Chapter 2 A transformative approach to social change

The previous chapter highlighted that disability inclusive development requires a multi-actor and multifaceted change process that is by no means straightforward. This chapter focuses on creating the preconditions for social change to occur as well as capture the social change process towards disability inclusive development for NGOs.

Throughout the past decade, international development actors have formed alliances to develop thematic knowledge to address worldwide issues that require social change processes (Le Borgne & Cummings, 2009; van Poelje & Maarse, 2013). In the face of increasingly limited resources, development actors, like NGOs, are more and more trying to combine efforts to show donors the value of international development programmes. This increasing collaboration in international cooperation can be seen as an opportunity for disability issues to be integrated in international development programmes. Inclusion of persons with disabilities can be seen as an overarching issue essential to addressing global issues, like poverty reduction, that require social change (Stein, 2013).

The Dutch umbrella organisation for development, PSO developed an approach called Thematic Learning Programmes (TLP) to co-create knowledge in communities of NGOs, academic partners, and content experts. In a TLP different actors in development try to understand what works and what does not work when facilitating a social change process on a thematic issue in a specific context (Hiemstra, Faber, Maarse, te Velde, & van Poelje, 2012). Thus, governments, NGOs, individuals, and academia try to join hands to address persistent globally relevant issues, like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Hiemstra et al., 2012; Phlix, van der Velden, de Wal, & Zevenbergen, 2012; van Poelje & Maarse, 2013).

With the aim of better understanding the role of NGOs in realising disability inclusive development, a community was started in 2009, comprising a group of Dutch disability specific and mainstream NGOs, expert organisations and an academic institute (which was the home base of the author of this thesis). A substantial part of this thesis is based on this TLP community. The collaborating actors adopted the TLP approach and started a TLP on inclusion of persons with disabilities in 2010. The TLP participants wanted to contribute and be a part of the process of social change required to realise disability inclusive development.
The TLP on inclusion of persons with disabilities involved different levels of development cooperation. First, international mainstream NGOs (mainly the Dutch counterparts) that fund and support local organisations in low- and middle income countries participated, second their partner organisations (recipients of fund and support) in Ethiopia and India participated, and third the field staff, who implement development programmes, and the communities that benefit from development programmes participated. The collaboration on multiple levels promoted learning and knowledge co-creation on disability inclusive development.

To develop a deeper understanding of the social change process, the TLP participants systematically documented the lessons learned. To accommodate the process of documentation, the academics (in consultation with the NGO partners) adopted a transformative (research) approach in order to document and understand the process and outcomes of the TLP and how this contributes to the social change process. Mertens (2007) describes how transformative research ‘provides a mechanism for addressing the complexities of research in culturally complex settings that can provide a basis for social change’ (p. 212). In the TLP on inclusion of persons with disabilities the transformative research approach contributed to the social change process by providing a structural format for enhancing, monitoring and evaluating the process towards disability inclusive development. The TLP formed a platform where the process of social change was influenced by the NGOs experimenting with disability inclusive development. The outcomes of these experimentations provided insights for the transformative research approach on the process towards disability inclusive development. In the TLP research and practice on disability inclusive development became two sides of the same coin, as is visualised in figure 2.1.
In this chapter we will describe the concepts that guide our research to understand the social change process towards disability inclusive development and describe how they were operationalised in the transformative research approach adopted by the TLP.

2.1 An approach to understand and enhance social change in the TLP

The transformative research approach can be applied to understand and at the same time facilitate social change. It is built on the early work of Guba and Lincoln on ‘naturalistic inquiry’ (1982, p. 133), later referred to as ‘constructivism’ (1994, p. 105). The transformative approach can be defined according to three sets of assumptions that determine our world view.

First, ontology refers to beliefs about the nature of reality. A fundamental question from the ontological view relates to the form and nature of reality. In the transformative approach reality is seen as a social construct that may differ in different contexts (Mertens, 2007).

Second, epistemology refers to the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the researcher and research objects. A fundamental question from the epistemological view relates to the relationship between the knower and the would-be knower (Mertens, 2007). In a transformative approach this relationship can be seen as a partnership that combines different types of knowledge in a flexible and creative manner (Crockett, Downey, Firat, Ozanne, & Pettigrew, 2013). As a result, new knowledge is developed in relation with others (E. Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Third, methodology refers to beliefs about the process of systematic inquiry. All aspects of a problem that can be known need to be addressed in a systematic way. A fundamental question from the methodological view relates to finding out whatever can be known (Mertens, 2007). In a transformative approach the way of conducting systematic inquiry should support people to contribute to their society (Creswell, 2012).

The remainder of this section explores how these three philosophical assumptions of the transformative approach are realized in the social change process studied in the TLP on the inclusion of persons with disabilities (table 2.1).
Ontological considerations

In transformative research the nature of reality is seen as a social construct that differs depending on location and context. Therefore, there is no such thing as one universal truth. This implies a need to understand the visions of different people about their reality (Mertens, 2003). The perspectives, knowledge, and experience of multiple individuals from different disciplines can be integrated in a new body of knowledge, constructing reality. Similarly, Wenger (1998) introduced the notion of Communities of Practice (CoP), to understand how learning in a community is about giving meaning to practices, knowledge and experiences around a shared domain of interest. A CoP can support the social construction of new knowledge, contextualised to different localities.

Table 2.1 Realizing social change towards disability inclusive development in the TLP

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Fundamental question</th>
<th>Transformative approach</th>
<th>Approach of the TLP on the inclusion of persons with disabilities</th>
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|          | ‘What is the form and nature of reality?’ | Define reality as a social construct that differs per locality. | • Define the meaning of disability inclusive development in collaboration with actors in different sectors, places and levels.  
• Collectively define strategies for realising disability inclusive development. |

| Epistemology | ‘What is the relationship between the knower and the would-be knower?’ | Create findings in relation with others. | • Enhance knowledge production according to the characteristics of Mode-2 knowledge production.  
• Connect theory and practice. |

| Methodology | ‘How can the inquirer (would-be knower) go about finding out whatever can be known?’ | Support people to contribute to their society. | • Adopt an action research approach.  
• Acquire insight in ‘single’ and ‘double’ loop learning.  
• Facilitate dialogue to enhance knowledge co-creation. |

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In the TLP on inclusion of persons with disabilities the notion of CoP was adopted. The TLP participants assumed that the synergy of their combined (experiential) knowledge from different sectors, places and levels in development, would lead to the construction of new knowledge of the social change process towards disability inclusive development. The TLP participants were in an on-going dialogue to define the meaning of disability inclusive development. Furthermore, from experimentation in practice they collectively designed strategies to realise disability inclusive development in different sectors and contexts. As a result, the TLP participants developed a shared repertoire of new insights and practices contextualised to the different localities.

Approaching reality as a social construct is in accordance with the notion that the reality of complex issues, like disability inclusive development, stretches beyond the boundaries of organisations and disciplines: they affect the wider environment in which the organisations operate and vice versa (Koppenjan and Klijn 2004; Van Bueren et al. 2003). This is especially relevant for social change processes where multiple organisations and individuals work together towards a common goal in order to address entrenched social problems (Elzen and Wieczorek 2005). The TLP on inclusion of persons with disabilities ensured the involvement of different disciplines in cross-cultural settings to allow for a rich knowledge co-creation process to explore the nature of reality.

Epistemological considerations

Transformative research highlights the importance of creating findings in relation with others. Conventional research approaches often refer to the importance of objectivity and a distanced view (E. G. Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 2003). The transformative approach, however, sees knowledge development as a collaborative commitment between researchers and their research objects (Mertens, 2003; Visse, Abma, & Widdershoven, 2012). The importance of influencing social change from a participatory multi-actor perspective is stressed by many scholars (Chetley, 2011; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Senge, 1990), but how we can integrate the different visions of people about reality remains a challenge. Gibbons et al. (1994) introduced a new type of knowledge creation that occurs in the context of application (Mode-2). They distinguish Mode-1 knowledge that is traditional knowledge which is generated within a discipline on a primarily cognitive basis and Mode-2 knowledge which is created in a broader, transdisciplinary, social and economic context (p. 1). Gibbons et al. (1994) describes four characteristics of Mode-2 knowledge production. First, they explain how knowledge production takes place in the context of
application. This is in contrast with conventional research approaches that describe how objectively defined knowledge from academia is transferred to society (Mertens, 2003). Second, Gibbons et al. (1994) describe that Mode-2 knowledge is not derived from pre-existing disciplines, but instead transgresses boundaries of different sectors resulting in transdisciplinary outcomes. The third characteristic is described as the heterogeneity of knowledge production. Heterogeneity refers to the observation that knowledge production takes place in different contexts (e.g. universities, research and development departments, NGOs, consultancies etc.) involving different skills and expertise that are brought in by the actors involved. The fourth characteristic refers to social accountability and reflexivity (Gibbons et al., 1994). This relates to the idea of knowledge production as a dialogical process between all actors involved resulting in so called socially robust knowledge, reflecting the ideas, perspectives and experiences of all these actors.

The four characteristics of Mode-2 knowledge production were adopted by the TLP on inclusion of persons with disabilities. The TLP involved a transdisciplinary group of people to make sense of the reality of disability inclusive development. Thereby, the knowledge developed on disability inclusive development transgressed the boundaries of sectors, levels and localities in development. This resulted in heterogeneous experimentation with the inclusion of persons with disabilities in development programmes across a variety of places, involving a variety of skills and expertise. This resulted in an extensive dialogue on the research findings, with full attention to social accountability and reflexivity. By adopting these four characteristics, the TLP on inclusion of persons with disabilities ensured a collaborative effort in understanding the process of social change towards disability inclusive development.

Knowledge production is a collaborative process, with actors coming from different perspectives and engaging in different levels of development and inherently involves learning in the context of practice. As Raeside (2011) puts it aptly: ‘It is local staff who interact with communities every day, who have the knowledge and information generated through participatory processes at their fingertips’ (p. 101). Therefore, to accelerate change it is important to learn from experiences of practices in the field, where programmes, developed on the basis of ideas and visions, are confronted with the real world. Guba and Lincoln (1989) describe ‘experience’ as one of the fundamental mechanisms that support learning. Gibbons et al. (1994) and Wenger (1998) stress the importance of giving meaning to practices, knowledge and experiences around a shared problem. The synergy of combined (experiential) knowledge leads to the development of new insights and practices.
(Wenger, 1998). This process of knowledge co-creation is also described as an integral part of transdisciplinary research, in which multiple actors from both academia and practice collaborate to solve a common, complex problem by developing mutual in-depth understanding and new knowledge (Hirsch Hadorn, Gertrude Biber-Klemm et al., 2008; Ho, Stremmelaar, & Cummings, 2012; Klein et al., 2001; Pohl & Hadorn, 2008; B J Regeer & Bunders, 2003). In this thesis, we apply the definition of Klein et al (2001), who describe transdisciplinary research as ‘a new form of learning and problem solving involving cooperation among different parts of society and academia in order to meet complex challenges of society’ (p. 7). In the TLP on inclusion of persons with disabilities, there was serious attention to learning from practice through the involvement of grass root level actors at local and national level in India and Ethiopia. Their experiences were then connected to theoretical insights from international NGOs, experts and academia. The shared efforts led to a dialogical process of knowledge production on the change towards disability inclusive development.

**Methodological considerations**

As transformative research aims to support people to contribute to their societies, it is important that beneficiaries of the research are involved in every stage of the research process, from methodological design to implementation and evaluation. Inclusion of beneficiaries at every stage contextualises the results and makes them active contributors of change. In particular, the inclusion of the least advantaged is important as it is intended to empower them to take a stake in research into their own problems (Mertens, 2003). Action research is often emphasised in literature on the transformative research approach, since it focuses on bringing change and empowering marginalised people (Kemmis & McTaggert 1988; Creswell 2012; Mertens 2003). Furthermore, action research is by definition research that is done ‘by’ the involved actors, and not research that is done ‘on’ or ‘to’ them (Kemmis 2001). As action research contributes to empowering people to bring about change, it fits well in the transformative approach that aims to support people to contribute to processes of social change.

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2 Similar approaches have been developed simultaneously, notably participatory action research (Reason, 1995; Reason and Bradbury, 2008). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to elaborate on the similarities and differences of these approaches. I have chosen to use the term action research in accordance with the discourse of transformative research.
Action research applies a cyclical process from action to reflection. The idea is that every action is planned, executed and then reflected on. Reflection facilitates learning and a fresh view on the situation, which may lead to new issues being raised and new actions being planned, thus continuing the cycle and improving society (R. L. Dilworth, 1998). To accommodate reflection on activities, different levels of learning are required. In their seminal work, Argyris and Schön (1978) distinguish ‘single-loop learning’ and ‘double-loop learning’. In single-loop learning goals and plans are executed and reflection deals with the efficiency of the action involved. Practitioners, thereby, improve their skills, develop expertise and learn new methods (Phlix et al., 2012). Single loop learning can help actors to obtain knowledge in order to solve a particular problem (Nonaka & Takeucchi, 1995). Double-loop learning deals with more fundamental and strategic questions. Reflection comes from discussing the legitimacy of certain actions. Thereby, double-loop learning increases the understanding of why some actions work or do not work (Phlix et al., 2012). Senge (1994) refers to this type of learning as ‘deep learning’ that touches upon the essence of an organisation, resulting in ‘the development of not just new capacities, but of fundamental shifts of mind, individually and collectively’ (p 18). Through combining these two levels of learning, new knowledge and practices can be developed that facilitate a process of change.

In the TLP we aimed to make these two types of learning tangible in the process of change and created room for the participants to manoeuvre towards the inclusion of disability issues in their organisations and programmes. Monitoring such a process of transdisciplinary knowledge co-creation (a terminology often used in relation to learning about change in collaborative alliances: Wenger 1998; Senge 1990; Wiedenhof & Molenaar 2006; Quintas et al. 1997; Ho et al. 2012; Regeer et al. 2009) is about facilitating the learning capacities of all actors involved and bringing their experiences and knowledge together to create new knowledge. To get an in-depth understanding of the process of knowledge co-creation we paid full attention to balancing the dialogues between the actors in order to support all TLP participants in contributing to the change they envisioned with regards to disability inclusive development.
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