

By: Fons van der Velden and Sarah Cummings

Context,  
international  
cooperation

## Learning in development organisations: some reflections about the relationship between the Dutch government and civil society organisations in The Netherlands

### Background

This short discussion note has been written by the Capacity for Development cluster within Context, international cooperation\*. It has been prepared, on invitation, as a short input for the policy consultation, currently taking place within the Netherlands and organised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

We were invited to cover the learning capacity of development organisations in North and South. Given that this is such a broad subject, we have decided to take a specific focus on learning in the context of the relationship between the Dutch Government and civil society organisations in the Netherlands.

### 1. Introduction

From the early 1990s onwards there has been a growing realisation that organisational effectiveness is correlated with an ability to learn from experience.<sup>1</sup> This innovative insight, which now strikes us as blindingly obvious, is of particular relevance to the development sector. Ostensibly dedicated to social political change, development organisations predominantly function as the natural open systems, where performance is very dependent on and sensitive to instability and rapid change in the external environment.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, poor accountability – and for that matter a limited learning capacity – has affected the credibility and legitimacy of organisations.

Until very recently, 'learn and adapt' capacity received very little attention within development organisations in both North and South. As far back as 1993, Smillie and Helmich observed that development is, or should be, a knowledge-based endeavour, something echoed by many other commentators since then. The importance of learning what works, and why, is essential to success. Knowing what does not work might even be more essential.<sup>3</sup> The authors regretfully observe that the 'failure to learn from failure' is most probably one of the greatest shortcomings of the development sector. Such situations are, as recent developments show, common in North and South, East and West.<sup>4</sup>

### 2. The challenge of complexity

More than a decade ago, Robert Chambers made specific reference to 'chaos and complexity theory' while surveying alternative ideas<sup>5</sup>.

\* Cornelis Houtmanstraat 15, 3572 LT Utrecht, The Netherlands, phone: + 31 (0)30 2737500  
fax: + 31 (0)30 2737509 e-mail: info@developmenttraining.org internet: www.developmenttraining.org  
1 Senge, 1992.  
2 Fowler, 1995: 143-145; Fowler, 2000.  
3 Smillie & Helmich, 1993: 18.  
4 Fowler in: Edwards & Hulme eds., 1996: 143-156.

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Nowadays, it is received wisdom that development can have different characteristics varying from rather simple to complicated, complex and chaotic processes and a combination of those and is in general a non-linear process<sup>6</sup>

Despite this greater realisation, this understanding has not always been put into practice; policies, instruments and procedures within the development sector (including some of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs) are quite often based on contemporary versions of the modernisation theory and too often based on the assumption that development can be seen as a rather linear process. Manifestation of these are the spread of the Logical Framework Approach within the development sector almost as a 'mono-culture'. Rihani puts it succinctly: 'Under these conditions, rigid plans and policies are inappropriate'.<sup>7</sup> This has implications for learning and we will deal with this point further below.

### 3. Knowledge and diversity

It is now accepted wisdom in the development sector that people ('stakeholders') may have different perceptions of the same situation or 'reality'. Reality in a dynamic universe is non-objective. Indeed, consciousness is the only reality. Situations can be viewed from different perspectives, each of which is equally legitimate and real to the particular groups of participants. This can be described as the perspective of multiple realities.

Even more fundamental, is not only how organisations deal with their own knowledge and learning internally, but also how Southern partners are included in these initiatives. Ironically, when Southern partners are included, knowledge benefits most often accrue to the donor or development organisation rather than to the Southern partners<sup>8</sup>. The participation of these partners is often instrumental rather than driven by effective participation of all stakeholders in the development process<sup>9</sup>. The criticism of Kenneth King from 2000, and his following prediction, remain valid:

'The agencies have not started with the dramatic knowledge deficits, nor with the key question of how knowledge management could assist knowledge development in the South. A continuation along their present trajectory will arguably be counter-productive; it will make agencies more certain of what they themselves have learnt, and more enthusiastic that others should share these insights, once they have been systematized.'<sup>10</sup>

The power dimension of knowledge and learning plays an important role in the development sector's inability to address these concerns. Many organisations are more concerned with addressing their own needs rather than those of their Southern partner organisations or intended beneficiaries. They are able to continue with this approach because the inherent and structural inequality of the relationship between donors and recipients. In addition to this, there is greater value placed on Northern knowledge with little understanding of the value of multiple knowledges and multiple realities.

<sup>5</sup> Chambers, 1997: 194.

<sup>6</sup> Snowden at [www.cognitive-egde.com](http://www.cognitive-egde.com).

<sup>7</sup> Rihani, 2002: 235.

<sup>8</sup> Ferguson, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> Engel[ XE "Engel" ], Carlsson, & van Zee, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> King 2000, as cited in Kalseth & Cummings, 2001.

#### 4. NGDOs and learning

Although it is very unfortunately not easy to respond to the question about ‘the state of affairs with regard to the learning capacity of Northern and Southern civil society organisations’<sup>11</sup> which was one of the questions posed by the invitation to prepare this discussion note, it should in general terms be acknowledged that – on account of a number of internal and external factors – the interest of the NGDO sector in concepts such as ‘the learning organisation’ has increased substantially over the last few years. There is, however, still a substantial gap between rhetoric and reality.

On the one hand, the importance of learning with regard to strengthening civil society and civil society organisations has been acknowledged by the Dutch government. For example in the White Paper ‘Civil Society and Structural Poverty Reduction; Actors in Dutch civil society’<sup>12</sup>:

*“But social development is a complex, non-linear process, and it is often difficult to ascertain what constitutes a positive result. ... Hence, assessing the payoff in terms of results may put disproportionate emphasis on outcomes that can be measured or verified. The problem is not what is included, but what is excluded. Looking solely at results also deters people from taking risks in situations where innovation - which inevitably entails an element of risk - would be desirable or even essential. The point is not that there may be no mistakes or that interventions must not fail, but that lessons are learnt from those mistakes. In future, CSOs will not be judged by their results alone: the quality of their monitoring and evaluation systems and their ability to learn [our emphasis] will also be taken into account.”<sup>13</sup>*

On the other hand, many policies, instruments and procedures of the Dutch government vis-à-vis Dutch civil society organisations do not sufficiently take into account that development processes are indeed complex, non-linear processes. In their turn, the NGDOs are struggling and ‘major challenges of knowledge and learning in the development sector still need to be addressed’.<sup>14</sup>

As well as being stimulated by prescribed policies, procedures and instruments, organisations have a responsibility to effectively learn from experience. However, there has to be some awareness that information systems and reports are not the ‘end products’ of learning. Learning is not a technical issue, nor can it be done through providing a few trainings. It has to be a mindset, a way of doing things. Questioning, reflecting and reinventing should be elements of the daily work.

Rather simple as this may sound, Ramalingam argues that continuing difficulties appear to be the common prioritisation of internal, headquarters-oriented approaches which distract from the realities on the ground in the South, and that knowledge and learning work is often marginalised:

*“the typical response to the difficulty of re-organising core processes along knowledge and learning lines has led to the widespread conceptualisation of knowledge and learning initiatives which supposedly drive organisational change, as a support function.”<sup>15</sup>*

<sup>11</sup> As stated in the letter of MDF, regarding this question d.d. May 30, 2008

<sup>12</sup> This paper was accepted by the Dutch parliament in September 2001.

<sup>13</sup> Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2001: 7.

<sup>14</sup> Ramalingam, 2005, as cited in Powell, 2006: 12.

<sup>15</sup> Ramalingam, 2006: 20

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A further problem, also highlighted by Ramalingam, is the emphasis on best practices:

*“the assumption that ideas can be transferred as ‘best practice’ from one place to another has driven much organisational learning. Rather than scanning globally and reinventing locally, most learning initiatives in the development sector have tried to scan globally and apply locally. This ‘pipeline’ approach to learning seriously underestimates the complexity of aid work. Therefore, best practice needs to be replaced with good principles that can provide the context for local reinvention.”<sup>16</sup>*

#### **5. Policy and operational choices of development actors in the Netherlands**

If the NGDOs and the Ministry are serious about the learning agenda there is a number of concrete steps that will support its adoption. These relate to the subsidy framework, the nature of the learning organisation, and the issue of leadership.

##### **a. The subsidy framework**

The subsidy framework needs to be based on the realisation that a plan is not a blueprint that has to be implemented down to the smallest level – otherwise the building might fall down. In development, a good plan is basically an expression of a public declaration of a purpose around which people gather and not a time table of the railways which can be checked whether the project or programme runs in time. The mission and objectives are crucial but the actual trajectory and the journey will need to be flexible: ‘we make the road by walking’. Here the concepts of volition and agility are of key importance:

*“The concept of volition emphasizes sense-making on the one hand (creating comprehension and purpose) and, on the other, commitment to stick to decisions that have been made. It also entails fluidity: an informed and thoughtful volition, strictly speaking, is never in error; it is, however, always subject to challenge or reformulation.”<sup>17</sup>*

##### **b. The nature of the learning organisation**

On the basis of extensive empirical research Pedler et al. have identified eleven characteristics of a learning organisation.<sup>18</sup> During the last decade in various participatory self-assessment workshops, client organisations of Context, international cooperation have been asked to identify organisational factors which facilitate and hinder learning. During these exercises most the characteristics of Pedler et al. have been reconfirmed. Based on this input from the development practice a few additions need however to be made: learning always takes place within the overall vision, mission and strategy of the organisation. A clear mission statement, which is translated into a coherent strategy, organisational set-up and programme, and is understood and shared by all within the organisation is another important characteristic of a learning organisation. Furthermore: the crucial factor with regard to organisational learning is ‘organisational culture’ and tacit aspects of organisations (the invisible, the unofficial, the ‘hidden connections’ as Capra call these issues) appear to be the crucial factor.

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<sup>16</sup> Ramalingam, 2008 in: Capacity.org.

<sup>17</sup> Engel, 1997: 107.

<sup>18</sup> Pedler et al., 1997: Chapter 4; Senge, 1992: 22-30.

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When organisations are seen as 'living organisms' however organisation learning cannot be treated alike. Nancy Dixon, a leading consultant on organisational learning in the USA, argues that learning is in essence a social process.<sup>19</sup> Learning is thus conversation-based rather than written-based.<sup>20</sup> Organisational systems need to facilitate such learning through social interaction. True organisational learning involves a high degree of trust and sharing of information. It is therefore disconnected from activities that focus primarily on results.

In essence organisational learning is about knowledge creation and reuse and can be seen as a circular process of sharing of lessons between knowers and reusers over time. Learning is basically about knowledge creation by 'knowers' - the ones who have learned something and are willing to share - and possible reuse by 'learners' - the ones asking the knowers and who are willing to learn and subsequently create their own story and lessons learned. Dixon continues that the work processes within an organisation define to a certain level the type of learning and how to learn from each other. Organisational learning is basically about learning how to start the learning process on the basis of the initial questions of the learners; and about how to anticipate new sets of questions along the way.

When organisations are seen as living entities the continuous interplay of informal dimensions and its formal manifestations are being acknowledged and reckoned with. Learning and adaptation comes from within, knowledge is embodied in the people within the system and the aliveness of the organisation resides in its informal communities of practice. The emphasis is more on tacit than explicit knowledge. The most effective way to assess and enhance an organisation's learning potential is to support and strengthen its community of practice.

In order to make the process of organisational learning meaningful, various stakeholders need to be involved right from the start on the basis of their own commitment, terms and conditions. It is necessary to get their active participation and to provide an environment in which their creativity and organisational learning can flourish.<sup>21</sup> Within this context, leadership is of key importance.

#### **c. Leadership**

Peter Senge has rightly argued that the task of leaders is to built learning organisations in which people can grow. He argues that leaders have a special role as designer, teacher and should take the lead with regard to the emergence of a collective picture of the future and the discipline of team learning. Such a leadership role is of utmost importance as many staff members of development agencies have a rather mechanistic vision of organisations. In terms of metaphors many view organisations in the traditional Frederick Taylor kind of manner as a 'machine' instead of a 'living organism'.<sup>22</sup> At an operational level, this has far reaching consequences. Within such an approach the emphasis is on formal structures, systems and procedures, et cetera and change and organisational learning is seen as something that can be engineered from outside an organisation as per Taylor's principles of 'scientific management'.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See among other things Dixon, 2004 and Dixon, 1999.

<sup>20</sup> Organisational learning should in other words be connected to the development of relationships, reflective conversations, probing questions and in-depth interactions.

<sup>21</sup> Capra, 2002: 99.

<sup>22</sup> The metaphor is borrowed from Peter Senge.

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But within the living organism, leadership and management are two different issues and organisational functions. By disorganising, by placing the leadership function next to the management one, the visionary element, necessary to guide the future of the organisation, would receive greater emphasis and provide an environment in which knowledge, learning and change become central. Therefore, a true leader can be recognised through the guidance she or he provides, by taking responsibilities for the choices she or he makes and her or his level of accessibility within the organisation and her partners.

### Conclusions and recommendations

‘Experts, especially those dealing with local issues from afar, can, and often do, get things seriously wrong. They have a tendency to misdiagnose problems, they regularly misinterpret what those affected actually want, and, most importantly, they frequently jump to the wrong conclusion as to what needs to be done to rectify the situation.’<sup>24</sup>

In summary, it can be concluded that the ability to learn from practice is in essence linked to the ability to acknowledge that development is quite often a rather complex, chaotic process, with often complex power dynamics, whereby a plan basically is an expression of an intention around which people rally and it is important to create space for acknowledging success and failure in a setting of trust-based relationships.

Although the rhetoric, and the fact that the importance of learning is accepted in development discourse, it often appears to be one step forwards and one step backwards, as demonstrated by international and Dutch national trends. The disbandment of Bellanet, a Secretariat at the IDRC, with a focus on knowledge and learning, last year and the similar action with DCO, within the Ministry, are small, symbolic actions which undermine the considerable progress on the learning agenda, and fill us with trepidation. Both of these organisational units were beacons in their support of the learning and knowledge agenda. For this reason, not only do the NGDOs need to ask themselves whether they are serious about learning, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also needs to ask itself the same question too.

How can the Ministry encourage organisations to make learning more central to their work? Firstly, by creating a subsidy framework that truly makes learning at the centre of the development process.

How can organisations themselves make learning more central to their work? First of all, by appointing leaders who are not necessarily the managers of the organisation because these are different organisational functions which require different qualities. Leaders with a vision of development and who are manifest learners will do much to change the orientation of their organisations. Secondly, learning should not be seen organisationally as a support process: it should be at the centre of all the organisations activities. At the same time, NGDOs should ask them serious questions about how they learn and how they address the multiple knowledges from which they are learning. In operational terms of internal procedures that will make the learning agenda more central to the organisation this could lead to staff

<sup>23</sup> Braverman, 1974: 85.

<sup>24</sup> Rihani 2002: 233.

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assessments which include clear learning and knowledge targets, for both senior and junior staff, to promote positive attitudes and behaviour to learning and knowledge sharing of internal procedures and to build in 'reality checks' – immersion of Northern staff in Southern realities – also appears to yield benefits.

By: Marcella Tam

PSO

## Bijdrage beleidsdialoog Lerend Vermogen PSO, Marcella Tam

### Introduction

The state of the art paper of Fons van der Velde gives an interesting general overview. The main points centre around: In the sector the importance of learning is acknowledged. What we should realize that we are operating in an extremely complex environment, which requires that we should shift from linear thinking to complex, multiperspective approaches. Learning processes in the North often do not benefit southern parties. What the sector needs is a subsidy frame that puts learning at the centre, NGDOs that have an organisational culture conducive to learning, with leadership that fosters learning and frequent reality checks in the South.

### Comments

In general I recognize the trends indicated in the paper and agree with the pointers for discussion given.

### IN ADDITION:

#### More than subsidy

The paper claims to focus on the relationship between Dutch Governments and Civil Society organisations. In the paper actually the reflections on this issue are limited apart from stressing the importance of a subsidy frame that gives space for learning.

Also from a more systems thinking point of view I think that it is relevant to also reflect on the other forces that determine our reality; notably the Dutch public and the Dutch Parliament. In reactions from the Dutch public we can see that the general atmosphere is one of "quick wins, results, not too much funds should be spent on overhead, micro management (I want to know how my Euro is spent)." The attitude of the Dutch public determines to a certain extent the space in which the Dutch Government has to manoeuvre. If we want to make a meaningful shift to more space for learning it requires from the Dutch development sector (Government and Civil Society) a strategy to deal with this. How can we get the message across that reality is complex, requires time and involves learning, how can we support one another (government and NGDOs)? This is more than agreeing on a subsidy frame. This would require a different relationship between Government and NGDOs and NGDOs amongst themselves, in which we would collaborate as allies. I would like to add this to the points for discussion.

I find this particularly important also since making a shift in the attitude towards learning between Dutch public-Government – NGDOs, will have an impact on the attitude we will have towards learning in the South.

#### Learning with the South

I very much agree with the point touched upon in the paper about the power dimension in learning. I had earlier put this on the "ontwikkelingsverandering" website as input for discussion.

As a sector the policy dialogue on 24-25 June gives us the opportunity to not only put learning on the agenda, but to go one step further and use our space for learning here as a tool for empowerment and learning for our partners in the South. Is it possible to design our learning processes, and use the time and funds available for these processes in such a way that partners are not approached as instruments, but actually learn together and strengthen our partners by doing so. I have encountered interesting examples of this in the South, where local NGDOs in stead of doing action research themselves, trained slum dwellers to do so, thereby greatly enhancing their status, knowledge and leverage vis-a vis the local municipality. Can we do the

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same?

#### **Different stages of experiential learning**

Further we support the points given in the “Partos kernboodschap”. More specifically, The points 1 to 4 reflect the four stages in experiential learning: Experimentation->Learning in implementation -> Learning in synthesis ->Forming Theory -> Experimentation, etc. Going through these stages is important in learning processes in the development sector. In practice there is little room for experimentation, and theory formation is left often to academics. Closer collaboration with the academic world and room for experimentation could be further pursued.

#### **Learning: some PSO experiences**

PSO has been focusing on learning and quality improvement of the work of its members in the field of capacity development in the South over the last years. I would like to share some of our insights from this hands on experience with learning processes.

In the sector sharing of lessons learnt between NGOs and exploring new ways to become more effective have been fairly limited. The PSO collective learning trajectories have been one platform where organisations could meet to share experiences and explore new ideas. Our experience is that these learning events can greatly stimulate learning in the sector. Learning and knowledge in our view is ultimately expressed in changed behaviour. In this context one of our lessons learnt is that having individuals attending learning events is not sufficient. When they enthusiastically get back to their office the new insights are only put into practice if the management supports them. In our trajectories we now always get the commitment of the management as part of the trajectory. This supports Fons's emphasis on organisational culture and leadership.

PSO has learning by practice trajectories with its individual member organisations. In these trajectories we analyse together with the members what the strengths and weaknesses seem to be in their capacity developing activities in the South. We jointly select an area for improvement (for instance: refining the strategy when supporting networks) and then develop a learning and action plan. PSO introduced these trajectories based on our earlier experience that systematic feedback, and focus on a theme (from inside or outside party) stimulates learning processes. Learning of course can take place anywhere, anyhow and we should cherish this “free” learning, but focussed learning can also enhance the effectiveness of our work. The first experiences with these trajectories show that (focused) learning requires the organisation to change and is indeed not an add on.

Finally, in working with the great variety of PSO members we have noticed that some of the already known insights in development work, such as the importance of a good context analysis with stake holders prior to interventions, are not always part and parcel of the thinking and working processes of Dutch NGOs. So apart from developing new ideas and insights, there is still a need to focus on translating knowledge into daily practice.

By: Wim  
Stroecken

SHF

IK MIS EEN TWEETAL DIMENSIES:

### Veranderende wereld

Niet alleen voor “ons onderwerp”, maar eigenlijk bij alle 6 thema’s van de beleidsdialogoog gaat men uit van stukken die mogelijk (deels) over hun houdbaarheidsdatum heen zijn. Het is ongetwijfeld waar dat de veel aangehaalde beleidsnotitie van Lammers uit 2001 nut kan hebben als een richtsnoer voor onze discussie. Die discussie moet gaan leiden tot nieuw beleid, dat is toegesneden op het effectief kunnen aanpakken van de ontwikkelingsissues van de komende korte en middellange termijn. Bij het hanteren van deze uitgangspunten hebben we naar mijn gevoel te weinig aandacht voor de zicht sterk en snel veranderende wereld. Ná 2001 hebben een aantal nieuwe wereldwijde thema’s (zoals o.a. klimaatverandering, veranderende militaire- en economische machtverhoudingen, voedsel- en brandstofproblematiek en crisis op de financiële markten) een enorm beroep gedaan op nieuw denken. Voor dergelijke thema’s schiet het in veel gevallen tekort om te extrapoleren op “oude kennis”.

### “Leren” integreren met “Innovatie”

Gemotiveerd ook vanuit argumenten bij dimensie 1 wil ik stellen; leren is voor een groot deel terug kijken, maar zeker ook vernieuwend vooruit kijken. Over het profijt hebben van terugkijken lees ik erg veel gedachten (die ik grotendeels ondersteun en hier niet verder wil herhalen), over het vooruitkijken veel minder. Sarah en Fons halen de volgende tekst aan; “Looking solely at results also deters people from taking risk in situations where innovation – which inevitably entails an element of risk – would be desirable or even essential”. In de conclusions and recommendations kom ik helaas niet meer een specifieke focus hierop tegen.

Voor het “terugkijk-deel” is leren niet zozeer een kwestie van (alleen) methoden en systemen, maar veel eerder van leiderschap, cultuur en een vertrouwen om te durven delen. Voor het “vooruitkijk-deel” zou naar mijn smaak sprake moeten zijn van een beleid dat uitgaat van een groter vertrouwen in visionair leiderschap bij vernieuwende organisaties in de sector. Als je als doel van leren stelt dat het moet bijdragen aan een grotere doelmatigheid en effectiviteit van de sector, dan zou innovatie een zelfde plaats verdienen naast leren, kortom, een betoog om leren en innoveren op een geïntegreerde wijze te benaderen, ze hebben elkaar nodig.

Ik constateer dat huidig beleid, en de daar uit voortkomende procedures en systemen, meer uit gaat van het denken in stramien, methodes, track record, etc. Het dient onvoldoende het belang van innovatie.

In zekere zin zou je “innoveren” als het zielige broertje van “leren” kunnen beschouwen. Daar waar iedereen het vanzelfsprekend vindt dat je een op leren gericht beleid hebt, hebben innovators vaak door een zure appel van ongeloof en wantrouwen heen te bijten. Er is vaak nog geen voorbeeldmateriaal voor handen en de risico’s zijn dus groter.

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SHF is als lid van het Innovatie Platform actief geweest met een lobby naar de overheid om juist aandacht te vragen voor jonge en vernieuwende organisaties. Nadat haast 100% van de aanvragen van partijen in de categorie "jong en innovatief" in de laatste MFS-ronde niet werden gehonoreerd hebben wij ons verenigd in dit platform. Als platform zijn wij gelukkig met het resultaat van deze lobby; een tussentijdse MFS ronde voor jonge en vernieuwende organisaties. Op 1 Juni j.l. werd daarvoor in de staatscourant een nieuwe wet gepubliceerd. SHF en vele collega partijen van ons platform schrijven daarvoor nu een subsidieaanvraag. Los van dit mooie resultaat wil ik het toch getalsmatig in perspectief zetten:

Bij de laatste MFS-ronde werd voor ongeveer € 2,1 Miljard aan gelden voor 4 jaar toegewezen aan de voornamelijk gevestigde partijen in de sector. In deze tussentijdse ronde gaat het om € 20 Miljoen voor 2 jaar. Als je dat procentueel uitzet kom je op een belang van 0,2 % voor jonge en vernieuwende organisaties. Ik zou zeker niet de stelling aanwillen dat er bij de gevestigde organisaties met de toegewezen gelden niet ook aan innovatie wordt gedaan, maar de verhoudingen lijken toch scheef te liggen.

Als we voor het gemak van de discussie de gevestigde en innovatieve organisaties als twee separate groepen beschouwen (wat natuurlijk ergens mank gaat, maar toch...), dan valt er m.i. wederzijds voordeel te behalen:

Gevestigde organisaties beschikken per definitie over een ruime kennisbase en hebben veel ervaring met procedures, kennismanagement, stramienen, systemen, etc. Innovatieve organisaties hebben een andere kernwaarde. Zonder te veel belast te zijn met decennia aan ontwikkelingservaring spelen zij vaak wendbaarder in op eisen van deze tijd en doen hun werk vaak ook vanuit onconventionele samenwerkingsverbanden. Over en weer kunnen deze twee typen partijen met elkaar terrein winnen als er voldoende vertrouwen is om met elkaar te werken.

Kortom, bij het leren van de sector als zodanig stel ik voor om innoveren een structurele plek te geven en daar ook ondersteunend beleid voor te ontwikkelen.

**By: Kenneth van Toll**

**Free Voice**

### **Reactie op het stuk zelf:**

- Er zouden meer literatuurverwijzingen gemaakt moeten worden naar kanttekeningen Lerend Vermogen. Een voorbeeld hiervan is Mintzberg, Ahlstrand en Lampel die in Strategy Safari de volgende kanttekening plaatsen:
- “The learning organisation is all the rage right now, and mostly for good reason. But it is no panacea for anything. People have to learn, but they also have to get on with doing the regular work efficiently. There can be a time to learn and a time to exploit the previous learning. Moreover, ... there can be superstitious learning too and “groupthink”.... There is also negative learning as we saw in Staw’s (1976) notion of escalating commitment”. “So learning can be wonderful, but there can be too much of any wonderful thing. Finally learning can be expensive...”(Strategy Safari pages 176 – 231).
- de notitie gaat te veel uit van learning in development organisations zelf. Er staat niets in van lerende vermogens van netwerken en ketens. Dit is een opvallend gemis omdat bijna zonder uitzondering NGDO's onderdeel zijn van netwerken en of ook ketens waarin lerende netwerken en ketens van eminent belang zijn. Het is immers van groot belang dat niet alleen de NGO hier lerende organisaties zijn maar dat ook alle betrokken organisaties in de keten of het netwerk dat ook zijn.
- In onze optiek kun je niet zeggen dat je niet stellen een uitstekende lerende organisatie
- te zijn, als zowel voor je als na je in de keten niet wordt gewerkt volgens deze principes
- (lerend vermogen van netwerken en ketens) dan is je eigen leren suboptimaal. In Nederland is er relatief veel onderzoek en ervaring op dit vlak zoals TNO, INK, etc.
- over het subsidyframework. De tekst ‘In development a good plan is basically an expression of a public declaration of a purpose around which people gather....’ (pag 4 en 7) Ik denk dat dit voor sociale, culturele, mensenrechten, vrijheid van meningsuiting projecten, in met name fragiele staten, zal gelden. Maar om dit op alles toe te passen gaat te ver en is ook niet juist. Plannen die “SMART” zijn kunnen in ontwikkeling ook goed werken, maar je moet je bewust zijn van de context waarin de plannen moeten worden uitgevoerd.
- Stel voor om het model van ‘The learning company’ zichtbaar te maken in het structuurplaatje’ En van daaruit 5 b op te zetten. Maakt het geheel duidelijker. Nu lastig te lezen.
- de opmerkingen over de opheffing van zowel Bellanet en DCO (pag 7) zouden beter onderbouwd moeten worden. Er staat nu dat ze ‘were beacons in their support of the learning and knowledge agenda’. Op welke wijze waren ze dat en voor wie waren ze dat. Zonder toelichting blijft dit in de lucht hangen
- leren als centre of the development process? ( pag 7) Ik dacht dat armoedebestrijding (behalen millennium development goals) moet zijn. Beter is om te zeggen learning at the centre of network, chain and or organizational activities. Dat wordt verder op ook gezegd in de notitie : learning should be at the centre of all organizational activities.

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#### **Conclusie:**

Leren is voor organisaties zeer belangrijk en vooral voor de processen die onze organisatie uitvoert en degenen die verantwoordelijk zijn voor het managen en uitvoeren van die processen.

Maar belangrijker is dat organisaties die in een keten en een netwerk opereren het belang van een lerend netwerk en keten onderkennen. In de zeer complexe en dynamische wereld van ontwikkelingssamenwerking zijn lerende netwerken en ketens essentieel om met succes ontwikkelingsprojecten te kunnen uitvoeren. Lerende netwerken en ketens, zo ervaren wij, helpen om focus op doelen (outcome) te houden, de toegevoegde waarde van de keten en netwerkpartijen te identificeren en verbeterprestaties over de gehele keten te doen.

Free Voice denkt dat dit de processen die door de ketens lopen efficiënter en effectiever maken (transparante doelstellingen voor elk onderdeel van de keten, de kern waar het om gaat wordt duidelijker en stapeling van ambities die niet te halen zijn wordt voorkomen, sturing is eenvoudiger enzovoorts).

De vraag hoeveel kost dat leren? En wat levert het op? Dit moet elke organisatie kunnen beantwoorden.

INK en andere organisaties in Nederland hebben ervaring met lerende netwerken en ketenallianties. Free Voice heeft het INK model op de eigen organisatie toegepast en is momenteel in een pilot met het INK aan het werk om het model ook toe te passen ten behoeve van een lerend netwerk en keten. We doen dit met een van onze grootste partners in Afrika die op zijn beurt projecten en programma's in 14 landen uitvoert.

By: Yolanda  
Jansen

MamaCash

**Due to time and other constraints, I have decided to limit my observations to three points. These are my observations:**

1. Overall, I appreciate the paper because it provides a general overview; it almost being a 'Learning in Development Organisation 101', though I am less convinced that the points made are specific or typical for Development Organisations. Also, I had expected to find a greater deal more on *the relationship* between the Dutch Government and civil society in the paper, but perhaps all that could be said, has been said in the paper. Those of you who are more closely connected to the 'development world' can perhaps comment more on these issues (as a women's fund, Mama Cash does not consider herself a development agency).

2. (A comment on paragraph 5. Policy and operational choices of development actors in the Netherlands)

Whilst the concepts of *volition* and *agility* are presented as "of key importance", I found the use of these concepts in the paper rather contrived and lacking in clarity. I would like to suggest that during the conference we will examine whose ultimate responsibility the *Learning Agenda* is and what consequences this may have on the subsidy framework. I say this, because in section 5b. The nature of the learning organisations, an implicit case is made to view (development) organisations as "living entities". Further on, it goes on to say that "learning and adaptation comes from within," and that "the most effective way to assess and enhance an organisation's learning potential is to support and strengthen its community of practice". Connecting these statements, I would like to suggest that on June 24&25 we should discuss where the responsibility for the learning agenda lies and how facilitating and/or promoting this agenda should be represented in the subsidy framework. I am also rather keen to find out **how** this assessment of the organisational learning potential is taking place and **who** in fact should make this assessment.

3. While I wholeheartedly agree with the authors that organisational learning should not be marginalized nor conceptualized "as a support function" I would like stress that the focus of the learning agenda should be tightly connected to the development agenda - this may be regarded as a superfluous statement, but I think the danger is that NGDO's who enthusiastically adopt a learning approach may inadvertently confuse improving organisational effectiveness with efficiency. Improved efficiency is a very important objective; however, by continuously asking oneself **why** a learning approach or trajectory or approach need to be adopted or implemented, will keep the **what** and the **how** of the learning objective relevant for - dare I say it - those who the organisation was founded to serve in the first place.