The state of the art on knowledge integration across boundaries:
Key findings and emerging future issues
23-24th January 2012

A two day seminar was held on 23-24th January, 2012 in Utrecht, Netherlands. Its focus was to further thinking on knowledge integration and co-creation. A think piece[1] provided stepping stones to for rich discussions and energetic exchanges. Some key resulting insights and findings that kept surfacing are here presented.

The Outer Space of knowledge integration

While the focus of the think piece and the seminar was on knowledge integration processes in the 'sector' of international development cooperation (IDC), the sector itself was not subject of analysis or discussion. Nevertheless, a number of important issues were raised that, although outside the direct firmament of KI, need to be taken into account as they influence KI processes and the way these relate to changes sought:

1. *Changes in and debates about Aid and International Cooperation:* scenarios are changing quickly and deeply. The focus of the Think Piece and the seminar was not to analyse them, but these changes are important to consider (see no.2);
2. *Knowledge for change*: development processes are change processes. Knowledge integration in itself only gauges meaning when it is embedded in the *for what* – what is it supposed to contribute to? Without the embedding KI becomes an empty buzz word. For KI to be connected to change, understanding external changes is crucial;
3. *For-profit sector*: several participants pointed out that business was not involved. However, other participants indicated that as the drivers are fundamentally different, there is only so much that can be learnt from or gained from joining forces with business actors. Relevance of the knowledge produced is the yardstick rather than their involvement per say. Also, as the sector is extremely diverse, gains and costs of engagement are difficult to understand when not further specifying who and what;
4. *Who is 'we'*: it was pointed out that 'we' can be a cover-up, as there are also issues of competition and divergent interests, parallel to the trend to form alliances. There can also be contesting parties which can make KI processes volatile and even conflictual.

Evidence, Rigor and Robustness

Evidence-based and rigorous working for KI is to be understood as the opposite of ad hoc approaches: make sure that whatever you produce or approach you follow, that it is up for scrutiny, and that it builds on available knowledge.

Suggested rigor and robustness criteria for KI processes that have already been tried:
-   Transparency
-   Validity
-   Reproducibility/traceability

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[1] http://linkingknowledgedomains.wordpress.com/2012/01/19/like-a-bridge-over-troubled-waters/

These are 'normal' scientific standards. The question is how to apply them when there are different stakeholders. With triangulation, divergence of opinions is not a problem, but a source of richness[2]. The creation of intermediate products can enhance transparency of the process.

With negotiated knowledge resulting from KI, an issue is furthermore the *acceptability* of 'alternative' knowledges, and its context specificity, and how that influences issues of validity etc.

The construction of evidence and robustness can be build into the approach followed by:
- Be on the lookout for comparable contrary cases to strengthen 'evidence'
- Challenge saturation and avoid a premature closure
- Articulate intermediate understanding and check that against 'other' perspectives
- Also, build in ways for triangulation: for methods, data, cases, findings and contexts and context-specificity (e.g. through analytical induction that is check against available data and realities)
- Continuously check against values for early detection of possible clashes between desired and (unconsciously) applied paradigms

Enablers

There exist many disconnecting drivers in the knowledge landscape, e.g. different timings, cycles and frames of different knowledge actors, evaporation of knowledge, divergent interests, disconnecting business models.

Nevertheless, in the seminar a great number of enabling pointers and starters were put forward. Here, overarching ones are listed:
- Change in mindset: think not disconnect, but connect
- Undertake 'pre'- research: preparation is key – build time for piloting.
- Create (space for) collective experiences and joint efforts, e.g. joint travels, multi-stakeholder platforms
- Exchange people, create positions and support people to travel across boundaries (of knowledge domains)
- Make use of technological innovations for transparency and accountability
- Start together: there is a tremendous need for brokers, bridging and boundary workers, people who can contribute to the fluidity between domains.
- Make sure to budget time and other resources for brokering, boundary work, collaborative efforts.
- Start where you are, and build from there (structures, relations, conditions etc.). Snowball process, also in deepening understanding of what happens
- Step away from fixed ideas regarding (prescribed) roles and focus on what you can contribute
- Marry different approaches (but be knowledgeable about methodologies and paradigms underlying approaches)
- How to address power inequalities: prepare before interacting, have separate groups before mixing etc.
- What drives a process is not a methodological problem, but a political one: unconsciously and unintentionally one tries to drive a process. Sometimes, the issue is not about being transparent, having different agendas or participation, but about situations when there are contradicting interests with trade-offs that are unknown, unresolvable and unmeasurable. Participatory methodologies cannot resolve fundamental power dynamics, although they can help to make maximum use of available space.
- Create and expand a list of enabling conditions.

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[2] There is a whole theoretical stream of evaluation approaches that focus on this, e.g. narrative evaluation

A number of issues require further reflection:

1- How can we be more strategic in our choices regarding KI[3]?
2- How can we start developing new paradigms together? In which direction the current needs to change?
3- What is the balance between self-reflection and think in connecting, that is how to divide the precious little time an organization has for reflection between investing in internal reflection processes and collectively with peer organizations (both happen too little)?

Proposals for the future:
1. Develop a brief that collates experiences
2. 'Unpack' the Think Piece: write in 'people's language, a document that is more practical (handbook?)
3. Set up a meeting framework 1/2 a year, or peer learning groups: strengthen ecology by networking
4. Deepen knowledge: for instance undertake study of costs of bidding (financially, time-wise, emotionally)

For the longer term:
- unpack what reflexivity in the knowledge landscape means and how to strengthen it.
- Reflect collectively on how to tread in the changing context (the broader horizon of knowledge integration efforts)
- to elaborate and enhance a Theory of Change of KI. So far, we are not clear nor document rigorously the link between KI and change.
- We need to work towards creating 'morphed' organizations, that is organization for the future that can support a landscape vision on KI
- Shifting grounds also create opportunities such as the space to take on new roles: how can we understand them and make best use of those spaces?

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[3] A number of pointers are already presented in the Think piece

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