The role of local knowledge in sustainable development programmes

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Summary

Background and research question

In September 2015, the member states of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly ratified the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a transformational agenda to address the problems facing the global community, including poverty, gender inequality, and climate change. The UN and its member-states are committed to achieving sustainable development in its three dimensions— economic, social and environmental — in a balanced and integrated manner. For the SDGs, sustainable development involves the eradication of poverty, combating inequality, preserving the planet, and creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Replacing the Millennium Development Goals which applied to 2000-2015 period, the SDGs set the framework for the international development agenda up to the year 2030 and will have an enormous influence on development policy and practice in the coming years. As a reflection of this, international organisations, such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the World Bank and the European Union and its member states have already embraced the new agenda, re-framing their development efforts in the light of the SDGs. In addition, some national governments, including the Netherlands, India, Liberia, Somalia and Switzerland have taken the step of reviewing their own national policies within the framework of the SDGs. For the first time, global development efforts in the economic, social and environmental spheres for both developed and developing countries are being integrated. This represents a great step forward, reducing the fragmentation of efforts to address global problems. However, a number of challenges remain, some of which relate to the role of knowledge.

There is a general recognition from international organisations, governments, civil society and academics that knowledge is important to development. Despite this recognition, the current way knowledge is included in the SDGs, and within the paradigm of sustainable development more generally, probably places too much emphasis on Western approaches, concepts and researchers. There is also an increasing acknowledgement that sustainable development needs to be more closely linked to local knowledge and local realities. For example, UNESCO sees local knowledge as the basis of development capacities at the local level as demonstrated by the following quote:

> All societies possess a rich range of knowledge and make use, in their daily lives, of various levels and types of knowledge that they produce and pass on using a wide variety of means, practices and tools. They are a base on which the capacities necessary for their development can sooner or later be built.

Against this background, new modes of knowledge production and exchange are needed to contribute to sustainable development at the grassroots. Promising new modes of knowledge production and exchange include transdisciplinary research, knowledge management for development, and social capital. Transdisciplinary research, a type of research practiced by the Athena Institute at the VU University, is based on the understanding that scientific knowledge

alone cannot address persistent problems, emphasising the role of socially robust knowledge and experiential knowledge. Knowledge management for development is currently an active field of research and practice with, at its core, KM4Dev, a vibrant network of more than 4000 professionals. The importance of local knowledge is recognised by both transdisciplinary research and knowledge management for development. Another promising approach to link local knowledge more effectively to sustainable development focuses on the role of social capital in local knowledge exchange. Social capital, roughly synonymous with the resources accessible through one's social network, has been found to contribute to poverty alleviation, health, wellbeing as well as access to knowledge and information. Against this background, the main research question to be addressed by this thesis comprises:

> How can new modes of knowledge production and exchange, such as transdisciplinary research, knowledge management for development and social capital, improve approaches to sustainable development?

Part I: Dominance of Western approaches and Western researchers

Part I of the thesis aims to answer the following research question:

> To what extent do Western approaches to knowledge and Western researchers dominate discourses of knowledge related to sustainable development (and development more generally)?

To address this question, we under took two studies. In the first study (Chapter 2), we employed a methodology called critical discourse analysis to consider which perspectives on knowledge are evident in the UN publication, 'Transforming our world' which was the key document on the SDGs ratified at the UN in 2015. This methodology was employed to analyse the SDGs at the level of vision, strategy, implementation and goals, aiming to demonstrate how local knowledge is presented. We established that knowledge makes only a marginal appearance within the 40-page SDG document: with only 11 references. This relative absence does not appear to be consistent with general trends in which the importance of knowledge to development is recognised by a wide variety of stakeholders. We also established that the SDGs are transformative at the level of vision and strategy, while the means of implementation and the goals and targets do not appear to reflect this vision.

In the second study (Chapter 3), we considered the extent to which academics from developing countries are represented as authors and editorial board members in 10 scientific journals in the field of development studies. We found that academics from developing countries are poorly represented as both authors and members of editorial boards within 13.6% of authors being based in developing countries and 8.5% of editorial board members. We consider that this pattern, fairly similar across all journals, is the result of very complex processes which are active at a systemic level and are affecting many more academic fields than development studies

Based on two studies, we conclude that Western approaches to knowledge in the SDGs and Western researchers in academic knowledge production dominate discourses of knowledge

related to sustainable development, and development more generally. However, the problem is not so much that Western approaches and researchers are dominant but that the approaches to development that are being espoused are not transformational, despite a rhetoric which contradicts this, and that they do not take sufficient notice of local knowledge and local realities. To address the issues highlighted here, we consider whether new modes of knowledge production and exchange have the potential to shed more light on local knowledge for sustainable development.

Part II: New modes of knowledge production and exchange

The next part of the thesis comprises two chapters and attempts to answer the following research question:

> What are the characteristics of the new modes of knowledge production and exchange, and to what extent are they applicable to development?

The first study (Chapter 4) compares and contrasts two academic fields which are concerned with knowledge for development, namely transdisciplinary research and knowledge management for development. Based on the descriptions of both fields, we argue that there are similarities emerging between knowledge management for development and transdisciplinary research and that the fields are, in some aspects, converging and mutually enriching. Development issues are increasingly recognised to be complex wicked issues demanding a knowledge intensive approach which has forced knowledge management for development to take on certain strategies and methods. At the same time, we argue that knowledge management for development can learn from transdisciplinary research and vice versa. Convergence between the two fields can be grouped into four main areas: the focus on real world problems in complex situations; the involvement of multiple actors; new processes and methodologies; and knowledge integration and co-creation.

In the next study (Chapter 5), we consider whether social capital can be employed to examine knowledge networks for development, based on social capital's postulated role in the production and exchange of knowledge. Given that social capital is applicable at micro to macro levels and has been found to facilitate both knowledge production and exchange, we decided to further consider how applicable it is to development. We established that the Nahapiet and Ghoshal framework seems to be a particularly interesting approach to knowledge production and exchange, despite the fact that it focuses on the business environment in developed countries, and that it might be applicable to the grassroots. At the same time, we also recognised that transdisciplinary research is able to stimulate new modes of knowledge production and exchange. In the next part of the thesis, we apply transdisciplinary approaches to social capital and local knowledge.

Part III: Strengthening social capital and local knowledge

The third part of this thesis comprises four chapters (Chapters 6-9) which together answer the following research question:

> Through which mechanisms and strategies can local knowledge and social capital be strengthened for sustainable development?

In the first study (Chapter 6), we undertook a literature review to investigate how social capital can contribute to poverty alleviation at the grassroots. Social capital has been found to contribute to poverty alleviation through micro-credit in Bangladesh and other developing countries; agricultural production and marketing in Vietnam, Bangladesh, Rwanda and Uganda; environmental protection in India, Vietnam, Thailand and Syria; and knowledge networking in Honduras and India. Previously discussed by other researchers, we identified four mechanisms which have been shown to strengthen social capital at the grassroots: regular opportunities to meet other people, knowing how to interact with others, sense of belonging and an ethos of helping each other. We postulated that it might be possible for development projects to strengthen social capital by fostering such mechanisms.

The final three chapters in this thesis (Chapters 7, 8 and 9) are concerned with a development project in rural Bangladesh, undertaken by researchers of the Athena Institute in cooperation with a local non-governmental organisation, PRIDE, and local people over the 2006-2012 period. In the first of these chapters (Chapter 7), we consider how action research, a transdisciplinary research methodology, made it possible for poor women and other stakeholders to articulate a development path which was appropriate to the local context. The project demonstrated the suitability of action research to address complex challenges, such as poverty alleviation and unequal gender relations.

In Chapter 8, we applied the Nahapiet and Ghoshal framework to analyse the process of knowledge creation and exchange. Despite having been developed for a very different hypothesized group of people, we established that the framework was applicable to the grassroots and the context of rural Bangladesh. We adapted the framework to enhance understanding of how development interventions stimulate social capital for knowledge creation and exchange. We also established that different types of social capital have different functions in terms of their use along development paths. In our study context, characterized by poverty but also by limited access to social networks due to *purdah*, bonding social capital with family members is generally the first type of social capital to which poor women have access, followed later by bridging (networks of peers) and linking capital (vertical links with powerholders). As a result of this insight, we further developed the structural dimensions of the framework, dividing it into the three functional subtypes of social capital (bonding, bridging and linking) in order to distinguish between three distinct paths in which social capital contributes to knowledge production and exchange. We found that knowledge is of huge importance for development at the grassroots but that leveraging knowledge and social capital is not a simple process: it requires concerted efforts and dedication from people at the grassroots and from NGOs who are assisting them.

The development project also designed strategies to strengthen women's social capital (Chapter 9). Some of these strategies were developed by the NGO, others were developed by

the women themselves, such as working in harmony with norms and customs and becoming change agents. The four categories of strategies identified are closely related to mechanisms of social capital production identified in the literature review but we have also identified a number of new strategies. First, PRIDE worked within the social norm of *purdah*, selecting women who already had more freedom of movement because of age or lack of familial relationships through widowhood. Second, corresponding to regular opportunities to meet other people, we demonstrated that PRIDE provided opportunities for women to meet other women and to make 'social exchanges', including gift exchanges, barter and financial exchanges. Based on this experience, we argue that creating opportunities for women to meet and exchange is a pre-condition for strengthening social capital and improved livelihoods for women living in circumstances of *purdah*. Third, developing knowhow and know-who of social interaction are important strategies for strengthening social capital, building on the identification of pre-existing social and networking skills. Fourth, we found that improved feelings of self-worth and increasing 'recognition capital' often helped women to become change agents, able to develop themselves and their communities. This becomes a virtuous cycle in which these new capacities are then increasingly valued from the local norm of altruism.

In Bangladesh, improvements in women's livelihoods went hand-in-hand with gradual change to gender relations in the household and community in which women's improved access to social networks was part. Although women's livelihoods improved considerably over the study period, the greatest, most sustainable impact was probably the improvement in women's capabilities to take action and see opportunities in their own environment. The development project seems to have started a positive spiral in which women's contribution to the community has been enhanced, and their self-esteem and their social status has been improved. It is this positive spiral which might form the basis of sustainable change.

Main findings and conclusions

In this thesis, we have added to academic methods and theory in a number of ways. We have adapted two methodologies. First, we have adapted the methodology of critical discourse analysis, making it more easily applicable to policy documents. Second, we have adapted the influential Nahapiet and Ghoshal framework to make it applicable to processes of knowledge production and exchange at the grassroots.

In this thesis, we have also developed additional insights into the role of social capital. First, this thesis demonstrates that bonding, bridging and linking social capital have different implications in terms of access to knowledge. Second, gift exchange played an unexpectedly important role within the context under study. Third, linked to the exchange of gifts, trust appears to play a far more important role in this context than it does in the Nahapiet and Ghoshal framework, possibly because the development project was taking place in a context with low levels of trust – where NGOs are not trusted, and where women are not trusted to be able to contribute to their own, their household's and their community's development. We also present a novel framework for strengthening social capital for grassroots development which combines insights from theory, studies conducted by others, and the data from the action research project. In a necessarily simplified, graphical form, this framework attempts to show how processes to stimulate social capital were found to work at the level of norms and

ethics, opportunities, self-worth, capacity to act, social skills and knowledge, and to strengthen different components of social capital.

Based on the findings of this thesis, we see six avenues for possible future research focusing on the impact of the SDGs at the grassroots, the concept of sustainable development, new transdisciplinary research on models of academic publishing, action research in another locality, additional research on social capital, and a literature review focusing on the existing use of transdisciplinary research in development studies. In addition, we identify opportunities to address some of the issues highlighted in this thesis at the level of creating new narratives and approaches which might change the way in which knowledge is integrated into the implementation of the SDGs. These include encouraging the KM4Dev community to develop a focus on the societal role of knowledge and supporting an international initiative to develop the Knowledge Development Goals to complement the SDGs.