



Conference Report: Measuring what matters in a 'post-truth' society

A conference on how to measure what matters, and use what matters, in order to change what should matter?

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6 April 2017, The Netherlands

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Oxfam GB
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This report presents the key highlights and contributions from the conference 'Measuring what matters in a 'post-truth' society'. This conference was held on the 6th of April 2017 in Wageningen, the Netherlands. This conference was the 10th annual 'M&E on the Cutting Edge' conference. These events are organised by Wageningen University & Research, Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (CDI) in collaboration with partners, in this case Oxfam GB. The conference focused on understanding how we measure what matters, and use what matters, to change what should matter, in an era of post-truth, whilst aiming towards social inclusion and global development.

Keywords: conference, evaluation, monitoring, SDGs, post-truth, fact free, evidence

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Preface

This report summarizes the outline and outputs of the conference 'Measuring what matters in a 'post-truth' society'. This conference was held on the 6th of April 2017 in Wageningen, the Netherlands. This conference is part of the annual CDI series 'M&E on the Cutting Edge'. These annual events are organized by Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (CDI), Wageningen University & Research in collaboration with partners, this year Oxfam GB. So far, the following events have been organized:

- **2017 'Measuring what matters in a 'post-truth' society'**, with Wendy Asbeek Brusse, Claire Hutchings and Robert Dijksterhuis; Wageningen 6 April 2017
<http://tinyurl.com/zd7esy6>
- **2016 'Partnering for Success: How M&E can Strengthen Partnerships for Sustainable Development'**, with Bruce Byiers and Ros Tennyson; Wageningen, 17-18 March 2016
<http://tinyurl.com/pr88j6c>
- **2015 'M&E for Responsible Innovation'** with Prof. Dr. Phil Macnaghten and Dr. Irene Guijt; Wageningen, 19-20 March 2015 <http://tinyurl.com/o3oucncz>
- **2014 'Improving the use of monitoring and evaluation processes and findings'** with Marlène Läubli Loud; Ismael Akhalwaya & Carlo Bakker; Wageningen, 20-21 March 2014
<http://tinyurl.com/pxhvwfs>
- **2013 'Impact evaluation: taking stock and moving ahead'** with Dr. Elliot Stern and Dr. Irene Guijt; Wageningen, 25-26 March 2013; <http://tinyurl.com/pkpgfb6>
- **2012 'Expert seminar on Developmental Evaluation'** and **'Global hot issues on the M&E agenda'** with Dr Michael Quinn Patton; Wageningen, 22-23 March 2012;
<http://tinyurl.com/nbw29ub>
- **2011 'Realist Evaluation'** with Dr. Gill Westthorp; Wageningen, 22-23 March 2011;
<http://tinyurl.com/mhw89ka>
- **2010 'Evaluation Revisited. Improving the Quality of Evaluative Practice by Embracing Complexity'** Utrecht, 20-21 May 2010; <http://evaluationrevisited.wordpress.com/>
- **2009 'Social Return On Investment'** Wageningen, March 2009; www.Sroiseminar2009.org
- **2009 'Innovation dialogue - Being strategic in the face of complexity'** Wageningen, 31 November and December 2009; <http://tinyurl.com/nfxzdpq>
- **Other innovation dialogues on complexity:** <http://portals.wi.wur.nl/navigatingcomplexity/>

The support provided by CDI and Oxfam GB made this conference possible. We are deeply grateful for their support.

We are grateful to the keynote speakers whose inputs helped us shape the conference. Their stimulating ideas, experiences and concepts helped frame the conference's thought-provoking discussions.

Our thanks go to:

- **Keynote speakers:** Wendy Asbeek Brusse (IOB), Claire Hutchings (Oxfam GB) and Robert Dijksterhuis (RVO);
- **Conference facilitators:** Irene Guijt (Oxfam GB), Cecile Kusters (CDI);
- **Conference organisers:** Cecile Kusters (CDI; conference coordinator) in collaboration with Irene Guijt (Oxfam GB), Bram Peters (CDI).
- **Conference reporters:** Bram Peters (CDI), Lavinia Plataroti (CDI), Imme Widdershoven (WUR), Veerle Boekestijn (WUR), Edel Heuven (WUR).

Furthermore, we would like to thank Cicilia Percy Jr. (Monstercookie) for the photographs; and CDI staff for essential logistic support. The conference participants were inspired by the conference topic, and contributed to lively presentations and discussions. We hope that this conference report and related conference products will further stimulate our thinking around measuring what matters in a post-truth society.

Wageningen, the Netherlands, May 2017

The conference organizers: Cecile Kusters (CDI) – conference coordinator; Irene Guijt (Oxfam GB); Bram Peters (CDI)

List of abbreviations and acronyms

CDI	Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation, Wageningen University & Research
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
IOB	Policy and Operations Evaluation Department, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MSP	Multi-Stakeholder Partnership
PPP	Public Private Partnership
RVO	Netherlands Enterprise Agency
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
ToC	Theory of Change
WUR	Wageningen University & Research

1 About the conference and the report

1.1 Why this conference

In 2016, Oxford Dictionaries pronounced 'post-truth' as the word of the year, following the heated and controversial political developments in Europe (Brexit) and the United States (election of President Trump). The dictionary noted that "post-truth is an adjective defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). Evidence becomes contested at every turn: it takes shape according to beliefs and mental models rather than through the testimonies of experts or news agencies.

In a globalizing world of rapid change and incredible complexity, this poses a particular challenge for international sustainable development. International commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) demands endorsement from all layers of society. "Partnership and collaboration across every sector and at every level is vital if we are to meet the 2030 Global Goals for Sustainable Development. We need to find ways to measure progress in ways that have meaning to individuals from local to global, and across every sector. The range of organizations and stakeholders present and the range of initiatives being developed show how the Goals can be used to develop a shared framework" (Jessica Fries in: A4S in Measure What Matters: a Framework for Action (2016)).

The need for evaluation and result-based management to show the impacts of development initiatives has increased in the past years. Contribution and attribution of results are increasingly demanded by donors, governments and stakeholders. However, identifying positive change and striving for effective and equitable development processes demands that organizations ask the questions that really matter. Do we get to the core of what matters to be evaluated, and for whom? And, how can we generate evidence that has meaning for society at large, not just the key players in society?

Conference questions

The core conference questions were: *How do we measure what matters, and use what matters, to change what should matter? What is our role in this as evaluators, commissioners, policy makers, other users?*

These conference questions were explored by the keynote speakers and participants during a one day interactive event.

1.2 About the program and the report

The structure of this report follows the conference program. First, highlights from the keynote presentations during the morning session are provided. These are followed by a panel discussion, responding to questions from the audience. In the afternoon the main conference question 'How do we measure what matters, and use what matters, so as to change what matters?' was reflected upon in interactive group sessions, using circular dialogue. The conference concluded with key highlights from these dialogue sessions. After that, there was a book launch 'Managing for Sustainable Development Impact: an Integrated Approach to Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation'.

Presentations, photographs and backgrounds material can be found at the conference website: <http://tinyurl.com/zd7esy6>

2 Keynote speeches

2.1 Introduction to the conference

Cecile Kusters

Senior advisor (participatory) planning, monitoring and evaluation – Managing for Sustainable Development Impact at Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation , Wageningen University & Research (the Netherlands)

Cecile Kusters, lead conference organizer, set the scene for the conference. Cecile emphasized that the conference sought to explore the issue of post-truth in the context of the SDGs from different perspectives, with keynotes from government, civil society and from the private sector. In 2016, 'post-truth' was the word of the year according to the Oxford Dictionary. This related to the British politics being dominated by the Brexit referendum, whilst in the United States of America , the presidential elections caused spikes in the use of the phrase 'post-truth'. This demonstrated that facts and evidence come second to pre-conceived ideas and personal experiences when the stakes in the political process are high. This war on facts has sparked actions by for example scientists, who marched in Washington. 'An American government who ignores science to pursue ideological agendas endangers the world' as indicated by Deirdre Fulton in January 2017 (<http://tinyurl.com/Iso2tov>).

Definition of 'post truth' (Oxford dictionary): *Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.*

There has been a lot of debate on the implications of this: what is truth and what not, and how do we use this. From the perspective of a global development and a social inclusion agenda, it poses additional questions regarding the role of professionals working on development issues. In order to reach our goals we make use of evidence. However, how people are influenced by all the evidence of what is around us remains a question and this influences the decisions we make. For this conference, Cecile encouraged all to be inspired by the SDGs and to explore the role that evidence plays in society.

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2.2 Personal experiences with 'post-truth'

Irene Guijt

Head of Research Publishing – Oxfam GB (the United Kingdom)

Irene Guijt, for a long time co-organizer of the 'M&E on the Cutting Edge' conferences and now head of Research and Publishing at Oxfam GB (OGB), followed up the introduction by sharing her own experiences with post-truth. Being in charge of research at a moment when the organization is operating in a context where information is being broadly devalued, throws up strategic questions. For example, recent research in Mexico showed that 89% people don't believe the media anymore... and this is not unique for that country. For Oxfam, an organization dependent on sharing information to achieve policy advocacy and awareness change this is a troubling matter. Irene: *"we have a slight theory of change problem."*

One way OGB has sought to achieve impact through information is by producing 'Killer Facts'. A well-known example is the Oxfam inequality report, which this year showed that the eight richest people own as much wealth as the bottom 50% of the world's population (<http://tinyurl.com/j84vh53>). During the World Economic Forum debate at Davos in January 2017 Oxfam called on the world's richest people to "even it up". The assumption behind the use of such killer facts is that it lands

somewhere and shifts people's thinking, ideally, moving them to some kind of action. But what if people are increasingly skeptical about such facts?

Irene posed the question whether we have not always been living in a post-truth society. Steve Tesich, the writer who first coined the word in 1992, stated that it was about cherry-picking and ignoring and denying alternative facts. The USA election and the Brexit referendum really triggered widespread discussion about the

term and presence of 'post-truth'. But these processes have long existed in many countries in the world. This suggests that perhaps it can be seen as a reality check for the Western world - an equalizer.

The post-truth phenomena has perhaps accelerated due to the increased reach and speed of internet; access to information, big data, social media and increasingly vocal societal groups mean that extensive spectra of narratives, opinions and arguments are being shared. The complexity of people's use of and access to information poses fascinating challenges for an organization like Oxfam. Irene noted that it provokes deeply ethical questions: Are we really measuring well enough? And do these developments allow us to manipulate and use these phenomena as well?

"Recent research in America showed that 89% people don't believe the media anymore. For Oxfam, an organization dependent on sharing information to achieve policy advocacy and awareness change, this is a troubling matter. We have a slight theory of change problem!"

Irene asked the conference participants to show to what extent they were affected by post-truth in their work and in their personal life. People were asked to position themselves in a spectrum across the conference hall according to how much effect post-truth had on their personal life. Over half of participants felt strongly affected, with a large number of people placing themselves slightly more neutrally. One participant shared that in working with farmers associations, "you feel that you need to use facts that strengthen your message. I felt that as something very useful, but there is also a tension there: is it really the truth or do we need more rigor before we claim this truth"? Another person revealed that he was now especially reminded of the final presentation of the MFSII evaluations at the Netherlands Ministry

of Foreign Affairs. He said that actually the most important aspect of this evaluation was the communication about it. This seemed to indicate that the gathering of facts, the reason why this evaluation started, apparently wasn't the most important aspect anymore.

The opinion was raised that post truth is not a new thing. One participant said "I have the idea that the period that truth mattered was actually quite short. At the end of the cold war the truth mattered, now we are back again at politics. Perhaps when truth mattered was the exception not the rule".

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2.3 The perspective of the head of the Dutch Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB)

Wendy Asbeek Brusse

Director Dutch Policy and Operations Evaluation Department (IOB), (the Netherlands)

Underlying causes for 'post truth'

Wendy Asbeek Brusse, director of IOB, gave the first keynote presentation, based on her personal reflections and not reflecting the position of the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Wendy related post-truth to the kind of work she is involved in, and especially how this affects institutional development. She referred to an article from the Economist (2016) on post-truth politics. The article points at two, interrelated root causes: a loss of trust in institutions, and a rise in new (social) media.

Currently, there is a long-term trend of emancipation of groups in society, globally resulting in democratization and individualization for the last 40 to 60 years. Before this time it was largely the elite producing truth, but now this power is dispersed among different groups. Now each individual can bring his or her own truth into society. Wendy stated that this is an important development. In parallel, a number of other trends are happening. New arrangements of social networks and filter bubbles create new truths, experiences and facts. At the same time, processes of privatization are occurring, tasks the state previously had are now taken up by other actors in society: citizens, interest groups, companies and media.

Wendy said that "alongside these rearrangements you see that institutions need to reframe how they operate. The different ways we perceive society influences that". For knowledge workers and evaluators this poses challenges. Wendy said that there is widespread competition from all sorts of information centers. "In this competitive world we are craving for authoritative facts, but this creates a paradox for science". While science still has authority, many of the institutions and the authority of people that used to produce science are on the decline. Many institutions erode or are changing and



adapting to new forms. This shows the necessity for other institutions to change and adapt as well. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Privatization of knowledge and new forms of organization has led to tensions, but also to institutional renewal, innovations and more room for failure and learning. Adaptation is needed: where it is lacking you see sclerosis and lack of legitimacy and trust in society. This lack of trust creates a vicious circle of distrust in institutions and a widening difference

between what is actually happening, informally happening and what people are thinking and saying in society.

Getting to the core: state capability

In her keynote, Wendy sought to get to the core of what she felt really mattered. For her the concept of post-truth became especially visible in the debate on climate change. Throughout this debate the role of scientific evaluators has evolved. A lot of news and information reporting is about the weather, while really we are in a climate change. In part this is because most people (in society but also in the media) are not trained to connect the dots between different events. This is relevant for more themes: the slowly emerging structural, news unworthy developments that are also out there. Only when we can no longer escape the cumulative signs of repeating events that actually expose a structural trend, a tipping point or a crisis, that we accept what is already unfolding. The financial crises that we have experienced and the crises that followed are perfect examples.

Wendy asked: what does this have to do with us? Is it true that we also prioritize the most relevant political issues? Do we focus on the results of individual and isolated projects or do we do the maths and answer the underlying questions and see the underlying issues?

Wendy referred to the book 'Building State Capability: Evidence, Analysis, Action' by Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017). This book inspired her since it addresses the problem of capability traps. Many people engaged in development concentrate on the 3 Ps: policies, programs and projects. However, most of the time in weak states and weak organizations it is not those three P's that matter but the actual capability to implement them. Without adequate capability stagnation occurs, with institutions and states unable to adapt to change and complexity. The authors of the book argue convincingly that building state capacity to implement is crucial to achieve development goals.

Implications for policy evaluation

Wendy stated that there is a difference between reality on paper (fiction) and reality in practice (fact). In many development processes 'isomorphic mimicry' takes place: plans and institutions are transplanted from one context to the other. This creates quasi-institutions and quasi-programs which, when you look at them more closely, do not really work and might even be counterproductive.

Wendy sees these different realities every day in her work environment. IOB produces certain truths for accountability or legitimacy reasons, but the fact is often that things are often not as brilliant and functioning as it is on paper. This is something everyone wrestles with, and it is a normal fact of life. However, it becomes problematic when the two realities move in completely opposite sides and do not match anymore. If that happens the risk of losing legitimacy internally and externally is very likely. On different levels, it turns out that no matter how hard individuals work within institutions that don't function properly, their work is for nothing. This points to the need to strengthen capability, and especially the capability of the institutes that train people, such as universities.

"IOB should not get stuck at looking at merely the small questions, but ask the bigger questions. It does not mean that the big questions always should be answered, but that we should really stay focused on what the real problem is."

Reflecting on her own organization, she said that she believes IOB should not get stuck looking at merely the small questions, but ask the bigger questions. She said: "it does not mean that the big questions always should be answered, but that we should really stay focused on what the real problem is". This means asking whether IOB is producing evaluations that help answer the bigger questions, or if the agency is just working in isolation and perpetuating its own role. Wendy said that IOB should help ministry to explore the bigger questions and the bigger events. Policymakers or civil servants are often preoccupied with the 3 Ps, and it can be the role of IOB to explore bigger questions and try to scrape together the evidence about these complex dynamics. Wendy imparted that "we should also support problem-oriented step by step learning, rather than merely judging it at the end. We have been doing that and we know it does not work. Accountability is a burden because it stops people from learning. That does not mean that we should lose our independence, it means that we start early in the pipeline, we become more of a consultant/advisor than a judge at the end of the pipeline". This also means experimenting and working with methods that explore underlying mechanisms, for instance via randomized control trials. These approaches are generally costly and they provide lessons for specialists outside the work area (so within academia), and this unfortunately means that they are less useful for people working in development who need to respond quickly. IOB can help these professionals how to learn quickly. This implies being quicker with our evaluations and advising more than judging. Hopefully then IOB can contribute toward providing a small building block to exploring the bigger questions.

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2.4 Facts and feelings: measuring what matters from a civil society perspective (Oxfam GB)

Claire Hutchings

Head of Program Quality, Oxfam GB (United Kingdom)

The second keynote was by Claire Hutchings who spoke from the perspective of Oxfam Great Britain, a global civil society organization. In thinking about 'Measuring What Matters in a Post-Truth Society', Claire flagged a number of issues to consider; measurement, and the generation of evidence, of truths

"Let's remember that social change is complex and messy. There is something in the idea that truth is in the eye of the beholder. That is an important truth."

even; with influence – about the role of evidence in influencing ideas, beliefs, decisions and behaviours; with a shifting landscape – and a decreasing appetite for information, for evidence, for facts perhaps; and with meaning – about personal beliefs, emotions... about values. She stated she felt worried. She recognized many of the events and trends occurring in the USA and in the United Kingdom, the 'zeitgeist' along the lines of "people have enough of experts". Claire indicated that the values currently driving decision making are not her values. She thus started with a question: whose truth are we talking about?

Claire heads up the evaluation department for Oxfam GB, one of 19 Oxfam affiliates worldwide, who work together in over 70 countries globally. Oxfam understands poverty as multi-dimensional, and our programmes and campaigns engage with the complex dynamics in which poverty gets nurtured and sustained, working to tackle growing social and economic inequality. Claire shared a slide of a stakeholder mapping that the United States army did in Afghanistan, to help illustrate the enormous complexity of such situations. In most cases, it is not enough to know what worked - that we need to understand why, and more importantly for whom, and under what conditions. This is about being accountable, of course – but it is also critically about learning, about adaptation, about sharpening and strengthening our interventions, and about making a contribution to sector efforts to further social justice. Oxfam is not a think tank, but does invest heavily in the generation of evidence in different forms: research, evaluation, impact, tacit knowledge, and program learning. This supports adaptation, strengthening interventions and working towards social justice.

Claire reflected that "we sometimes question the tradeoffs that we make during our work. The reality is that we individually and collectively make choices with tradeoffs. Let's remember that social change is complex and messy. There is something in the idea that truth is in the eye of the beholder. That is an important truth". While the effectiveness of a malaria drug is clear, implementing a vaccination programme in different contexts is complex - shaped by people's social, economic, and cultural realities. It is essential to take these perspectives into account and to be inclusive, since many involved can feel that the situation does not speak to their experiences.

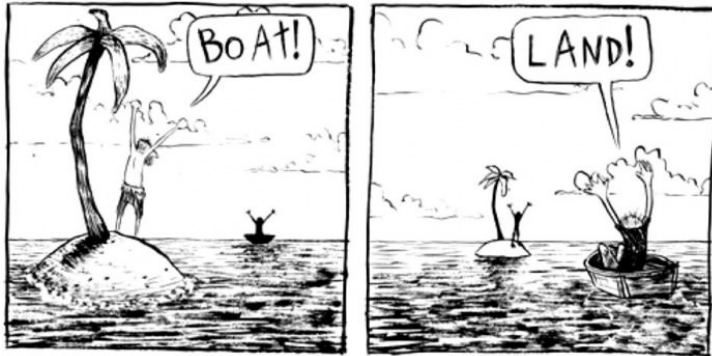
SDGs as an inspirational metaphor for what matters

Claire used the SDG framework as a metaphor for helping to understand how values and evidence relate. The 2030 SDG agenda emphasizes a robust, effective, participatory and transparent approach, while placing evaluation at the center as a driver for progress. The agenda operates from the premise that the goals will be achieved in synergy and at different levels. Working on one SDG might



require progress in the other goals and possibly even trade-offs. Change will look different for different people, and therefore a broader package of evidence is called for. She said we should encourage a much stronger relationship between quality and decision-making in an iterative and real-time way.

Claire shared that she felt the shift towards evidence-informed instead of evidence-based decision-making is a positive change. This is an important realization since it recognizes that policies are based on facts but other factors also play a role. The challenge is uptake and use of evidence. Even though it



Truth is in the eye of the beholder

is acknowledged that there are problems with evidence, there is a need to put more focus on how evidence is used. According to Claire this has been a struggle for quite some time now at Oxfam: "We accept that we often can't access perfect knowledge, that our findings will sometimes be inconclusive, even that our evidence may sometimes produce conflicting findings. That social change will look and feel different for different stakeholders..."

But fundamentally we're still struggling to know how best to use and apply the evidence that is being generated. It is not a new challenge. Where does it leave us?"

Listen, understand and act

Claire said that there is still much more work needed to expand the evidence universe in realizing social change. Many different stakeholders across the world are providing different parts of the puzzle, including United Nations agencies, academia, governments, civil society and citizens. However, more areas need work:

- Active citizenship: involve people in evaluations and expand the 'capacity to stitch evidence together'. There is still so much we ignore, while much of the evidence and information out there can be utilized to equip people;
- Embrace the messiness: better understand limitations and reinforce external validity of research and evaluations. Look more closely to the standards of evaluation and research, and use rigorous and participatory approaches to create collective sense making;
- Use what we know about human behavior and communication: we do not do that enough. For example, tailoring evidence to make it fit for day-to-day needs of decision makers;
- Acknowledge that decision-making is seldom solely based on evidence. Cultural forces and economic realities always play a role; this is not a new issue.

Claire concluded with three broad lessons for the audience: listen, understand and act. She said: "rather than decrying people for not listening to evidence, the best thing is stop and listen to what is being said, ask questions, and to understand the root causes. Evidence has an important role to play here. We need to engage in efforts to make evidence relevant, meaningful, and effective".

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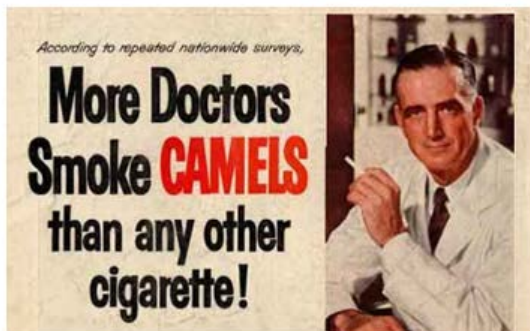
2.5 Measuring what matters from a private sector perspective (RVO)

Robert Dijksterhuis

Board member Dutch Enterprise Agency (RVO) (the Netherlands)

Perspectives on lying and bullshitting

The third keynote presentation was given by Robert Dijksterhuis, who is actively involved with the Dutch Enterprise Agency but also was a long-time civil servant at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He took up the third perspective, that of the private sector. The first issue he touched on was the question whether post truth is a new topic. Robert said: “when we talk about post-truth we talk about advertising. It is really simple. In the 1950s, advertising was there as well, for products that we know now to be harming health or the environment”. He showed two examples of Camel cigarettes and clean diesel. However, while this is not new, the broader context of what is happening now is important: economics are taking over politics, the best example being a businessman (President Donald Trump) taking a business approach into politics in the USA.



Post-truth = Advertising?
'from trust to confidence'.

Current global trends require businesses to adapt. First, the private sector is increasingly interested to invest in 'intelligence'. This means moving from information to intelligence and to improve top-down and bottom-up internal communication. Secondly, continuity planning is needed: crisis management, contingency planning, emergency preparedness planning and crisis communications planning. The third issue is transparency and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

Applied to the SDGs this opens up a number of perspectives. Robert showed research that asked the private sector why they would align to the SDG agenda. 27 percent of respondents noted that the SDGs offer opportunities for their business, and 30 percent said that they would do so in order to manage risks. He said that if you ask a business man about crises, he or she will respond that while crises are dangerous, they can also create opportunities.

The need to work together

Robert broadly stereotyped two categories of people working in development (based on Robert Chambers). 'Positive practitioners' strive to assist the efforts of poor people in difficult contexts, but are often susceptible to a number of biases: confirmation bias, optimism bias, and hindsight bias. Their presence working in the context is oriented toward acting, with the risk of connecting issues that might not be linked or the tendency to want to avoid losses (Alliance for Useful Evidence, 2016¹). The other category is the 'negative academics', who are rewarded for the quality of their criticisms and elaborations of why efforts to improve the human condition fail.

Robert pointed out two behaviors that relate to post truth: lying and bullshitting. “There is an important difference in relation to perspectives of truth: a liar cares about the truth and attempts to hide it, while a bullshitter does not care whether what they say is true or false, but rather cares about whether or not their listener is persuaded by what they say.” More lies and bullshit lead to more fake news and satire. However, debunking a lie is easier than responding to bullshit. Broadly, it all leads to less trust, more skepticism and more scrutiny and calls for virtue

“There is an important difference in relation to perspectives of truth: a liar cares about the truth and attempts to hide it, while a bullshitter does not care whether what they say is true or false, but rather cares only whether or not their listener is persuaded by what they say.”

¹ <http://www.nesta.org.uk/publications/using-research-evidence-practice-guide>



The question Robert posed was: Do we understand each other? “Are the practitioners the post truth people?” He answered the question by saying that if we want to go further, we have to work together. People who gather evidence need to understand the people who work in their context and vice versa, and know that these people are coming from different angles. In a number of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) RVO is working with the private sector to achieve development

goals. For business people gathering too much information can lead to administrative burdens. They say: don't ask us to measure what you will not use! Robert: “we keep asking them many questions and ask them to gather new information when new questions pop up”. An example is that the Dutch Ministry is now asking to distinguish between youth and older people within the target group. But what is the definition of youth? In response the company then says ‘come on, this is too much work! Are you going to use this for policy or do you never use this?’

Can you make it, sell it, and handle the money?

Beyond realizing there are different perspectives, it is also about dividing and prioritizing what matters. A company looks at the bottom line: price, quality of the materials and labor circumstances. The second line is about national level issues: health, education, import-export and environmental changes. The third line is the global level, the level of the SDGs. Robert stated that we want to look at the second and the third line as well, but this requires more work. He drew on the case of child labor to underline his point: he showed a map of the world showing in which countries the occurrence of child labor is highest. Robert asked the audience: how would you look at it from a business perspective? There are good and bad ways to look at it. A bad company might say that there are many options to use cheap labor. A good company, like for instance Tony Chocolonely, may see this as a market opportunity. They have succeeded to get 6% of the Dutch chocolate market in Holland in 5 years. The concept is selling an idea that the chocolate is coming from slave labor-free plantations. They are open and transparent about the fact that it is not working well yet, and it works as a business model.

In the work RVO does in relation to international development and private sector development it is essential to know the private sector. A business has to keep an eye on risks that might affect how it can operate. Some key factors may include: access to land; access to skilled people; access to capital; entrepreneurship.

The entrepreneur has to be able to do three things: make a product, sell it, and look after the money that comes in. But the goals of PPPs are much broader: they have to realize success for Dutch enterprises abroad, contribute to local private sector development and align with the Dutch global public goods agenda such as food security and water. Robert: “This is difficult to achieve and difficult to measure. Take for instance employment creation: job support is much easier than job creation”. In order to make this more manageable and efficient IATI reporting is used. Using this reporting it is possible to geographically locate programs, find out what they are doing and what kind of impact they are realizing. The key is to find manageable and understandable indicators that give an idea of the bigger picture, but are not leading to a high administrative and programmatic burden.

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2.6 Panel discussion

Panel members: Claire Hutchings (Oxfam GB), Robert Dijksterhuis (RVO) and Giel Ton (Wageningen Economic Research, Wageningen University & Research)

The keynotes in the morning provided some substantial, but also satisfying, food for thought for the conference participants. As part of the following session, Irene Guijt and Cecile Kusters invited the listeners to reflect on the following personal questions:

- What have you not heard?
- What is still puzzling you?
- What surprised you?
- What information is conflicting?

Participants were asked to pose their questions to a three member panel.



Questions that surfaced and responses are described below.

Something not heard yet: *"what matters most? What matters most to measure and what is unnecessary to measure?"*

Claire responded by saying that it is a perennial issue. She shared that "in a brainstorm we discussed all the things we would like to know about our impact. We ended up with 18 pages of questions, and there is a lot of work to be done on what issues

we need to measure rather than what is really going to create the change that we wish for". Claire said that the main thing for her is that it is *about mechanisms*: pieces that work in multiple theories of change and multiple contexts. However, the challenge is then how to gather that information and make it meaningful.

Giel added to this and said that it is obvious that IOB has made a big shift in the last 5-10 years from more rigorous counterfactual approaches to the approach suggested by Wendy this morning. The key issue is that there is always something you need to know and learn about. Giel noted that the evaluation question is often an important one: why does it (a certain intervention) work, and under what circumstances? However, if one takes as evaluation question: why does it *not* work, for whom, under what circumstances? Then you might be able to learn. It relates to the bigger picture, and discusses issues at a more comparative higher level. Giel mentioned that he hoped that IOB will also invest more in comparative research, since this helps to share and generalize lessons.

Has the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to speak in climate metaphors, started talking more about climate change and less about the weather?

Robert said that within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs civil servants have invested in strategic policy advisors in the past 5 years. The Ministry is event-driven because there is a difference between the policy agendas of Minister Ploumen (Dutch Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation; long term money investments) and Minister Koenders (Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs; responding to events as they occur). This requires both a vision on how to reply on the short term as well as the longer term. This group of 15 strategic policy advisors is for that goal: they directly advise the political leadership on what the bigger picture is.

On business, Robert stated that businesses look at this as well, further down the trail. Specifically about climate change: 80 multinationals reacted to president Trump: 'don't kill the climate agreement'. Often in some way, if it affects the business model and represents major risks and opportunities, large companies often do have that long time horizon.

What is needed from an impact evaluation methodologies lens? Is it in your experience the case that people's perspectives are not included?

Giel responded that in his opinion evaluating impact of projects is not the way to go. However, evaluating the mechanisms has a future-oriented aspect in it. Giel said that he thus likes to focus on effectiveness and compare between different approaches as a way to learn about the broader scale. Giel: "I think that what is needed is evidence to make judgments. Or data to make judgments. What I do in my work is generating information". Giel added that there are different ways to look at effectiveness or the relevance of development interventions. And it depends on your emphasis and on your own political position. Impact evaluation is generating data for others, e.g. practitioners, to make decisions on an informed basis.

Giel Ton: "I think that what is needed is evidence to make judgments. Or data to make judgments."

Robert answered this question by saying that from a business perspective it is about gathering information, but also gathering intelligence. Gathering intelligence keeps you focused on what information your client wants answers to or what you want to know to help you sell something. It is thus very goal oriented, and often asks one specific question. If you ask a too broad question there might be good answers in there somewhere, but it is difficult to take it out.

Claire responded to this question as well, mentioning that a lot of the Oxfam research is trying to agnostic, at the service of people. Claire: "we try to understand what is the crux, what we need to focus on, and M&E processes help with that". However, it is true that before that is done the question is asked: 'who asks the questions?', because in the end, at the heart of it is that diverse, multiple groups of *people* need to be asking these questions. This means being participatory in approaching the questions, but this is not always possible. In response, Oxfam tries not to assign too much meaning to findings, and make them open to multiple interpretations.

Are we as evaluators and generators of knowledge for a good cause also part of post truth? Are we not also framing the debate in a certain way?

Claire: "be humble and be curious. Transfer that humility in the way we communicate, then you will encourage people to find their own interpretations, and help people with that by making access to the data available."

Claire replied that there is a real challenge in this awareness. The thing is: there is no one truth and it would be difficult to aim for one version. The realization that there is value in different interpretations brings us further, since there is great richness and diversity. But the line is crossed when we bend empirical facts. Claire recommended having two attitudes: "be humble and be curious. Transfer that humility in the way we communicate, then you will encourage people to find their own interpretations, and help people with that by making access to the data available".

Giel noted that it is about finding a balance for him. Finding truth in facts is valuable for him, but he realized that conclusions drawn from facts are not always clear cut. The suggestion: make conclusions less decisive. "Try to create more nuanced analyses, and talk it over with evaluators and others involved in the project. So you use the data to create a *discussion* rather than a *decision*".

Are there also opportunities to be found in the post truth debate?

Irene responded to this question by giving a more nuanced understanding about 'bullshitting'. Contrary to Robert, she said that sometimes there is merit in a bit of propaganda and bullshit: cherry-picking facts and creating killer facts have advantages. As professionals and evaluators of development we need to get better at selling and using what evidence we have to achieve sustainable and inclusive goals.

Building on a response from the crowd on the psychology of the human brain, Robert indicated that some issues are easier for people to attach meaning to and to work with. When he headed the gender division at the Ministry he found that the way a discussion was set up mattered so much for the transfer of knowledge. Having a man give a presentation on gender violence was totally different than when a woman presented it, and having an entertaining soap about a sensitive topic can realize so much more than any awareness raising lecture. Realizing these kinds of issues helps in making use of opportunities.

3 Reflecting on core conference questions

3.1 Circular Dialogue: dream, plan and criticize

In the afternoon Irene and Cecile presented the exercise to engage participants in addressing the key questions of the conference. For this purpose 'Circular Dialogue' was used, based on the 'Walt Disney Strategy': in groups of 9 people identify the obstacles and opportunities in relation to the core question:

How do we measure what matters and use what matters to change what should matter?

The exercise focused on groups generating opportunities in relation to the evidence process toward the future sustainable development goals. Irene explained that the circular dialogue process was used by Walt Disney in generating new opportunities and creative ideas. It involved 3 phases with 3 groups of 3 people per group: in the first phase *dreamers* develop and write down ideas, feelings, wishes based on the statement: *'working toward a future, inspired by the SDGs, where we generate and use evidence as inspiration for social justice'*.

In the second phase, the planners contemplate how the dream can be realized and note down the required activities, tools or resources, and turn this into a plan. In the last phase the critics come in: it is their job to search for mistakes and weak points in the concepts and plans. After these phases the process starts over again until all agree on the plans and the critics can find nothing more as critic to what is proposed. Each group was asked to briefly share their findings in plenary after the exercise.



The first group shared about their dream to develop a policy for donor organizations worldwide to take into account academic stakeholders when developing evaluations. The idea is that universities also have an interest in new forms of learning. This plan intends to engage universities or academic research institutions as facilitators of new types of knowledge, and not only as external researchers and consultants. The challenge here would still be how to manage the interests of the different participants in the development process. However, the group discussed that academics can support with balancing objectivity and credibility of evaluation outcomes in collaboration with citizen communities.

The second group indicated they explored the vision of development institutions and organizations becoming 'learning organizations'. This means that these organizations are given or create the space to make mistakes. It also means that reporting is not about impact but about how you can actually learn from mistakes. In the process of measuring, not just to measure outcomes but also methodologies to look at causalities in the process. This requires putting in place trial-and-error funds by which donors allow organizations to make these mistakes. While the group admitted that this was a dream that needed a bit more realism, the idea was that the emphasis is on 'improving' rather than 'proving'.

The third group spoke about a dream based on the proposition that primary stakeholders identify what is important for them, what matters for them, before evidence or knowledge is generated. In this

process the primary stakeholders observe the power differences at play in their surroundings. Due to the need to improve the situation, they identify what matters to them and they participate in identifying the best ways to achieve this. The group recognized that the other stakeholders have needs too, but emphasized focusing on what needs to change for the core stakeholders, and the information about how that happens. This hopefully also minimizes the useless evidence.

In the fourth group the dreaming evolved around a practical project to help South Sudan out of poverty in one year. This highly ambitious dream led the group to explore how to make a super-efficient M&E framework with very few indicators, but with more participation from many stakeholders – not only asking a few questions, but really letting them have a voice in the content of the program. This idea still needed some planning and realism, but the idea is that through involving many stakeholders in decision-making opens up possibilities to at least find a common truth.

The next group dealt with post-truth through increasing local ownership. Other organizations that came from outside are only there to facilitate the process, leaving the decision-making to citizens that are fully involved in the context. In parallel, the group developed the idea of a large database where all different kinds of information are collected and accessible for everyone. Due to this decentralization and openness, this database can minimize negative power-relationships related to information ownership.

The sixth and final group shared that they struggled with this dream quite a bit and tried to focus on realizing the goal of a world without hunger within 50 years. The dream involved creating a common understanding and urgency around the issue of hunger and multiple, context specific and culturally sensitive indicators.



3.2 Final statements

At the end of the conference the participants were asked for their final reflections. Especially the panelists had some last messages to share on their takeaways from the day.

Claire Hutchings indicated that, according to her, it is clear that we are desperate to get people to understand and get them into our world of complexity and nuance. Throughout the conference the many examples and statements often related to bringing people into our conversation. Claire said that she was not sure whether these people are not present because they have been excluded, but perhaps they don't want to be there. This means that we need to invest in how we communicate much more to

Robert: *"I have to be able to explain it to him, my neighbour who runs a coffee bar. How to bring across this message on a higher level? We need to simplify complexity without losing the ability of doing justice to complexity."*

make the discussions, interventions and information relevant. Key is that we need to digest and communicate the evidence we generate much more strongly.

Robert Dijksterhuis reflected that he saw from his own personal experience that many people in his surroundings are interested in the work he is doing and the broader work toward international development. But the challenge is always to explain it to a neighbor for instance: "I have to be able to explain it to him, my neighbor who runs a coffee bar. How to bring across this message from a higher level?"

The key challenge and opportunity for Robert is to *simplify complexity without losing the ability of doing justice to complexity.*

Another learning point was that the 'real' participation of stakeholders is essential. It requires us to ask the question: what are ways to organize ownership throughout the research process to increase convergence around a shared or a common truth? If you put a lot of different perspectives together, maybe different truths can converge. This means also examining the ownership of the questions you ask, the data, the analysis process, but also ownership of the report and the end product.

4 Key insights on the core conference questions

Throughout the conference, the main theme was: *"Measuring what matters in a post-truth society"*. Conference participants were encouraged to think about the core question "How do we measure what matters, and use what matters, so as to change what matters?" Sub questions to answer this core question included: "Is post-truth really a 'fact'? How does this influence our choices in evaluative practice?" "How do we find out what matters in order to initiate sustainable and inclusive change?" "What is our role in this as evaluators, commissioners, policy makers, and other users?"



Some of key insights around these sub questions are captured below. This report is in no way conclusive but rather intends to share some of the insights and stimulate learning around the topic of evidence, different forms and interpretations of truth, for social and sustainable change.

Is post-truth really a 'fact'? How does this influence our choices in evaluative practice?

The fact that in the last two years the word 'post-truth' has been

frequently used, as indicated by the Oxford Dictionary, triggers a sense of doubt and unease. Developments in the USA and in Great Britain have demonstrated that serious political decisions can be made without using facts or evidence, and are even contrary to values held by many working in international development. This has led many development professionals to question what truth means and to who and be wary about the potential consequences for the goals their organizations and institutions seek to achieve. According to Claire Hutchings 'truth is in the eye of the beholder' and there are many truths.

Keynote speakers mentioned that post-truth might not necessarily be a new phenomenon. Examples of cherry-picking information, using advertisements to sell unproven products and using stylized 'killer facts' may all be along the lines of mixing goals, interests, information and beliefs. However, 'post-truth' has become more urgent due to the increased reach and speed of internet: access to information, big data, social media and increasingly vocal societal groups mean that extensive spectra of narratives, opinions and arguments are being shared. Simultaneously, loss of trust in institutions and a rise in media organizations and outlets increasingly stimulate information, quasi-facts and opinions to be mixed together.

These trends are occurring in line with globalization and democratization. Wendy spoke about a long-term trend of emancipation of diverse groups in society, globally resulting in democratization and individualization for the last 40 to 60 years. Before, it were largely the elites (in the West) producing 'truth' or evidence. However, now this power is dispersed among different groups, at least in terms of speech. Each individual can bring his or her own truth into society, and it is more widely recognized that truth can be socially constructed. This leads to all forms of competition from all sorts of information centers. In these developments it has become harder to distinguish between the 'liars' and the 'bulls hitters'.

The roles of institutions have changed as well due to privatization, austerity and shifting roles in society. This is increasingly urgent: if these institutions do not adapt and innovate, legitimacy and

effectivity problems occur. There are opportunities here as well: the keynote speakers pointed to a need to invest in capabilities of institutions and states, invest in quality of work and research, invest in uptake, and use of evidence beyond simply generating it. Attention to the 3 Ps of policies, programs and projects also indicates a need to invest in capacities and structures, since most people are not trained to connect the dots between different events and practices. This can lead to missing important drivers and inability to avert disasters. Our evaluative practices need to focus on these bigger issues, the ‘climate not the weather’ as Wendy Asbeek suggested, and also explained below.

1. How do we find out what matters in order to initiate sustainable and inclusive change?

A participant at the conference literally asked the keynote speakers in the panel: “what actually matters?” The responses from the keynotes speakers came from their own societal actor perspectives, showing that what matters can be different for different people. The private sector might find that what matters most to be related to intelligence rather than information. A researcher conducting evaluations might seek accurate evidence that forms the basis of policy and intervention judgments. A civil society member would suggest that representing those people who don’t have a voice in improving their own circumstances, is needed to change policies and attitudes.

Claire Hutchings drew on the Sustainable Development Goals as a metaphor for international development that has the potential to align diffuse interests in society. She stated that the 2030 SDG agenda emphasizes a robust, effective, participatory and transparent approach, while placing evaluation at the center as a driver for progress. The agenda operates from the premise that the goals will be achieved in synergy and at different levels. However, working on one SDG might



require progress in the other goals and possibly even trade-offs. Robert Dijksterhuis addressed the SDGs from the private sector perspective, by indicating that at a high level all types of global changes and developments are relevant for businesses. However, there is a distinction between levels of influence. Immediate needs and profits, and surrounding environment, are priority areas while societal needs are much more distant. Dividing and prioritizing what matters is essential to maintain control and grasp opportunities.

Wendy Asbeek Brusse spoke about state capability, institutional trust and what is needed to evaluate policy. She said that a major challenge is to stay focused on what matters, which is in the case of IOB and the Dutch government: the bigger picture, the overarching processes, the climate and not the weather. An institute such as IOB can support the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to focus on exploring the bigger questions and the bigger events. By moving away from mostly judging and evaluating accountability at the end, evaluation of policy can be more about the learning and the mechanisms that affect the bigger challenges of our time.

Defining what matters is a co-created process to various inputs to make unheard voices emerge as well as to leave room for tradeoffs. This has implications for evaluation since different perspectives lead to different evaluation questions. While looking at the evaluation questions with the lenses of business, Robert pointed out the core of any evaluation is the extent to which it is directly applicable in a world that requires fast and grounded decisions. In this perspective, evidence is only useful if it allows grasping opportunities that are value for society as well as for business. In contrast, institutions such as IOB can give other answers to the question of what type of evidence matters. From a policy-making point of view, the evaluation questions should address issues at higher levels. Policies should tackle the problems that hit society from across the world, beyond the national state. All those different perspectives suggest that the extent to which scientists, practitioners and policy makers, are

successful in correctly setting the framework of what matters, points very much more to the way the evaluation questions and results are communicated.

2. What is our role in this as evaluators, commissioners, policy makers, and other users?

Much of the discussion after the keynotes and the panel session was on the implications of these issues for those who work in international development. How to deal with the challenges brought forth by post truth, and the possible spin-off effects that might diminish the impact of the SDG agenda. While the post-truth era does not necessarily demand a radically different approach to development, evaluation and evidence, it does indicate a need to look at those aspects underlying and surrounding the way we program and gather evidence.

'Post-truth' is not necessarily something new, but the symptoms are more visible and the consequences more contested. What this points to is that in the face of growing competition for information, shifting roles, skepticism and distrust and multiverse truths, there is a strong need to invest in capacity building, understand and apply what we know about how people's brains work, and explore what broader and rigorous approaches are needed to get across what matters.

As concluding remarks, conference participants as well as keynotes speakers stressed that evaluators, commissioners and policy makers bear an important role in assuring the investment in capacity building is constant. With the aim of sharing evidence and getting the message across, those working in evaluation should make an effort towards improving analytical skills of the various stakeholders involved in the evaluation. While avoiding suggesting a unique interpretation and keeping the process open for multiple perspectives, we should seek to improve the capacity of beneficiaries in terms of (engagement in) evaluation and related messages.

Some lessons learned from the conference:

- *Be humble and curious* as a fundamental approach for listening, understanding and acting;
- *Active citizenship*: involve people in evaluations and expand the 'capacity to stitch evidence together'. Engage in participatory approaches throughout the process of evaluation, including the questions beforehand. There is still so much we ignore, while much of the evidence and information out there can still be utilized to equip people;
- *Embrace messiness*: better understand limitations and reinforce external validity of research and evaluations. Look more closely to the standards of evaluation and research, and use rigorous and participatory approaches to create collective sense making. At the same time, the credibility of science should be explained, rather than taken for granted;
- *Use what we know about human behavior and communication*: we do not do that enough. For example, tailoring and communicating evidence to make it fit for day-to-day needs of decision makers;
- *Acknowledge that decision-making is seldom solely based on evidence*. Cultural forces and economic realities always play a role; this is not a new issue;
- *Support problem-oriented step-by-step learning and capacity building within institutions*;
- *Simplify our messages* and be ready to explain and learn from others with different priorities and opinions.



Appendix 1 Managing for Sustainable Development Impact - book launch



The conference was wrapped up with a festive book launch of a new book, published by the Wageningen Centre for Development and Innovation (CDI), Wageningen University & Research: *Managing for Sustainable Development Impact. An Integrated Approach to Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation*. The Managing for Sustainable Development Impact (M4SDI) approach is an integrated, results-oriented management approach, which can be used across a range of sectors and domains in a variety of contexts, and aims to contribute towards the Sustainable Development Goals. It addresses some of the most pressing concerns, such as engaging primary stakeholders, designing effective strategies and related M&E, focusing on capacity development, and responding to change in a complex context. Key features of M4SDI include its people-centered approach and how it seeks to integrate planning, monitoring and evaluation processes.

This guide builds on the earlier work of Irene Guijt and Jim Woodhill in the 2002 IFAD publication *Managing for Impact in Rural Development: A Guide for Project M&E*, and incorporates the insights and feedback of CDI colleagues, partners and over 800 practitioners who have been trained in English, French and Spanish in using the approach.

Find more information about the book, including book endorsements please see: <http://tinyurl.com/k4vt3bd>



Appendix 2 Conference participants

First name	Surname
Wendy	Asbeek
Karen	Batjes
Sharon	Becker
Gonne	Beekman
Veerle Charlotte Theodora	Boekestijn
Marjolein	Bouterse
Hedwig	Bruggeman
Karel	Chambille
Percy Octavio Vicente	Cicilia
Solveig	Danielsen
Y.	de Bruin
Geert Harm	De Jonge
Justus	Dengerink
Caroline Blandine	Desalos
Robert	Dijksterhuis
Ellen Marion	Eiling
Cecile	Feassaert
Dirk	Frans
Mtinkheni	Gondwe
Verona	Groverman
Irene	Guijt
Maria Magdalena	Heinrich
Suzanne	Hoeksema
Claire	Hutchings
Rudolf	Kramer
Cecile	Kusters
Bram	Peters
Christine	Plaisier
Lavinia	Plataroti
Grazina	Raguckaja
Michelle Jane	Rice
Rens	Rutten
Nese	Savas
Lydeke Dettine Frederique	Schakel
Huub	Sloot
Eunike	Spierings
Stan	Stavenuiter
Sarah	Stephan
Giel	Ton
Angela	Van Den Broek
Selma	Van Der Haar
Catherine	Van Der Wees
Marije Joanne	Van Gent
Dave	Verkaik
Lisa	Verwoerd
Imme	Widdershoven
Frances Elizabeth	Williams
Anja	Wolsky

To explore
the potential
of nature to
improve the
quality of life



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The Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation works on processes of innovation and change in the areas of food and nutrition security, adaptive agriculture, sustainable markets, ecosystem governance, and conflict, disaster and reconstruction. It is an interdisciplinary and internationally focused unit of Wageningen UR within the Social Sciences Group. Our work fosters collaboration between citizens, governments, businesses, NGOs, and the scientific community. Our worldwide network of partners and clients links with us to help facilitate innovation, create capacities for change and broker knowledge.

The mission of Wageningen UR (University & Research) is 'To explore the potential of nature to improve the quality of life'. Within Wageningen UR, nine specialised research institutes of the DLO Foundation have joined forces with Wageningen University to help answer the most important questions in the domain of healthy food and living environment. With approximately 30 locations, 6,000 members of staff and 9,000 students, Wageningen UR is one of the leading organisations in its domain worldwide. The integral approach to problems and the cooperation between the various disciplines are at the heart of the unique Wageningen Approach.

