Knowledge Platforms and the Knowledge Letter:
at the crossroads

An IKM discussion note

In November 2011, Secretary of State Dr Ben Knapen presented a 'knowledge letter' to the Dutch Parliament. This set out his Ministry's practical response to issues about the use of knowledge and research raised by the report on Dutch development co-operation, 'Less pretension, more ambition[i] by the Scientific Council for Government Policy. The report called for more focus – working in a smaller number of specialist fields in a smaller number of countries – and for greater professionalism. The 'knowledge letter' aims to show how knowledge management and research will be re-organised to address these issues. In doing so, it opens the way to thinking about the knowledges, capacities and working methods required to respond to the longer term vision of the report. This is of a future of development co-operation in which the Netherlands will need to seek common ground and common solutions with a whole range of other countries in order to achieve its direct national interests on issues such as climate change, energy, migration. In this future, the report suggests, direct development assistance will have a far smaller and subsidiary role.

The 'knowledge letter' establishes a framework for thinking about knowledge and development which defines three priority areas: knowledge for policy and implementation – that is knowledge used by the development sector as it plans, implements and evaluates its work; knowledge in developing countries – both as a factor in development as an enabler of developmental activity; policy for knowledge – that is how the Ministry manages its own knowledge and guides the wider process. It then outlines the 'infrastructure' of the knowledge programme, the development of 'knowledge platforms' relating to the four priority themes of Dutch development assistance – water, food, sexual and reproductive health and security and rule of law. A fifth platform will cover knowledge of innovative, theme-transcending intervention strategies. The letter goes on to sketch out arrangements for the funding and monitoring of research which will involve tendering processes overseen by an 'intermediary organisation'. This will replace the current practice whereby a substantial part of the research budget is spent on providing a number of institutional and programme grants.

We believe the 'knowledge letter' represents a significant step forward when compared to any previous donor knowledge strategy. The identification of the priority areas which the knowledge policy has to serve is clear, as is the acknowledgement of the importance of knowledge for implementation as well

as for policy. The idea of knowledge platforms offers a potentially viable route to developing and guiding knowledge production and exchange in the core thematic areas. Above all the emphases on the vital importance of knowledge sharing and the need for new ways of working demonstrate a crucial break from still powerful concepts of knowledge as something constructed from objects that can be manipulated. However, the letter, as might be expected in what is only a short document, is light on detail. We also wonder, based on the experience of new 'knowledge working' initiatives elsewhere and the many barriers they have to overcome, and on our own programme experience with the Ministry of trying to work in more innovative ways, if the scale of the challenges which will be faced in achieving the desired results has not been seriously underestimated. We think there are a number of areas which require further attention and where a clear understanding needs to be developed if the practical arrangements developed to deliver the programme are not to undermine its purpose. We would draw attention to a number of issues.

North/ South balance

As the WRR report states 'the ultimate task of high-quality development policy remains to search for mechanisms to initiate self-reinforcing processes of endogenous change' (WRR p 232). It is inconceivable that such processes do not involve knowledge and not just access to knowledge but the power and capacity to shape knowledge agendas and to determine what is important. Knowledge about development also needs to be widely available as unless there is potential for informed discourse at local level of the choices available to people, development becomes an imposition, undermining democratic discourse and the better governance it seeks to promote. The knowledge letter makes some of this explicit in its paragraph about knowledge for developing countries, and makes passing reference to various partnership arrangements and inter-university link-ups. However such arrangements are often based on a variety of inequalities which do not allow the necessary autonomy to allow 'self-reinforcing processes of endogenous change' or, indeed Southern knowledge producers to provide colleagues in donor or other development agencies with the local knowledge required if their interventions are to have any chance of success. 'It is the task of donors to actively promote the decentralization of knowledge development, i.e. developing countries should be enabled to create their own knowledge infrastructure' (WRR p 267). The letter does not give enough emphasis to this aspect and allows the danger that, as has happened with the introduction of ICT in the development sector, expenditure aimed at helping the poor might end up helping the rich[ii]

Power

North/ South relationships are not the only area of power imbalances when it comes to the production and validation of knowledge. Examples can be found relating to biases for or against academic knowledge versus that derived from observed experience, qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the gender or the status of the knowledge producer or publisher, as well as the frequent marginalisation of those excluded from economic or political power and, indeed from development.

Diversity

The letter's desire to see the current 'patchwork' of activities replaced by coherent research agendas is understandable but coherence does not require uniformity. The problem with research agendas devised by the 'great and the good' is that they can have an inbuilt bias towards the current dominant view and can constrain innovation and change. Being open to what we do not know or understand is essential. ' Diversity requires more attention. Development benefits from dissonant voices and different development paradigms' (WRR p.224). Previous research regimes at the Ministry have encouraged at least some investment in countervailing knowledge (and practice) and this practice needs to be deliberately incorporated into the new arrangements.

Emergence

A characteristic of effective knowledge sharing, in particular across boundaries of discipline, role, language and culture, is that it creates new knowledge and often new ways of expressing it. A UK study[iii] of 500 cross-disciplinary programmes concluded that the most important outcomes and impacts of interdisciplinary endeavours are:

- To be different from those that were expected (a universal finding)
- Not to be expressible in terms of the discipline that originated the initiative
- To involve new questions, or reformulation of objectives
- To be in the form of capacity to respond to future events, not past ones
- To arise after a long time – perhaps long after the initiative has formally ended

Clearly one would want the proposed knowledge platforms to be run in a way which was alert to the potential of emergent factors – be they new knowledge, new relationships or new ways of working and be capable of responding to and benefiting from them.

Knowledge Platforms

What is a knowledge platform?

The knowledge letter describes the functions of the platforms as

1. 'The joint identification, selection and definition of research questions
2. The preparation of a coherent joint research agenda
3. The identification and exploitation of existing knowledge
4. The feedback of research results into policy and practice'

It envisages that 'each platform will be coordinated by a recognized authority on that theme with extensive experience in development. A small steering group will ensure that the platform undertakes roles and tasks in line with mutual agreements'. Beyond that, it leaves a lot to the imagination. This is both good in that allows new ideas to be generated but also carries the risks of confusion and of raising expectations which will not be met. How are these joint processes to be performed? Who is

welcome to participate? Are we talking about a purely virtual presence or will the platforms have a physical presence too?

In the same way that the platforms themselves could become areas of collaborative co-creation, so could the process of identifying their development. In the process it is worth looking at some existing experiences of organising cross- boundary knowledge spaces. We would suggest that, albeit on a very different scale and without the focus on supporting the Dutch development programme, our own programme, IKM Emergent, has acted as a knowledge platform for the area of knowledge management in development. It has involved the creation and sustaining of a community of interest; the articulation of a research agenda; the identification, support and communication of a range of research activities within clear budget limits; the development of an evaluative practice appropriate to the tasks at hand; and the creation and running of a structure for the management and governance of the programme. The KM4Dev community (http://www.km4dev.org/) offers a different, less structured and less research-based, example of the creation of a community for the explicit purpose of knowledge exchange. The Sarai-CSDS Fellowship Programme may also offer relevant experience as an explicitly multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder research programme, intent on 'putting in place a public architecture for the production, circulation and exchange of knowledge' with an explicit commitment to diversity and the exploration of uncomfortable subjects.[iv]

Whatever their precise formulation we consider that, if they are to function effectively, then as well as attention being paid to the issues outlined above, the platforms be designed with the following characteristics

Open and collaborative institutional structure
The most effective vehicles for interdisciplinary enterprises are generally collaborative teams, directed and co-ordinated by a leader. Based on this, and on our own experience, we would argue that the platforms should thus have a network structure and should be without fixed boundaries to the outside so that new interests and ideas are able to enter. Such interaction could take place in face-to-face meetings or virtually

Transparent and accountable processes of planning and management which are aligned with the purpose of the platforms
It is not only new ways of working which are required but new ways of managing. As the WRR report makes clear, change is neither linear nor predictable and nor is the type of knowledge experimentation which is likely to generate innovation. Many existing processes for setting investment targets and evaluating outcomes impose levels of predictability and order which can be counter productive.

Knowledge sharing does not take place without trust. It will be an absolute necessity for the management of the platforms to do everything possible – in its systems and procedures, in its communications and in its own example – to stimulate trust in the platform itself and between its participants

Dedicated leadership and broad representation
Leadership of the knowledge platform will be key to its success. It is essential that the leadership is dedicated to the creation and maintenance of the platform an open and collaborative space and is not distracted by other institutional or financial interests.

Leaders and core members of the knowledge platforms should include recognised holistic thinkers who are able to talk and think as academics and practitioners, with no particular organisational axe to grind, and with direct experience of facilitating complex multi-stakeholder processes.

Key involvement from the South – at the level of leaders and core members – is crucial to reinforce the development rather than Dutch focus and ensure that the local realities which development is intended to change are properly known about and understood.

Active Facilitation
Facilitation of the knowledge platforms will be key to their success. Interactive, 'open space' types of meetings are much more likely to foster innovation that traditional meetings.

Technology makes it possible to hold virtual meetings in real time. These will need to be employed to make equal, Southern representation and involvement a reality.

Engagement at and beyond boundaries
The platforms must not become new silos of isolated knowledge. Even whilst providing the desired focus of attention, they will inevitably overlap with other producers and users of knowledge on   levels of discipline, theme, geographic area and individual role. It is very important that valuable knowledge located in these areas and relevant to the platform is identified and brought in and, just as important, that knowledge generated within the platform is made available to others who may be able to use it. As Wenny Ho has pointed out[v], this can often best be done through intelligent engagement with intermediaries.

We are not convinced that the specific arrangements proposed in the knowledge letter are likely to work that well in practice. We think that collaborative consortia which were open to new members and to which managers and other decision makers were ultimately accountable would be more likely to achieve the collective engagement with the research agendas developed and to create trust than 'lead

bodies'. For example appointing one institution as a lead body inevitably changes its relations with the other institutions which may have been considered for the role. When IKM started, ideas for linking up with a well known development research body were discussed but it was understood that this would have made it harder to secure collaboration from the staff of other institutes. In the end the programme was developed under the facilitative umbrella of an association (EADI) of which many of our collaborators were already members and which was not seen as a competitor. Similar points can be made with regard to the commissioning and monitoring of the research itself. We would agree that research funding should be based on research proposals rather than mere institutional existence and accept that some transparent means of selecting which research gets funded (and which doesn't) is clearly needed. However, we are unsure if competitive tendering is satisfactory as the only means of securing research funding, particularly if it is organised by a third party as suggested in the letter. Processes for competitive funding of development research by DFID in the UK are often cited admiringly but, beneath a veneer of normality, these processes have put considerable strain on behaviours which the Dutch government, in its acceptance of the WRR report and in the letter, seeks to encourage. Among a number of concerns, we would point out:

- that the tendering process itself does not guarantee full transparency or trust. Some decisions have been regarded as close to scandalous and could lead to legal challenge
- that the degree of control exercised by DFID on research questions, on research methodologies and on what types of knowledge count has led to a lack of creativity or diversity in what is funded and means that the 'innovation .. co-produced by science and practice' (WRR p 189) does not take place
- that the cost of preparing detailed tenders, some of which run to more than 200 pages, acts as a strong disincentive to the participation of smaller, perhaps more creative or more values based organisations, and their knowledge and approaches are therefore excluded
- that the contracting and monitoring of research against pre-identified outcomes greatly reduces the potential for creating genuinely new knowledge (that is unimagined in the proposal) or for acknowledging and responding to emergent possibilities
- that the 'ownership' of ideas becomes more important (as they become the basis for tendered proposals) and this acts as a strong disincentive to knowledge sharing between research institutions to the detriment of the development knowledge ecology, something which the WRR sees as a global public good
- that the related introduction of needing to book researcher time against indentified institutional income acts as a disincentive for individuals and institutions to invest time in creative processes developing new ideas or in the sort of knowledge sharing and networking the letter seeks to encourage
- that awareness of development history, institutional memory and the training of new researchers all suffer as these are in no way supported by an income stream based only on serial competitive bidding

IKM argues that some aspects of the current procedures for managing research represent a prioritising of bureaucratic control over knowledge creation and represent an industrialisation – on Taylorist lines – of knowledge production to the point where it becomes the accomplishment of predetermined tasks which can be carried out by any suitably qualified individual. In our view such a restructuring of knowledge production has everything to do with generating profits for the institutions capable of managing it and nothing to do with posing or answering the major questions facing society, of promoting innovation or development. This is why we think that how the Dutch government moves to implement the imaginative proposals set out in the letter is of such importance and why we suggest that the Dutch development programme, based as it needs to be on the knowledges it mobilises for its tasks, is genuinely at a crossroads. This is also why it is important to be clear as to what the WRR report meant by the greater professionalism it recommends. 'The emphasis on presenting results, monitoring and self-evaluation can also have negative effects. NGOs become more bureaucratic rather than more professional. After all professionalization means having enough room to manoeuvre to be able to respond to the changing situation in the countries themselves, to experiment, to be part of a learning system, and to render account for the main framework of their interventions, rather than the details' (WRR p 202). We suggest that this advice, given to NGOs, is applicable for all parts of the sector and needs to guide the development of the knowledge infrastructure too.

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[i]   van Lieshout P., Went R. and Kremer M. 'Less Pretension, More Ambition: development policy in times of globalization' WRR/ Amsterdam University Press 2010

[ii]   See for example Powell, M., Davies, T. & Taylor, K. 'ICT for or against development? An introduction to the ongoing case of Web 3.0', IKM Working Paper 16 (in press). Summary at
http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/files/1109-Final_Summary_Working_Paper_16-v2.pdf

[iii]   Alan Blackwell, Lee Wilson, Charles Boulton and John Knell (2010) Creating value across boundaries: maximising the return from interdisciplinary innovation. London: National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts. 31pp. http://www.nesta.org.uk/library/documents/creating_value_across_boundaries_may10.pdf

[iv]   See 'Working Questions: the SARAI-CSDS Fellowship Programme 2002-2007, SARAI/CSDS, Delhi 2007

[v]   Ho, W. 'Like a bridge over troubled waters', Hivos/IKM, 2011
http://www.hivos.net/Hivos-Knowledge-Programme/Publications/Pubs/Like-a-Bridge-over-Troubled-Waters