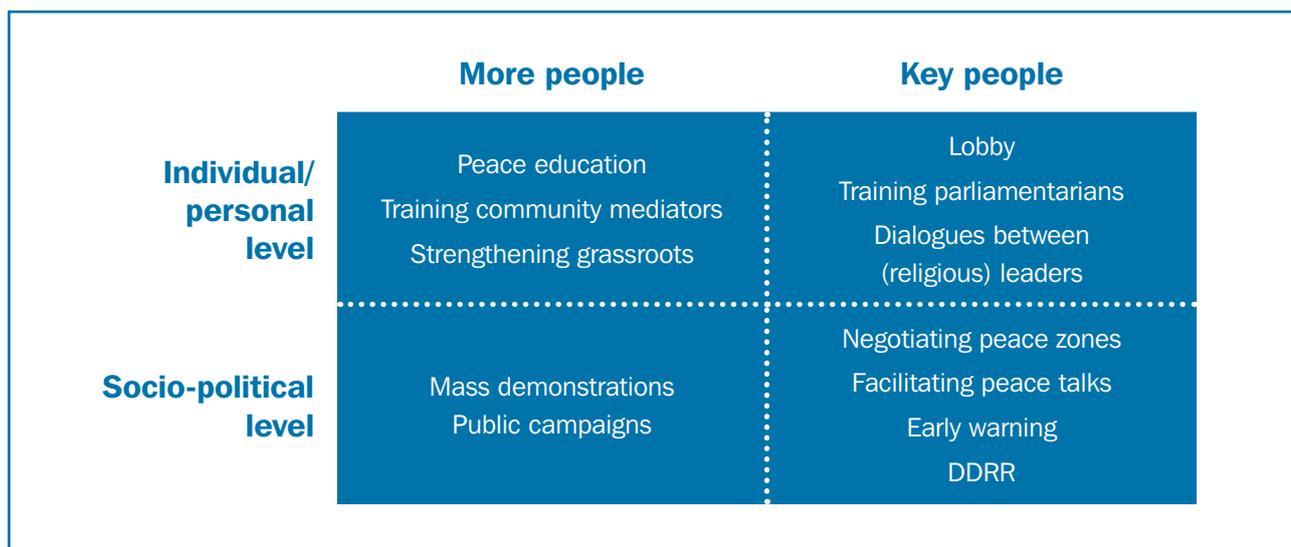
was developed by Anderson and Olsen (2003) and based on the outcomes of a three-year project called *Reflecting on Peace Practice* that involved over two hundred peacebuilding NGOs.

Figure 1 looks at the ways in which most strategies for working towards “peace writ large²” can be understood. The horizontal axis represents a difference in strategies ranging from activities aimed at involving as many people as possible to activities aimed at a limited number of key people. “More people” strategies want peacebuilding activities to be as broad-based as possible and to have people from all interest and conflict groups take part in them. “More people” strategies are not simply about numbers of people. It can mean having more people who are aware of a particular issue perhaps through public campaigns or mass protests. It may also be more people who are skilled in a particular way of working (ie. skills training in mediation, peacebuilding). And in situations where it may be dangerous for people to participate in peace activities, it may mean a strategy which moves incrementally towards involving more

and more individuals. “Key people” strategies by contrast aim at those people who are considered to be in positions in which they can make a difference, affecting the larger political or economic framework in which peacebuilding efforts take place. These may be people in government, powerful civic leaders, or representatives of international organisations. Lobbying is a “key people” strategy, as is negotiation to create peace zones or efforts to facilitate dialogue among leaders. (Anderson and Olsen 2003: 48-49)

The vertical axis shows two other dimensions of peacebuilding work. Activities aimed at the individual or personal level strive to start building peace by changing people’s attitudes and perceptions. Peace education is a good example of this. Socio-political level strategies aim at systemic, institutional change, at the level of society as a whole. Strategies to strengthen democracy and activities to further socio-economic development both fit within this category (Anderson and Olsen 2003: 48-49). If we start filling in the above-mentioned activities in the quadrants of the diagram, it might look as follows:

Figure 1: Categorising NGOs’ activities in peacebuilding³



2 or the bigger peace beyond the immediate context of a project or programme(CDA 2004).

3 Adapted from Anderson and Olsen 2003: 48.





One of the report's main findings was that work which stays within one of the squares is not enough to generate any significant momentum for change. Fitting their activities into such a model may help NGOs to understand better how they are placed strategically. It can stimulate reflection on the relationship between activities and final aims and encourage the development of more effective strategies. For example, if an NGO works mostly at the individual, key people level, how does it expect this work to trickle down to the more people level – and who and what are needed to make that happen? Alternatively, when an organisation focuses its activities in several parts of the quadrant, do these different areas of work strengthen one another, and how? Further on in this section we will see that most local peacebuilding NGOs have not done such thinking explicitly, but voice a need for more reflection on their place, role, strategy, and results.

3.2 Types of learning

A large body of literature about learning (and organisational learning) has come into existence in recent decades, generating various ways to categorise learning processes. An often-made distinction in these publications is between first-, second- and third-order learning. First-order learning uses a pre-given set of knowledge, which is transferred from a book or teacher to a learner. By contrast, second-order learning is the creation of new knowledge by *learning in action*. It is a cyclical trial-and-error process of action and adaptation and involves asking questions, reflecting, and adjusting while acting. Third-order learning goes a step further in that it also includes questioning the validity of the tasks and problems posed. It does not take the structural framework in which the action takes place for granted but questions the ultimate aims and principles that underlie the action. Where second-order learning leads to adjustment at the tactical level in order to meet one's aims more effectively, third-order learning may lead to strategic changes, such as an adjustment of the aims themselves. Thus, second-order learning may also be referred to as *tactical learning*, while third-order learning is *strategic learning*.

Third-order learning adds another cycle to the learning cycle of action, reflection, adjustment, and renewed action; namely the cycle of self-reflection that involves the questioning of underlying values. It entails asking difficult questions at the individual level about my own role in the activity in which I am engaged. What implicit theories, assumptions and experiences do I bring to this action, and how do they shape my ideas and actions? Should my assumptions be modified?

Because third-order learning adds another cycle, it is often referred to as 'double-loop learning'. In double-loop learning, the values and assumptions underlying my actions are reflected upon and tested simultaneously with the reflection and testing of the actions themselves. (Kolb 1984, Argyris 2004, Boonstra 2004, Cummings 2004).

3.3 Action research

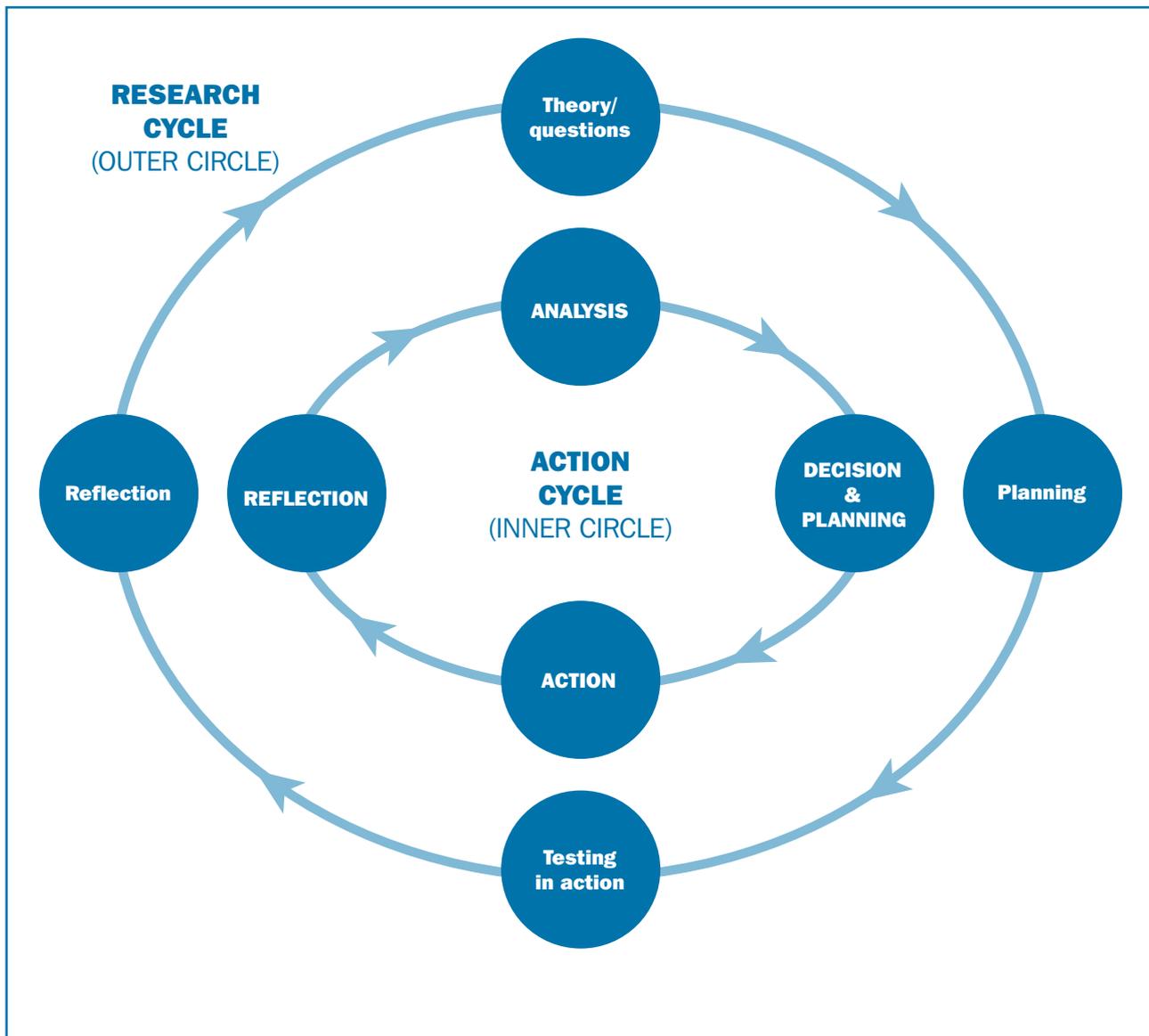
The concepts of action learning and action research (AR) build on the idea of third-order, strategic learning. Here, too, learning takes place by doing, reflection, and experimentation – while at the same time there is a focus on the underlying implicit theories and values of the learner. The action learning and action research cycle is depicted in Figure 2 (page 11) which clearly shows the double loop.

An important difference between AR and 'traditional' research is that while "traditional academic research denies the relationships between the investigator and the empirical object", AR recognises that the presence and actions of a researcher have an impact on the reality they study, and vice versa. According to AR, "the ambiguous, dynamic and changing world cannot be understood from the detached position of the pure observer". (Boonstra 2004: 17) Thus, action researchers do not strive to be objective observers who are separate from what is being observed. On the contrary, they study a reality of which they are part and explicitly take into account their own role in shaping this reality. In response to their growing understanding of what they are





Figure 2: Action learning (ACTS 2005:13)



The inner circle represents the action learning cycle, in which an activity is carried out. This starts from an analysis of the situation, followed by the planning and then the implementation of the action itself. Next, a reflection takes place: how did I do? Do the results confirm my original analysis of the situation – or should it be adapted? If I remain on this inner circle my learning might stay at the *tactical* level, depending on how serious I am about my reflection and analysis. However, if I also follow the outer circle, the research cycle will take my learning to a further *strategic* level. Including research questions, to be examined whilst undertaking the ongoing action, then requires me to be explicit about my understanding of the world (theories, values, assumptions) that underlies my analysis of the situation. This leads to the formulation of a plan to test the research questions and my theories during the action. This testing consists mainly of being aware of the underlying theory during the action and being open to the possibility that it might prove to be inconsistent with the events that take place as a result of the action. In the reflection phase I do not consider only my action and its results, but also the way in which they relate to the underlying theories and assumptions that I have made explicit earlier on in the process. This leads me to adjust these theories and assumptions, and a new learning cycle may begin (ACTS 2005, Cummings 2004).





studying through AR, they may introduce changes to this reality in order to examine the results to which those may lead. Therefore in the practitioner-focused AR used in the ACTS programme research, questions are formulated at two levels: what do I want to know about my role in the action, and what do I want to know about the action in which I am involved? The usefulness of AR to practitioners in the peacebuilding field is considered further in section 4.2.

3.4 Local peace practitioners learn at a tactical level

The learning processes of local peace organisations in conflict-affected countries tend to take place at the micro-level and to focus on the short term in which a given project is implemented. Changes may be made within the confines of this project, but more macro, strategic questions ('is this the right project in relation to our long-term aims?' 'How does this project relate to what others are doing?' 'Are we together contributing to macro-level, longer-term peace?') tend to be overlooked. (Anderson and Olsen 2003; Fisher and Zimina 2008; Verkoren 2008). The earlier-mentioned *Reflecting on Peace Practices* project concluded that, although much well-intended, good peace work was done, all of this "should be adding up to more than it is. The potential of these multiple efforts is not fully realized." (Anderson and Olsen 2003, 10) The reason was that

"often peace practitioners only assume that good programmatic goals, because they are good, will in some undefined way lead to or support Peace Writ Large [the overall aim of stopping violence and building sustainable peace]. Because this connection is assumed, practitioners often do not carefully monitor their programs' real impacts on the broader peace. That is, practitioners do good things, thinking they are working for peace. But, often the connection between what they do and what is required to promote peace in that circumstance is so remote that, even if they achieve the immediate program goals, the impact of the program on broader peace is minimal." (Anderson and Olsen 2003, 12-13)

A number of explanations for this difficulty to move beyond tactical learning have already been outlined

in section 2: lack of time and capacity, the context in which people work and the competition between local organisations. Another factor which should also be mentioned is the value which is placed on local knowledge, which we will go on to consider now.

3.5 Local knowledge is under-valued and under-developed

In the top-down (outside-in) system in which many funding and peacebuilding policies are implemented, donors have little space for knowledge which Southern peace practitioners bring to the 'partnership'. In many instances local 'partner' organisations are 'subcontracted' to implement the pre-developed strategy of donor organisations (Edwards and Hulme 1996, Krieger 2004, Mawdsley et al. 2002, Mitlin et al. 2005) and in such situations organisations have little influence over peacebuilding strategy. Local peace workers are critical of the lack of recognition by donors of the local knowledge that they and their target groups have. Accountability is towards donors, not beneficiaries. Evaluation is usually done by foreign consultants. There are few examples where local knowledge is truly taken into account in the project cycle. As a result, projects that are implemented are not always the most context-relevant and effective. Most Southern practitioners are able to give examples of this. (Powell 2006, King 2004, Van Grasdorff 2005, Mawdsley et al. 2002, Verkoren 2008) And if an organisation does not have the power to determine strategy on its own, then why would it do strategic thinking?

Other aspects of the funding system also have implications for joint strategic thinking among local peace organisations – something called for by the *Reflecting on Peace Practices* project and others. First, local organisations compete for the same sources of funding. Since they are one another's competitors, they are reluctant to share strategic information and have no incentive to engage in joint strategy development. Second, the trend among donors to obtain demonstrable 'impact' of investments in the short-term (something demanded from them in turn by their own donors) means that they tend to shy away from financing activities that do not yield clearly





visible “direct-impact” – including activities such as strategic reflection and learning. (Verkoren 2008)

This is not only to put the blame on the donors. Southern CSOs rarely challenge the project ideas that donors introduce (Mawdsley et al. 2002). Part of the reason for this is simply that they depend upon the funding for their survival. But there is another key reason. While local actors are often convinced that they have knowledge that could change and shape the way that peacebuilding is done in their area, this knowledge remains “underdeveloped”. It is largely intuitive, experience-based knowledge and it has not been systematically tested, compared with other theories, or supported by scientifically-gathered empirical data. This lack of development of local knowledge makes locals insecure about raising it to challenge the assumptions of outsiders, and this makes outsiders reluctant to accept it as “legitimate” knowledge. (Grenier 1997, Mudimbe 1988, Powell 2006)

This background helps explain a finding that emerged from 105 interviews about learning and knowledge strategies held with local peacebuilders in Africa and Asia in 2006⁴. Among the top priorities for knowledge and skills they would like to gain, 69 of these people, spread across the countries visited, said they wanted to increase their knowledge capacities: capacities for research, (joint) reflection, documentation, and knowledge dissemination. They emphasised that instead of obtaining pre-developed knowledge, they would rather be enabled to develop their own knowledge so as to expand it and make it better researched, more rigorous, and more authoritative. From this a specific picture arises of the type of capacity development local peacebuilders need: not training programmes in which existing knowledge is transferred, but the development of their own knowledge capacities. (Verkoren 2008)

Outsiders can play an important role in third-order strategic learning, as they bring in a fresh perspective that makes it easier for them to question working assumptions and underlying theories. In other words, outsiders can ask the uncomfortable questions that trigger the learner to rethink ideas

that had been taken for granted. This role of outsiders in third-order learning has been called a learning ‘scaffold’ (Smid and Beckett 2004).

In processes to develop local knowledge, local knowledge institutions (universities, research institutes) could potentially function as ‘scaffolds’. Knowledge institutions could help to do research as well as to develop research skills. A local ‘knowledge structure’ could arise in which knowledge institutions, NGOs and others cooperate around learning and knowledge generation. However, in most of the countries visited during the above-mentioned research project, there was little interaction between peacebuilding NGOs and knowledge institutions (Verkoren 2008).

The theories and research findings we have discussed in this section have – sometimes explicitly and consciously, sometimes more intuitively – shaped the theories of change that lie at the basis of the ACTS programme. We turn to them now.

4. Theories of change: what we thought ACTS would do

4.1 Role of insiders in creating sustainable peace

ACTS continues to build upon a key pillar of RTC’s approach: that sustainable change has to be driven by those who live and work in situations of conflict. However those who are most involved in the practical work of peacebuilding are often those who have fewest opportunities to access higher education in the field. So a basic premise driving the programme is to provide locally-based opportunities for practitioners to have access to theory, research and learning skills which will enable them to develop their own knowledge.

4.2 Action research can generate new insights into peace work

There are relatively few places where those involved in peacebuilding can access research which is both based on actual work that has

⁴ Staff members of local peace organisations were interviewed in Liberia (10), Sierra Leone (16), Ghana (1), Kenya (11), Cambodia (14), The Philippines (10), Kyrgyzstan (8) and Tajikistan (7). Themes that were addressed in the open-ended interviews include the ways in which people learn, the knowledge they feel they need in order to improve their work, the extent to which they are able to gain access to this knowledge, and the difficulties they encounter when trying to learn new things. How NGO staff members apply new knowledge in their work was also discussed, as were the modalities and difficulties of sharing knowledge with others. Besides, the interviews paid attention to the type of knowledge interviewees think they have to offer and whether or not this knowledge reaches potential users. The role of donor agencies in supporting or inhibiting knowledge processes was often discussed, and most interviewees were asked whether they thought some types of knowledge are considered more important than others in the field of peacebuilding.





taken place and written by those who have done the work. From the experience of working in peacebuilding for over fifteen years RTC knows that practitioners have a wealth of knowledge to bring to the field. However, for reasons which have already been mentioned, it remains unprocessed, untested and therefore unavailable to others.

Action research (AR) was chosen because it provides a methodology for practitioners to look at their own work in a systematic manner and relate their activities more explicitly to their aims and values, and to the theories in the field. It enables peacebuilders to analyse the effectiveness of their work, to examine and test the theories which underpin it, and to document the peacebuilding processes in their own work. In addition to analysing the work of participants, AR requires them to focus on their own role, working assumptions, and personal change and learning.

Through the use of AR, ACTS hopes to create learning practitioners who could in turn bring new learning and thinking into their organisations. In addition, as AR is in line with the theory of 'third-order' strategic learning, it can help practitioners move from tactical to more strategic learning. Its cyclical process can become a habit and may stimulate learning within organisations, whereby at every step of a project, the practitioner and his/her colleagues reflect upon the theories and ideas on which the project is based. This could help address the issue of peace organisations' lack of strategy.

So the assumption is that through close attention to the detail of the work of peace practitioners, being explicit about and testing theories, values and assumptions, and documenting their work, AR will be able to generate new insights into peace work.

4.3 Reflexive practitioners do better peace work

The concept of the reflexive practitioner is of "one who has developed the skills and habits of self-awareness, able to pay attention to our own actions and their impact, and aware of our own inner feelings and

motivations."(Francis 2005). This concept can be thought of as three levels of attention: on ourselves and how we respond and behave, on the behaviour and interaction of others involved in our work, and on the overall nature and dynamics of our work.

It is often said that the *process* of peacebuilding work can be more important than the actual activities: there are many different roads to peace, the important thing is how the road is travelled. Developing the skills of a reflexive practitioner may be one way in which practitioners can maintain awareness of this process, by being able to assess critically what is happening in one's daily practice, and to learn from and adapt to changing circumstances.

4.4 Through AR, ACTS can strengthen the role of Southern practitioners in theory generation and academic and policy debates

In 3.5 we saw that the knowledge of Southern peace practitioners is often 'underdeveloped' and as a result they are unable to participate on an equal basis in policy discussions with donors, academics and others. An assumption is that ACTS can help to correct this balance by generating new theories, or refining existing ones, through the action research of its participants.

4.5 Improving effectiveness

ACTS draws upon the 'key people, more people' concept introduced in section 3.1 in a number of ways:

- **Moving from more people to key people.** One aim of ACTS is to have more local people working in conflict situations who have a deep understanding of the field, the skills to engage in a strategic manner, and who are able to pass these skills and knowledge on to others. Students themselves may then become key people in their own contexts and better able to influence change. Alternatively they may develop new areas of work to target key groups of people.
- **Moving from personal to societal level.** The programme begins at the personal level with an





understanding that change has to start at the individual level for it to be sustainable in any wider context. ACTS hopes to develop the ways in which individuals respond to and understand conflict, as well as the skills and capacity they have to work effectively in these situations. There is then an assumption that a students' participation in the course will also have an effect on their colleagues and organisation, and that there will be changes in their work which may lead to changes in the wider context.

Overall, ACTS aims to enable participants to look at their own work, to develop their analysis and understanding of how change can be brought about so they can identify how their work can be most effective. Are they carrying out well-intentioned, but perhaps ineffective, peace work? Or are they making a strategic and effective contribution to a wider change? ACTS can then be viewed as a "learning scaffold" within which students can explore their work in a supportive and challenging environment.

5. ACTS in practice

5.1 Participants

The ACTS programme is intended for people who are already engaged in practical work for peace, and have a number of years' experience to reflect and draw upon. An initial assumption was also made that students would have already participated in a basic level conflict transformation course, such as those already run by RTC. Given the aims of ACTS the course is open to all those who have the experience and motivation to take part in the course, and are currently involved in peacebuilding work. Those who do wish to work towards a Master's degree need to meet additional requirements as set by the university – such as a Bachelor's degree and English language proficiency. Those without these formal qualifications receive a certificate and are asked to produce a final reflection paper instead of a thesis.

In the Balkans centre, 27 students have now completed the course, with 11 (out of a possible

15) gaining their Master's degrees. Students came from Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia, Kosovo, Croatia as well as Israel and Palestine in the second course. In the Asia centre, too, 27 students have completed the course, of whom 16 students applied for and received their Master's. A further 30 students have either just started or are midway through their studies in the Asia centre. Students in this centre come from throughout Asia, but there has been a particular focus on Burma, Cambodia, Nepal and the Philippines. So far the course has attracted participants working in both development and peacebuilding. They come mainly from the civil society sector (both NGOs and community-based organisations). In addition to civil society actors, the course is also open to participants from other sectors, such as government and security personnel, whose applications are increasingly sought in order to diversify the student groups and allow for the use and dissemination of newly-gained capacities and research findings in more than one sector.

5.2 Curriculum and teaching team

The curriculum of ACTS consists of six modules, taught in six regional ten-day seminars over the course of two years. This set-up allows students to study and continue working at the same time: as the course is based on research in people's own practice, much of the work is done at home. The first four modules all contain theory on various aspects of conflict and peacebuilding and focus on practical skills and developing action research. The fifth and sixth modules are left open to provide room for discussion on the action research of the participants. The course content has been designed to give students a broad understanding of the field of conflict transformation and to look at different phases of conflict in detail. The core papers which accompany each module were written by people with both academic credentials and practical experience, and spaces were made for the partners involved in ACTS to comment on the texts during workshops in Uganda in 2004 and Cambodia in 2005. The content of the modules, and their corresponding core papers, is outlined on page 16.





| | |
|---|---|
| Module One Theories of Conflict | Provides a broad overview of the theories about conflict and violence, and ways of analysing and classifying them. In addition, it deals with various schools of thinking about causes of conflict – psychological, social, political and economic. |
| Module Two Conflict, Power and Change | Looks at how conflict can be used as a catalyst for bringing about sustainable peace. The core paper discusses ideas and theories regarding social change, the constraints and opportunities posed by power and structures, and ways in which various actors can relate to each other to bring about change. |
| Module Three Transforming Violent Conflict | Addresses issues and challenges that influence the design of processes to transform situations of violence and create conditions for longer-term sustainability. In addition to the practical development of peace processes it looks at assumptions and motivations , and the roles of different actors. |
| Module Four Building Sustainable Peace | Analyses the post-settlement phase of conflict. It deals with the concept of post-conflict reconstruction and the various socio-economic and political aspects that come to the fore after violence has ended and the task is to re-build systems that can sustain peace. It also looks at social reconstruction, reconciliation and the rebuilding of communities. |
| Module Five Building Theory from Practice | Focuses on the AR of the participants, exchanging findings and experiences, reflecting on AR as a methodology and preparing for the finalisation of the theses. |
| Module six Agents of Transformation | Provides a forum for students to present their research to a wider group of people in a public seminar. Also looks at the impact of the course on the students and how they will continue their practice in the future. |

In each ACTS region the aim has been to develop a core teaching team drawn from the region who are able to support the course group throughout the two years of their study. The members of these teams have all been practitioners first and foremost but usually with some experience of academic teaching. This team is complemented by “international” tutors drawn from other regions or ACTS centres, who are brought in for their specific expertise. Again they are usually combine academic and practical experience. Both in Cambodia and Serbia there are few, if any, options for studying peacebuilding at a university level. As this is a new area for the university partners their main involvement has been in supporting students through the academic writing and dissertation process.

5.3 Action research in ACTS

AR is applied in ACTS in the following way. After the principles of the approach are introduced, making use of an especially developed reader, the participants first carry out small AR projects in order to experiment with the method. Next, they need to decide which aspect

of their ongoing work they want to research and find out how it may be improved. This research becomes the ‘red line’ running throughout the two-year Master programme. The participants are expected to relate the theories that are introduced during the seminars to their work and look for additional sources that may shed light on their research questions. They are asked to record their reflections and findings in both learning loops – both with regard to the work and their own role and theories – in a journal. Aided by the journals, they discuss their reflections and progress during the seminars. At the end of the course, the AR projects lead to a dissertation, which the students need to obtain their degree and which, it is hoped, may contain new or adjusted theories that can be disseminated and discussed in the wider peacebuilding field.

5.4 Academic-practitioner partnerships in ACTS

In both regions, cooperation among the partners has made possible the accreditation of the Master’s





degree by the local universities. The universities in both regions worked cooperatively with the ACTS tutors to ensure that the dissertations produced by the students were in line with what was expected at a Masters level. However, there have also been difficulties in the cooperation between the NGOs and universities. In large part, these difficulties have revolved around AR as a methodology. It clashed to some extent with the more traditional research methods of university staff, who therefore had trouble seeing AR as valid. In at least one of the centres, this led to frustration among the students who received conflicting feedback and advice from the ACTS tutors and the university (Francis 2007).

There are several deeper issues underlying this discussion. First of all, there is the question of whether to consider the capacity building of the university staff – at least with regard to AR – as a positive side effect, or even an aim, of the programme. As an internal ACTS document puts it, “[w]hile we want to ensure high standards and academic recognition for our students, we presumably would also want to honour and strengthen local academic capacities, rather than undermine them, and explore with them the relationship between culture and academic approach.” (Francis 2007: 23) However, as is already implied by this citation, such capacity building requires openness to the ideas and perspectives of the institution whose capacity is being built.

This leads us to the second issue: ownership. It is difficult for the universities to be true partners which ‘co-own’ the ACTS programme, as their lack of subject knowledge meant they could not engage with much of the course development and teaching. In addition the universities have not been part of the development of the curriculum and it was only later on that they became partners. A way to make them ‘co-owners’ would be to jointly adjust the methodology. But given that AR is such a central part of the theory of change of ACTS, the NGO partners are reluctant to enter into such a discussion. It is understandable that ACTS staff hesitate to make concessions on the approach that

has been so carefully developed and in which they believe so strongly. Still, finding ways to develop a true partnership dialogue over content with the universities seems to be a priority as the programme moves forward. This could also help the centres to find more regional content, achieve more academic input into tutor teams and the course in general, and become more familiar with the way Masters courses are generally taught (Francis 2007).

5.5 ACTS in 2009

At the time of writing the ACTS course in the Balkans has been put on hold as universities in the region are in the process of re-accrediting to move into line with other Western European universities. However, initial steps have been taken to establish a Community of Practice from the current alumni and it will be interesting to see how this progresses. The centre in Asia continues to grow and build its reputation. In Africa, after a number of false starts, a short course is due to take place in February 2009. This will draw on a number of elements of ACTS, such as linking theory and practice and the concept of reflexive practitioners. This also represents a recognition of a number of lessons learnt over the past five years: about how to gradually develop the capacity of the tutor team, and to develop the partnerships through smaller, more realistic pieces of work, rather than launching into a long-term project.

6. Has the programme met its aims? Theories and realities of change

The aims of the ACTS programme were to develop the capacity of peacebuilding practitioners to engage in their work, to support and promote effective and strategic peacebuilding work, and to develop theory and new knowledge about peacebuilding processes from the perspective of those who are engaged in the actual work. To what extent have these aims been met over the last three years? During 2008 the ACTS programme worked with all its students and alumni





HUY ROMDUOL from the first group of Asia students is an example of someone growing in confidence and pushing their work further.

The ACTS course has helped me to broaden my perspective and deepen my understanding with regard to peacebuilding. I have a wider knowledge and the literature from ACTS has opened a new world to me. Now when people ask me to give a presentation I always say okay.

I use AR in my work. I write things down more: what were the basic ideas behind this activity? I check with the theories. I ask next year how will we do this? What can we improve?

Lederach's concept of elicitive training influenced me a lot. Before I would only introduce theories, now my trainings are more experiential. Because of the Cambodia class tradition of education I have now developed a specific method that fits the context.

The course encouraged me to act. I am no longer scared or shy. Due to the ACTS course, I can explain things clearly and I am not scared to express my knowledge. I feel like I speak with more authority.

Since I attended ACTS there has been a growing interest in attending my courses, people from the ministries have participated. A consultant recently reviewed the direction of our training courses and concluded that more courses like this are needed for Cambodia.

to gather their stories of change. To do this we drew on interviews with the students, their own written reflections, their AR dissertations, and observations by the tutors and ourselves. There are many stories to tell and here we will highlight just a few.

6.1 Improving practice

Nearly every student mentions their increased confidence in their own knowledge. This seems to

stem partly from the learning process, where their experience is placed at the heart of the course. Over the two years of the course, they have broadened their theoretical understanding of the field and have found models and theories which support and validate the work they do. Many mention that they are no longer “afraid” of the theory and recognise the value that it brings to their work. It also provides them with a stronger base from which to talk about and explain their work to others.

In Asia in particular students have gained enormously from simply having ready access to learning resources (especially those which provide an Asian perspective) and further information about where they can find other relevant sources. We have also seen an improvement in students' academic skills: they are reading more and developing better analytical and writing skills.

Many students are beginning to pick up the skills of reflexive practitioners. After a great deal of struggle many now see a learning journal as a key mechanism for gathering evidence and information about their work and practice, and allowing them to reflect upon and analyse their work at a later time. There is also evidence of students questioning their role and the purpose of their work. One employer wrote about their student that he “... gained skills that helped him to analyse better. People keep copying what has been done before, but they rarely wonder why they are doing it... [He] is starting to ask such questions”.

The skills of reflexive practitioners become even more important when people work with groups outside their own “natural” constituency. In such situations the ACTS approach enabled participants to be aware of the personal assumptions and prejudices they might be making. A participant from the Philippines said that *“I was very suspicious of [working with] the military, because they abducted my father twenty years ago and we never saw him again. ACTS helped me to look deeper into myself, my personal bias and my role in the process. As I opened my mind I was inspired by the changes achieved.... It is a step by step process.. and my action research deepened this change.”*





Participation in the course and the process of engaging in their research has also brought many students a greater level of respect and acknowledgement from their colleagues and community. There are a number of examples of students who have been asked to become involved in mediation or run new training courses because of their new capacities.

6.2 Promoting more effective and strategic peacebuilding work

It is also clear that many students are seeing their work in a wider context. This has led some of them to include more people in their activities, from involving the wider communities in trainings to carrying out or facilitating strategic planning processes with the military. This has made people more aware of where they need to get to in the future. Students are recognising the limitations of working only at the local, grassroot level when it comes to thinking about long-term sustainable change. One participant from Vietnam is working on domestic violence through a mediation approach. She recognises that their work at the moment is just dealing with the conflict at the surface level but wants to be able to work towards a more transformative approach in the future. Two students from Israel have been able to promote strategies within their own organisations which work with other groups such as academia, business and government. In both cases the germ of the idea was already there, but the process of ACTS enabled them to articulate why this change was important.

Many of the students are experienced practitioners who have been working in the field for a number of years. Through ACTS some have been able to develop fresh analysis which has taken their work forward. A participant from Sri Lanka illustrates this: *“As part of my AR I analysed the conflict. Using the theory I learned in ACTS I came to see that the Sinhalese Buddhist community is legitimising state power, and that this is contributing to the conflict. However, no organisation is working with this group – the majority. Through ACTS I was able to formulate my own interpretation and analysis,*

NEBOJSA TASIC took part in the second ACTS course in the Balkans. He works with the Helsinki Committee in Serbia and his research focused on helping Serbian children to recognise the Srebrenica genocide.

Whenever I think about the solutions for my problems, it has something to do with ACTS, or what I have been learning there. I have become more systematic, strategic and focused. At the same time I have realised that I may be too emotionally involved in my work. I am trying to become more professional and to separate my personal life. Learning about conflicts and strategies gives me energy and made it easier to deal with my colleagues and helped me to explain things to the young people I work with. I can explain to them the larger dynamics in the world. I am also more patient now. I don't expect the youth to immediately recognise the genocide. I understand the importance of their ethnic identity and the ideas with which they have been raised.

One impact that ACTS has already had in my work has been in the way I have given shape to youth support groups for trained youth who go back to their communities. At first the groups were a mess and this was partly because I didn't realise why they were important. Because of ACTS and AR I now understand the broader picture and theoretical background. In the future there will be more participation of the youth group in the decision-making of the groups.

not just replicate the analysis of someone else.” Having developed a new perspective, participants test and adjust their approach to their work. For some this has led to refinements, with others it has led to new activities and projects. Examples of this include the development of new training courses, activities to work with the business community, and extending follow-up and support work.

While we have been able to see students making changes in their own work, the effect at an





organisational level has been less clear. Students have taken the time to share their experience with their colleagues, and some have been asked to run training courses within their organisation so others can be part of the learning, but it is unclear whether the impact has gone further than this. A number of people have talked of the difficulty of taking their learning back to their organisations. An interesting example comes from one of the Israeli participants. She said *“I tried to introduce things I had learned in ACTS to my team of trainers and the group we were facilitating. But I met with resistance. The Palestinians said it was always the Jews who were bringing knowledge. I wanted to find a way to enable the insights to come from my colleagues. In a way I struggled to copy the ACTS method of learning, in which understanding comes from the experience of the learner and is not introduced from outside... In my organisation it was different. I introduced my new knowledge in a more subtle way. I started mentioning some examples in staff and board meetings and occasionally emailing some material around. This raised people’s curiosity and they asked me to do a presentation of my thesis.”*

Some people have been able to bring change within their organisations. This ranges from developing a new strategic direction for their organisation to include conflict and peace issues in organisational planning, to re-structuring the management of an organisation so that it better reflects its values.

6.3 Developing practitioner-based theory and knowledge about peacebuilding processes

Going beyond the students, ACTS also had a much wider aim of contributing to peacebuilding discourse from a Southern, practitioner perspective. Although the participants have learned tremendously and become more reflexive and strategic, the majority of the dissertations they have produced fall short of the quality and level desired for them to contribute to global theory and policy. Interesting in this light is the comment by an employer, who said that *“The research is not at an international academic level. But I think it is good that the ACTS course is working with people where they are. [My employee]*

has made incredible progress, and it would not have been good to force a level on him. This would have made for more superficial learning.”

What ACTS has done so far is to document people’s work, and begin to make it accessible through its own publications and website. Students from the second generation are considering writing up their research so that they can approach academic journals. Some of their dissertations may indeed provide material that is suitable for academic publication. The general consensus among teaching staff is that the academic level of the course is improving year on year, however it will still take some time to reach a higher level.

7. Conclusion: Implications for capacity development

After three years of ACTS, what can we conclude about the change theories on which it has been based?

7.1 Reflexive practitioners do better peace work

It is clear that ACTS has made its participants more strategic, confident and aware of the bigger picture. Most of them have also acquired a habit of reflection, learning and critical thinking in their work, and the process of AR has been important in cultivating this. This meets a need that is felt among all development practitioners, and particularly, peace workers. People working in that field have noted a lack of strategic analysis about how activities contribute to larger aims of peacebuilding. This is seen to limit the overall impact of peace work. In theory, then, ACTS’ development of more strategic and reflexive practitioners can help peace work to have more impact. Has this been true in practice? The extent to which this has made their work better – more effective – is difficult to ascertain given the limited information available about their work before and after ACTS. However, some of the participants were asked to do activities specifically because they were considered to have gained expertise because of ACTS. And at least one employer felt the work of his employee had





improved due to his participation in ACTS. Still, more research is needed to affirm this scattered evidence and to illuminate the extent to which it was indeed increased reflexivity that led to increased effectiveness.

7.2 Action research can generate new insights into peace work

Whilst AR in many ways seems like a natural methodology for practitioners it is important to highlight that it has been a challenge, both for tutors and students, and that it is not a quick and easy practice to pick up. In addition, it has been a difficult issue for the universities. It is important that all involved in teaching and supervising AR have a common understanding of the approach and value it as a valid method. AR as a methodology is still developing and there are many variations. This understanding has given tutors the confidence to shape the methodology so that it fits the needs of the students.

But AR has proven a valuable framework to begin correcting some of the problems faced by Southern peacebuilders, namely, the lack of well-researched and articulated Southern knowledge and their shortness of time and skill to reflect strategically upon their work. AR enables practitioners not only to do research but to do it in their own practice, consciously relating it to theory and reflecting repeatedly upon the extent to which their actions – or the theory – require adaptation. It is clear from the research and stories of change that the process of AR has given many students new insights into their own work and practice, and in some cases these have been shared with colleagues and their organisations. However many also comment that this is only the beginning and that they feel further work is still required in order to be able to make more conclusive recommendations.

7.3 Through Action Research, ACTS can strengthen the role of Southern practitioners in theory generation and academic and policy debates

This is an area which requires much more attention in the future. Whilst the quality of students work is improving year on year, ACTS is not yet at a

stage to make a strong contribution to academic and policy debates. On the one hand we can say that it will take time for an innovative programme such as ACTS to establish itself and to refine the curriculum, teaching team and the ways of supporting students in their research. However, the fact that this theory-of-change has not yet been validated also highlights two issues. First, the cooperation with the universities around AR may have complicated student's research process, at least in the first courses. More fruitful academic-practitioner cooperation in supervising the research is likely to lead to better results. Second, there is a dilemma regarding the selection of participants. Should those most in need of capacity building participate? Or those who already have academic skills – so that we can better meet the aim of theory development? There is some tension here between two aims and theories-of-change, one that aims to help practitioners become more effective, and one which aims for the generation of new, quality theory.

7.4 From key people to more people

As noted at the beginning of this section, ACTS has worked effectively at the personal level. The opportunity to study the field of peacebuilding and to be part of a diverse learning community has been very significant for many students. For the ACTS partners it has affirmed a belief that learning is a vital part of peacebuilding work, and that it requires long-term support and some sort of “scaffold”, a framework or structure in which it can take place. Without this, as discussed in section three, the process of learning is inconsistent and does not go deep enough. Enough people have commented on the usefulness and applicability of the course content to their work for ACTS to be able to say that combining work and study is a useful approach for peacebuilding practitioners who are always busy and deeply involved in their work.

ACTS alone may not build a critical mass of “more people”, although there is some evidence to suggest that there is a multiplier effect, for instance through students passing on learning from the course to





their colleagues. There is also evidence that based on expertise developed through ACTS, people are being seen as “key” in their own situations. Participants have also realised the need to develop projects that work with key and more people (in their communities, in governmental organisations etc.) and now have the confidence to undertake this work. Thus, there are examples, some quite significant, where the impact of the course has moved beyond the individual to their colleagues and organisations. However this is quite limited and highlights an area that needs to be given further consideration. How does change happen in organisations working in complex conflict environments?

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