Organization structures and situated learning in development NGO's

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=== Extended summary (not to be quoted) ===

Introduction

The paper aims to confront two trends of a very different nature that are noticeable in the international development sector. The first concerns the shift from regional to sectoral or thematic organizational structures that major Dutch development NGO's have implemented in recent years. An important driver for this shift is the NGO's wish to support their role in capacity building via partnerships with local partners, research institutions and other development NGO's. The second trend concerns the increased attention for social-practice sides to knowledge and knowing as a reaction to the more limited focus on cognitive and explicit sides to knowledge, which typified technology-led knowledge management (KM) programs in the nineties. This trend is also noticeable in the development sector, where KM became highly popular in the nineties with a prime role played by the World Bank that redefined itself as Knowledge Bank (Ferguson & Cummings, 2008). These early KM initiatives in the development sector are now being criticized for being inspired by a mostly implicit epistemology-of-possession, their neglect of issues of power and the reproach that they embrace a predominantly western outlook on development issues (McFarlane, 2006; Powell, 2006). The implied call is that early KM perspectives, programs and initiatives should be augmented by efforts to do justice to the situated and social aspects of knowing in practice.

When these two developments are confronted, the question is whether and how they can support each other or whether and how they are at cross-purposes. The idea that knowledge can or should be organized, as proposed in parts of the KM and organizational learning (OL) literature, meets with much opposition and criticism. Knowledge that is organized into manageable chunks, so it is argued, ceases to be full-blooded knowledge. By organizing knowledge workers, knowledge processes, or knowledge networks via the imposition of organization structures, these same critics maintain, knowledge is bound to be become less knowledge as it gets grinded when moulded into an organizationally valuable capability or resource. Flexibility and freedom appear to be the keywords when knowledge and organization structures are brought together, because knowledge as a source of new knowing is said to require serendipity, and therefore defies structuring. Yet organization structures do more than just curtail. They also enable. Adopting distinctions between 'controlling, constraining or coercive' versus 'seeding and enabling' structures (Adler & Borys, 1996; Garud & Jain, 1996; Thompson, 2005), the paper explores when and how the definition of organization structures supports or thwarts the knowledge side to work.

Conceptual background

The paper discusses the connection between organization structure and the learning capabilities of development NGO's at a theoretical and a practical level. It addresses aspects of organization structure as independent variables affecting the NGO's learning capability as the dependent variable in the research. As to the independent variables, the paper does not inspect the full breadth of the concept of organization structure. "Organization structure can be broadly defined as the sum total of ways in which an organization divides its tasks and then coordinates them, in essence balancing job-related specialization (differentiation) with group-, intergroup and organization-based coordination (integration) as appropriate" (Mintzberg, 1983). Within this broad definition, the paper focuses on the production structure, that is in the case of development NGO's, the division of tasks concerning service delivery. Within the production structure, specific attention is given to the key parameter typifying choices regarding the production structure, which is what Mintzberg (1983) calls 'grouping' and what Sitter (2000) identifies as the 'level of functional concentration'.
The dependent variable concerns the learning capability of development NGO's, which translates into their ability to deal with both knowledge application and knowledge creation. Here the paper links to an epistemology-of-practice (Cook & Brown, 1999) which aims to provide a combined account of the personal (cf. Polanyi, 1958), collective and situated sides to knowledge. Learning is then seen as closely related to 'knowing in practice' (Blackler et al. 1998; 2000), which stresses that knowledge is or can be provisional and reflexive, mediated by linguistic and technological infrastructures, situated and pragmatic, contested and political, and emotional as well as rational. Within this broad realm of knowledge-related distinctions, the paper focuses on the collective and situated sides to knowledge. Focusing on issues of learning and knowledge implies that within the broader domain of what are called the 'functional demands of organization structures' (Sitter, 2000), the focus is put on flexibility, innovation potential and effectiveness of communication. The first two are descriptive variables of the quality of organization and the third typifies the quality of the work relationships.

Research approach and research questions

The paper's core argument is that adopted organization structures play a key role in defining what development NGO's are. They should therefore play centre stage when considering how these NGO's manage to establish situadedness in working with and enhancing their knowledge. As a vehicle for inspecting the connections between organization structures and learning capabilities as specified above, the paper looks at the so-called 'toppling' of Dutch development NGO's. In recent years all four broad, not thematically-specialized Dutch development NGO's (Hivos, ICCO, Cordaid and Oxfam Novib) have been reorganized based on a thematic grouping principle to replace or enhance their previous regional grouping focus. This change of organization structure is commonly referred to as the toppling ('kanteling') of these NGO's. I am in the process of collecting and analyzing data concerning this toppling to see …

(a) if the application of the implied grouping principle leads to a higher level of coherence within the groups as compared to coherence between the groups and …
(b) how it affects two relevant aspects of the knowledge that is used and produced in the organizations' learning processes, viz. the organizations' ability to deal with the collective aspects of its knowledge (as surfaces in internal cooperation and

cooperation with partners) and the situated nature of that knowledge (as becomes visual in their ability to address local, contextual issues).

Research propositions

The research is of an exploratory nature, and allows no definitive conclusions if only because of sample size. But based on the data I have collected and the preliminary analysis I have performed, I put forward the following research propositions:

- How (well) development NGOs are structured is crucially important for the effectiveness of their learning processes
- The importance of organization structures in NGO's is underrated, at least in the literature. Even if the zeal and expertise of the individual development worker remains crucial, there is not just curtailment of their autonomy involved when the NGO tells them what to do and what not to do, and perhaps even to some degree tells them how to do it and how not to do it; the enabling and constraining sides to structuring work should be balanced.
- Grouping along thematic lines is not inherently better or worse than grouping along regional lines; NGO's will have to keep on striving at finding some combination of both grouping principles; yet the impression I get is that (1) the toppling has initially reduced the coherence of the work because of the reorganization effect but (2) has led to improvements once the dust had settled down
- Knowledge (and the connected learning capacity of the NGO) can provide effective guidance in efforts to design development NGOs if the implied epistemology is sufficiently rich
- However, the situatedness of knowledge used and produced in tackling issues of development is not a good beacon for designing structures; that knowledge is situated just because these issues are unpredictable (e.g. because they are political, contested, partially emotional, pragmatic) and intransparent work relationships cannot meaningfully be organized
- What is a useful beacon is the collective side to knowledge: unless internal and external cooperation is deemed useful and will lead to better services rendered, it does not make sense to even consider the appropriateness of any alternative grouping scheme
- Development NGOs should not divorce their knowledge goals from their service goals; the better they can link their knowledge creation efforts (eg. collaborative research projects) with their knowledge application activities, the more both types of activity will benefit.

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