Workplace and Organisational Learning in Development Aid

A Case Study of a Belgian Development Agency

Prepared by

Huib Huyse

A thesis submitted to the University of Sussex

Sussex Institute of Education, Brighton, England – UK

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

International Doctorate in Education

May 2011

The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers. (Scott Peck, cited in Reeler, 2007, p. 12)

Dedicated to Elizabeth Chikwanha, ZimPATH Support Team Leader, who passed away unexpectedly in March 2009. She was one of the key drivers of ZimPATH and an inspiration for many of us.

Acknowledgements

The process of writing this thesis would not have been possible without tutors, colleagues, friends and family. They have guided and supported me throughout this journey of discovery, also in difficult times when unforeseen events took over.

First of all, I want to thank Dr. Kwame Akyeampong, my thesis advisor, for guiding me through this endeavour with professional and moral support and feedback. Being a distance learning student -in the language of this thesis- few opportunities existed for face-to-face interaction and for the exchange of tacit knowledge. But, every interaction was a true learning experience for me. Also other tutors, such as Dr. John Pryor, Dr. Fiona Leach, Dr. Mairead Dune, Professor Michael Eraut, and Professor Keith Lewin have all been important sources of inspiration.

At Sussex I met with an amazing group of fellow international students which all added their valuable insights, thoughts and reflections during and after class. I especially mention Akiko Kamiiisaka, Albert Motivans, Cesar Guadalupe, Cristina Lai, Hazel Slinn, Isaac Ohene, Maria Hartl, and Todd Beach. It has been a very special experience to me.

A significant part of the journey took place inside VVOB, the case study of the thesis. This small but remarkable organisation has shaped much of my professional experiences and insights over the last decade. There are too many people within VVOB to thank for the openness, participation, patience, and critical remarks. I especially want to show gratitude to the project teams of ZimPATH and St2eep and to other colleagues in Zimbabwe, namely Michel Triest, Elizabeth Chikwanha, Robert Chipimbi, Ambrose Chipenzi, Mqaphelisi Sibanda, Jan Van Ongevalle, Steff Deprez, Carl Beel, Jane Chimbodza, Hanne Huysmans and Webster Jojo. In the VVOB head office I received support from Bart De Waele, Willy Blockx, Wouter Van Damme, Arne Willems, Bert Janssens, Fran Asselberghs, Katleen Locus, Eric Vanderwegen, Marie-Claire De Blieck, Ingrid Vanlommel, and many more.

My colleagues of HIVA virtually inherited the doctorate when I started there in 2007. I fully appreciate that, in a context of a hard-working and demanding organisation, opportunities in terms of time and space were provided. I express my thanks to Patrick Develtere, Hans Bruyninckx, Caroline Gijselinckx, Ignace Pollet, Bénédicte Fonteneau, Tom De Bruyn, and Rafael Peels, and to other colleagues.

Table of contents

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

Huib Huyse

DEGREE OF INTERNATIONAL DOCTORATE IN EDUCATION

Workplace and Organisational Learning in Development Aid:

A Case Study of a Belgian Development Agency

This thesis investigates workplace and organisational learning over the period 2000-2010 in a Belgian development agency (VVOB), involved in the implementation of educational development projects. It explores some of the structural causes of the perceived learning deficit at the project and the agency-wide level, and links it with similar findings in other development agencies. For the project level, two case studies in Zimbabwe (ZimPATH and St2eep) were selected in which the project's management invested significantly in team learning. These practices were put against the learning support activities that the head office was catering for.

The study follows a qualitative case-study design inspired by phronetic-based research (Flyvbjerg, 2001), and utilises a mixed method approach to data collection involving a variety of research instruments. The author of the thesis worked in different positions in the field and in the head office (1997-2007).

An improved version of the concept of learning patterns (Sterck, 2004) is introduced to gain insights in the tenacity of learning practices. It is derived from an in-depth analysis of the underlying characteristics of the formal and informal learning activities. Important drivers of the observed learning patterns are argued to be axiological in nature. These result in strongly diverging views about why learning should happen, what should be learned, and how learning should be organised. These views are captured and analysed through a newly constructed concept, the learning support framework.

The findings for project level learning are multiple and point at the importance of both intra-organisational and external factors. The working environment of the two case study projects was characterised by internal (micro-political) and external (institutional and socio-economic) sources of pressure that seriously complicated learning processes. However, evidence is provided that both project teams managed to develop powerful learning processes. The 'situated' learning patterns of ZimPATH and St2eep shared a view of learning as a strategy to deal with the complexity of work. Knowledge was regarded as a process, with a focus on knowledge creation and the use of local knowledge. Both projects integrated learning in their daily practice via the extensive use of social learning practices and by creating conducive conditions for implicit learning. The bulk of these practices was going under the radar in the head office. It treated implicit learning rather passively and it hardly addressed the structural factors hindering such learning. As a consequence, teams without skills and insights into workplace learning were largely left on their own.

The analysis of agency-wide learning in VVOB confirms research that indicates that 'tacit knowledge does not travel easily' (Gertler, 2003, p.84). The strong bias towards vertical learning processes, ICT-solutions and the codification of knowledge created a bureaucratic learning pattern. It did not stop VVOB from entering into a profound crisis.

A severe institutional emergency, triggered by external pressure of back donors and institutional partners in the years 2005 and 2006, together with changes in the

management brought the momentum for change. The resulting improvements in learning at the field level were, however, not replicated for agency-wide learning. This is linked in the thesis with a lack of 'institutional proximity' (Gertler, 2003).

Initiatives introducing changes in existing learning practices are deemed to face fierce resistance unless they take into account crucial internal factors (such as the configuration of views, interests and history with regard to knowledge and learning), and various external causes of pressure. An alternative 3 step approach is proposed.

In conclusion, unless development agencies and back-donors become more responsive towards the challenges of sharing tacit knowledge across organisational, institutional, cultural and power divides, projects like ZimPATH and St2eep are likely to remain pockets of innovation.

Part I

Scope, approach, and methodology of the research

Chapter 1
Research context and design

Section 1 VVOB and its challenges

This research tells the story of the Flemish Association for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance (VVOB), a small Belgian development agency, and its experiences with learning in the field and at the organisational level. It has also been my own professional biotope for about ten years, spending time in various positions in the head office in Brussels and at the field level in Zimbabwe.

Over the last decade the agency experienced a rapidly changing and challenging working environment. The organisation has a rather peculiar background and set-up. It was founded by the regional executive of Flanders in 1982, as a part of the gradual rebuilding of Belgium into a federal state. VVOB, a relatively new and small quasi-governmental player, had and has to compete with larger bilateral agencies in the arena of public sector reform programmes in developing countries. In addition, for many years it was run as a traditional civil service agency, operating as a closed system inside the safe but stagnant boundaries of its guaranteed funding by both the federal and the Flemish executive. At the end of the 1990s Flanders' ambitions and funding in the area of development aid vastly increased. The money and programming linked to this growth was initially channelled through VVOB. However, its quasi-governmental status played to its disadvantage when the Flemish government decided to set up a wholly new development agency. By losing a significant part of its regional funding, VVOB was now fully dependent on financial support from the federal government.

1990's: an organisation slowly growing obsolete
Until the end of the 1990s, VVOB had been mainly involved in the provision of expatriate teachers and lecturers to secondary schools, technical schools and teacher training colleges in developing countries. Between 80% and 90% of its budget was invested in the salaries of expatriate staff. There were hardly any funds for support activities, training, or other forms of professional development. Monitoring and evaluation procedures were vague and not systematic. Country offices were very poorly developed; they mainly dealt with basic personnel administration and had limited

contacts with the participating schools and colleges. All in all, there were hardly any opportunities for sharing views and experiences of field staff with the overall organisation. Many of these collaborators felt alienated. The Brussels office was driven by an organisational culture that was experienced by the field as bureaucratic and centralistic. To use the terminology of Britton (2005), real *motives*, *means* and *opportunities* for learning in the organisation were almost absent. The organisation was stuck in single loop learning (a concept developed by Argyris and Schon, 1974), with its actions taking the shape of coping strategies, resolving only temporary situations but damaging the longer-term context (as described for the private sector by Eraut and Hirsh, 2007).

1998-2002: pushed out of the comfort zone

By the end of the 1990s a change in the federal development cooperation policy forced all development agencies in the education sector to specialise on sub-sectors and to move away from substitution towards project-based approaches. In this context, VVOB had to halt its policy of providing expatriate teachers and lecturers. Management procedures were readjusted to enable a project-based approach and to increase local participation and ownership. Now more funds were made available for coordination and follow-up activities, especially at the field level, shifting decision making power to this level. This development was initially resisted at the Brussels office[1].

2003-2006: not ready for the new aid paradigm

Soon after, many field offices felt the consequences of the growing international consensus on a new aid architecture. If VVOB wanted to remain relevant as a small technical agency and be allowed to work with local ministries, it needed to position itself in an environment now characterised by sector approaches, donor harmonisation, and budget support. One possible strategy was to inflate itself to the level of a bilateral donor and develop large sector-support programmes. But for this funds and political status were lacking. The other option was to move towards more informal and smaller programmes, like supporting local educational NGOs. It would mean quitting the technical and implementing role it had held up to now. This was a development which the federal funding agency did not seem to like. Other options were unknown and had yet to be explored. Consequently, the organisation was faced with the most trying

---

[1] An attempt to manage the new projects through the existing centralised procedures, with every decision and communication passing via the secretary general failed. Procedures had to be relaxed and decision-making decentralised.

period in its existence. The various waves of reorganisation in staffing and operating procedures led to a significant and recurrent staff turn-over at the head office.

Ingredients for change

VVOB seemed largely unprepared for the drastically changing institutional environment, the uncertainty of the relationship with the Flemish community, and the consequences of the new aid paradigm. A full crisis broke out in the years 2005 and 2006. The organisation in fact experienced the challenges and the uncertainties, but also the opportunities of now being an open system. As I will describe later, by the end of 2006 the head office team managed to build on several internal and external processes to change the identity of the organisation, and to learn its way through this trying period. It slowly identified and carved out a niche for the organisation, one which linked well with its new identity and had the potential to keep the organisation relevant in the context of the new aid paradigm.

Section 2 The author as a practitioner and a researcher

I entered the organisation in 1997 as a programme officer in Brussels and became overwhelmed by the interplay between the functional goals of the organisation and its micro- and macro-politics. There were clear signs of poor learning across projects, with field staff remaining in substitution roles (replacing often existing local capacity), and with no developments at all in the delivery modes of the projects (mainly teaching to secondary and higher education students). This unsustainable situation triggered my interest: could improved monitoring and evaluation play a role in assembling the necessary information for field level and agency level learning?

In the head office, by the end of the 1990s, more effective external evaluation was seen as *the* instrument for improving the organisation's learning capacity. The outcome of this choice was disappointing. The doctoral training I embarked on in 2004 provided a good opportunity to explore this mismatch between the normative goals of evaluation as a learning tool and the reality in the field. The literature confirmed that evaluation is much more relevant when based on a process perspective, combined with relevant stakeholder participation, attention given to evaluation design, inclusion of elements of self-evaluation, and using the actual evaluation to build evaluative capacity during the exercise (Patton, 1997, Horton et al., 2003). At the same time, my field experiences showed that evaluations tend to be organised on an ad-hoc basis and are difficult to

synchronise with developments in the field. They also are expensive and most often lack timely feedback. External evaluation, it became clear, is limited in its capacity to improve the effectiveness of projects and programmes on a continuous basis. A broader picture of project and programme management was needed, from the planning processes of new projects over the monitoring of ongoing projects, up to the ex-post evaluation of finished ones. Surprisingly, what initially looked like a dry technical enterprise, focused on project and programme management tools, became a thrilling confrontation with paradigm wars, heated debates about theories of change, and tensions between accountability and learning. In a search for instruments that provide a better balance between accountability and learning, and supported by initial research activities for the doctoral training (Huyse, 2006a), I supported the piloting of a more learning-oriented planning and M&E approach in the St2eep project in Zimbabwe (Huyse and Deprez, 2006, Huyse and Van Ongevalle, 2008).

Further field work assignments confronted me again and again with a fundamental organisational defect: the big gap between the emphasis funding agencies and head office staff put on external evaluation and formal M&E on the one hand, and the experiences and perceptions at the field level. The actual practice was firmly disconnected from the initial goals of the instruments used. The question was now: if we accept that formal M&E systems in many cases do not contribute significantly to learning processes at the project level, how do project teams learn and how can they be supported in their learning? This is how my role as a practitioner led to a study of how field level learning in project teams originates and develops.

Learning something the hard way has often been described as 'to learn something by experience, especially by an unpleasant experience'. This phrase fits well as a description of the process I went through framing and re-framing issues confronted at VVOB. Faced with structural inconsistencies in their professional practices, many practitioners develop 'espoused theories' (Argyris and Schon, 1974), which tend to blind them from the real effects of their actions. Others grow frustrated, sometimes cynical, and turn away from the sector (Eraut, 2000). A third group prefers to reflect on their own work experiences to develop a deeper understanding of the issues they are confronted with. I belong to this third category.

Thus, more than in a traditional doctoral research, my own learning and professional experiences were affected by the rhythm of the organisation I was working for and by

the different positions I held. From September 1997 to August 2000, I was the programme officer at the head office, following-up projects in six countries in Africa and Asia. From August 2000 to June 2006, I was country coordinator in Zimbabwe, managing a number of educational development projects. I was back at the head office from July 2006 to October 2007, responsible for quality, policy and communication. And finally, in November 2007 I changed the world of practice for the world of study and became research manager at HIVA (Research Institute for Labour and Society at the University of Leuven) – in a unit that specialises in research and evaluation for Belgian and international development agencies. In this last position, I was one of the six international evaluators participating in the overall evaluation of the VVOB education programmes for the period 2008-2010 (Stoop et al., 2010).

I will discuss later more in detail the methodological questions that arise from the professional route that I have taken.

Section 3 Research goals and approach

Looking from a distance at the troubles with learning in VVOB, the question arises whether they are organisation-specific, or if they reflect more generic challenges in the aid sector. The problems were clearly VVOB-specific during the first years of its life. However, by 2005-2006, its policies and actions had become much more based on generally accepted practices and standards (VVOB, 2006b)[2], making the questions and difficulties of a more generic nature.

Indeed, research such as McGrath and King (2004); Ramalingam (2005); Baser and Morgan (2008) has listed the many problems that development agencies face in the organisation-wide learning processes they develop. Extensive analysis of the causes of such difficulties (Carlsson and Wohlgemuth, 2000, Pasteur et al., 2006, Roper and Petit, 2003, Crawford, 2004, Morgan, 2005, Smit, 2007) has made the aid sector firmly aware of the need for organisational learning. However, the perceived consensus hides more than it reveals about the way forward. The very notion of 'organisational learning' remains vague and this, in turn, leads to wide ranging views on *why* development

---

[2] VVOB organised an email survey in October 2006 amongst 49 of its external partners (strategic and operational partners in the South and stakeholders in Flanders) asking feedback on various aspects of the performance of VVOB. One of the questions compared the performance of VVOB to other agencies: 'How do you score the performance of VVOB in comparison with other similar development agencies in the educational sector? 70% of the respondents stated that the performance of VVOB was 'good' or 'very good' compared to other agencies.

agencies should learn, *what* they should learn, and *how* they should learn. Some scholars and practitioners argue that agencies must learn what works and what does not through more rigorous external evaluation (Banerjee, 2007, Savedoff et al., 2006). On the other end of the spectrum there are those that favour social and transformative learning strategies that are oriented towards empowering the vulnerable members of society, or aim at the development of counter-power and transformative change (Pasteur et al., 2006, Guijt, 2008). Other theories and practices vary in between these two positions. Chapter 2 will describe more in detail the many problems with learning in the aid sector.

One of the research questions for the thesis will be defined as 'how can development agencies better support field level and agency-wide learning?' Arriving at this definition of the research problem has been an iterative process, characterised by several rounds of moving up and down two different types of steps.

One quest involved the choice of a unit of analysis for the research. Should I focus on the dynamics of workplace learning at the project level (micro-level), or rather try to look at the overall process of learning in a single development agency (meso-level), or of a group of development agencies in Belgium (macro-level). I decided to link agency[3] and structure, and therefore focus on the project level and its interaction with the agency level (VVOB), but at the same time framing these insights in the broader context of the Belgian development aid sector. In this way, one might avoid the critique from Flyvbjerg (2001), in which he argues that "… social scientists tend to generate either macro- or micro-level explanations, ignoring the critical connections" (p. 138).

A second quest dealt with the question of the multi-disciplinary nature of the topic of learning in development agencies. There are several possible routes to explore learning: mainly in terms of monitoring and evaluation practices, of knowledge management, of organisational learning, or within the context of human resource development. Depending on the level one finds himself/herself, the relevance of instruments for learning tend to be perceived differently, as will be discussed later on. Several researchers have focused on only one of these management processes and looked how they could be made more relevant and effective for learning. Crawford, P. (2004) and Guijt (2008) examined extensively how monitoring and evaluation can

---

[3] 'Agency' is used in two different ways in this section. Here, I do not refer to the development agency, but rather to the meaning of agency from a research methodology perspective. In any organisation there are several sources of agency, for example individual employees, teams, project unit, etc.

advance learning. McGrath and King (2004) and Ferguson et al. (2010) on the other hand looked at knowledge management strategies of international agencies. These studies took the respective learning tools (M&E, knowledge management,...), or the means for learning as the starting point for their research. My preference is to start my research journey at the end of the process, which is the actual *learning practice of project teams*[4]. Eraut and Hirsh (2007) call this the 'real experience of workplace learning':

> This means putting the individual employee centre stage and working outwards to the work group, the manager, other colleagues and the organisation. (p. 2)

This focus resonated well with my own insider position in the agency which had the potential to add value to learning from within.

My analysis will thus move backwards and explore which processes (M&E, training, informal learning) have contributed to and which factors have hindered the existing learning practice in the project teams. In doing so, attention will be given to both successes and failures in facilitating learning in VVOB, as suggested by Roper and Petit (2003):

> Very little has been written about failures and problems with regards to organisational learning systems and how we can learn from that. (p. 19)

In essence, this thesis explores what Pasteur et al. (2006) frame as the 'operationalisation gap' in the area of agency learning, creating a widening chasm between theory and practice. One way to bridge the gap between the espoused theories on learning in the aid sector and the reality in the field, is by increasing understanding of the daily learning practices of project teams and their relationship with the development agency.

Section 4 General research questions

A Belgian development agency, VVOB, will serve as the main case for the following general research questions:

1. How to describe the variation in the learning practices inside VVOB?
2. How to understand the reported variation in learning patterns?

---

[4] Depending on the context, I use the terms workplace learning or field level learning (see also literature review).

3. How to explain the obstacles to change in VVOB?
4. How can development agencies better support field level and agency-wide learning?

More *specific* questions, generated by the overview of both the theory-oriented literature and the publications based on empirical research, will be offered at the end of chapter 2.

Section 5 Plan of the thesis

Part I presents the scope, the approach and the methodology of the thesis. This chapter 1 deals with the research context. Chapter 2 looks at the literature on learning through its three main issues: *team learning (project level learning), organisational learning (agency level learning)* and *the interaction between both levels*. Emphasis will be given to publications that focus on the development sector. This overview will lead to a major building brick of this thesis: its conceptual framework. The third chapter of part I introduces the selected methodology and will identify some of its challenges and limitations. An overview of the various research methods follows.

Part II is a discussion of the research findings. Chapter 4 starts with an overview of the policy intentions regarding learning of a group of similar agencies and presents the cases on which the analysis has been built: the VVOB agency and two educational projects in Zimbabwe. Chapters 5 to 7 form the main body of the empirical analysis. Chapter 5 describes, first, how formal learning activities at all levels have been organised. In a second part the chapter discusses the findings on intentional or deliberate informal learning. In both parts a distinction is made between agency- and project-driven initiatives. Learning in teams and at the agency level is also the (by-) product of several work processes. These processes are identified in chapter 6. Ample attention is given to the key factors that affect their learning potential. A common finding in the chapters 5 and 6 is that learning practices in VVOB vary considerably. The possible causes of this variation are singled out in chapter 7 by applying the concepts of learning support frameworks and learning patterns.

The final chapter 8 brings together the empirical findings in order to answer the main research questions and discusses the emerging thinking about learning across various institutional settings.
This thesis ends with a list of references and four appendices.

Chapter 2
Learning in the aid sector:
towards a conceptual framework

Section 1 Learning, the Achilles' heel

> The Belgian Treasury denounces the poor follow-up of development projects and programmes and in response all democratic political parties in parliament submitted a resolution to improve the alignment of evaluations to the relevant laws and to the strategies aimed at reaching the poor. (De Morgen, a Dutch language newspaper, 20 April 2007).

Various development and evaluation experts in Europe and the US were taken by surprise when in May 2006 a number of new lobby groups started advocating more rigorous impact evaluations in the aid sector. Their implicit or explicit vision of what was needed was firmly inspired by methods that originated in the medical sciences, particularly Randomised Control Trials (RCTs), which have been promoted as the gold-standard for evaluation research. The foundations of Bill & Melinda Gates and William & Flora Hewlet, and some other influential donors commissioned a report on the topic from the Centre for Global Development (CGD). It was published in May 2006 as "When Will We Ever Learn? Improving Lives through Impact Evaluation" (Savedoff et al., 2006). It was now evident that the new philanthropic donors would look differently at impact evaluation. The issue also had received a prominent place on the international development agenda because of the Millennium Development Goals and Education For All agenda and the strong focus on managing for development results (Prowse, 2007). Others, like the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Lab at MIT (Banerjee, 2007), even go as far as arguing that Western countries should put stringent conditions (read RCT evidence) in aid-disbursements, similar to those the American Ministry of Education did for organisations asking access to the 'No Child Left Behind' fund under the Bush administration. In January 2008, only a year and a half after the release of the CGD report, a new organisation was launched. The Impact Evaluation Entity (3IE) presented itself as "… designed to dramatically increase the number of rigorous impact evaluations in areas such as health and education." (CGD website, 7 Jan 2008). This new initiative was initially looked at with mixed feelings by the established evaluation community, as some saw it as a duplication of existing evaluation structures. It took

indeed some time before the community realised the scale and the impact of these developments, partly because they had been launched outside the existing structures and/or from only one methodological side of the evaluation spectrum. After some delay, the strong epistemological positioning of the newcomers triggered debates in email listservs of evaluation groups[5] and in a number of ad hoc working groups. By December 2007, the European Evaluation Society (EES) Board of Directors issued a statement on "The importance of a methodologically diverse approach to impact evaluation – specifically with respect to development aid and development interventions" (EES, 2007). Similar position papers and statements followed from the Overseas Development Institute (Prowse, 2007) and the Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation (NONIE)[6]. By mid 2008, the relationship between NONIE and 3IE seemed to have been cleared out to some degree, and in March 2009, they were actually organising a conference together with the African Evaluation Society on evaluation. Interestingly, several observers were shocked to find out that the conference was organised around two main themes: (1) 'rigorous evaluation methods,' focusing on experimental designs (RCT's, ..) and quasi-experimental designs, and (2) 'other evaluation methods'. The second group of evaluation methods was therefore implicitly labelled as not rigorous. This again triggered a reaction from academics and practitioners from the qualitative field, and in May 2010 a well attended conference was set-up in the Netherlands under the heading 'Rigorous Evaluation Practice that Embraces Complexity', looking specifically to a wider ranges of approaches beyond experimental and quasi-experimental designs.

The paradigm wars in the evaluation community were thus started through the agenda setting by influential groups in the aid sector. That reveals a certain pattern in thinking about development aid anno 2010 and puts light on the growing role of evaluation in the public debate (Patton, 2008). Policy makers, politicians and the general public have grown impatient, confronted as they are with the recurring findings that development agencies do not seem to know what works and what does not. They now look at independent and external evaluation to make the sector more accountable.

The question of whether the recent fixation on evaluation to improve learning in the development sector is justified is unresolved. Better learning from the past is a much needed policy. This statement has a common sense touch, it sounds even trivial, but it

---

[5] An interesting example can be found on the XCeval listserve (during January 2007).
[6] NONIE was set-up to enhance development effectiveness by promoting useful and relevant, high quality impact evaluation. It is a joint initiative of DAC-OECD Evaluation network, the UN Evaluation Group, the World Bank and others (www.World Bank.org/ieg/nonie/index.html).

has haunted the development sector for many years. P. Crawford (2004) wonders if aid agencies are in fact worse at learning than organisations in other sectors, or "… if commentators are just hypersensitive to the ethical imperative …", and as such condemn the lack of learning in view of the urgent task to fight global inequity. (Crawford, P., 2004, p. 124).

In the following sections of the literature review, I will describe the limitations of a learning culture that excessively builds on external evaluation and will also try to slightly open the black box that holds the learning practice of development teams and agencies. This will bring us later: 1) to look at how professionals in the aid sector are actually learning individually and in teams; 2) to discuss approaches that attempt to stimulate learning from within; and to point at blind spots in the body of knowledge in this area. Within the M&E debate, this will lead me to focus mainly on monitoring, rather than evaluation as a method to sustain learning in programmes.

Section 2 starts with a review of publications on the difficult relationship between learning and accountability in development projects. It will then highlight some of the key drivers for organisational learning in the aid sector, demonstrating a long history of learning beyond external evaluation. Next, in section 3, the literature on learning in teams will be discussed. Learning by organisations is the subject of section 4. Learning patterns, a key concept in this study, is dealt with in section 5. The two final sections are: the literature on the balance (6) and the presentation of the theoretical framework (7)

A final remark: this review will approach the literature from an operational perspective. And consequently, I will not try to make a judgement on the overall performance of the development sector. Doing so a number of tricky debates about development aid in general and, more specifically, about the role of development agencies and expatriate development workers will not be dealt with. However, these broader issues will re-surface in various ways at the micro (project teams) and meso-level (the development agency) when the case studies are discussed.

Section 2 Framing learning in development agencies

2.1 The complex marriage of learning and accountability

> A successful NGO must on the one hand appear to the donor as a professional and accountable project management organisation that reliably implements projects on time and within budget; while on the other hand appear to the beneficiary as a partner in a transformative relationship that transcends any single project. (P. Crawford, 2004)

In his analysis of the critical success factors for development agencies, P. Crawford (2004) argues that NGOs have to deal with the dilemma in satisfying both the *accountability demands* of the donor agencies and the *learning demands*, inherent to the implementation of social transformation programmes with beneficiaries. He writes that *accountability* is grounded in what he calls the *business imperative*, which comes from the pressure put on development agencies to prove efficient and effective delivery of services towards their funding agencies. Such pressure asks for detailed planning with a strong focus on achieving results, on pre-determined indicators of success, and on control-oriented monitoring and evaluation (M&E) processes. According to Earle (2003), the growing focus on planning and results is influenced by the New Public Management Agenda, aimed at improved efficiency in the public sector. From the viewpoint of the managers in development agencies and of policy makers, these Result Based Management approaches promise to bring logic, transparency and accountability to the project cycle - in a sector that has been criticised for being inefficient and not result oriented. In its extreme form, this understanding of accountability can be linked to a functionalist view on human development, implying that development follows linear cause and effect relationships, and that it can therefore be neatly planned and predicted.

P. Crawford (2004) discusses a wide range of authors who argue that the growing accountability demands can be in conflict with the *learning demands* of social development programmes. Gasper (1997) lists some of the resulting problems:

> in parallel to increasing talk of local ownership, building local capacity and so on, low– trust management imposes more and more, time–consuming, even humiliating, compulsory procedures upon recipients. (p. 4)

Trust-based and respectful relationships have been identified as an important condition for learning in partnerships. Smillie (1995) also criticises the growing influence of

donors on development agencies and NGOs through the stringent accountability requirements. Development agencies will tend to comply with all the requirements to ensure ongoing financial support. P. Crawford (2004, p. 74) cites Korten (1990) to illustrate how they risk becoming mere 'public service contractors'. They might lose the adaptive capability as agents of social change because of the control-focused managerialist methods (Rees and Rodley, 1995, cited in P. Crawford, 2004).

In addition, it is clear that learning is often grounded in an *ethical imperative*. Roper and Petit (2003) refer, for example, to the influence on the development sector of the work of authors such as Freire (1972) and Borda (2001) on transformative learning as a means of fulfilling human dignity, consciousness and self-determination. This value-driven view on learning within development agencies builds on their raison d'être, which is supporting social transformation. Rather than based on a functionalist view on development, P. Crawford (2004) links these participatory and emancipating approaches with the interpretative paradigm and with an iterative process of enquiry, which acknowledges that social development is often non-linear and unpredictable. According to these views, supporting social development is best served by a learning-oriented management approach, which is flexible and adaptive, and is implemented together with the beneficiaries.

As a conclusion, it is important to note that the growing 'professionalisation' of the development sector over the last decades, with its strong focus on planning, procedures and control, can form a barrier for learning when low-trust managerial practices are introduced uncritically without safeguarding the flexibility and the necessary operating space.

Table 1 summarises the main driving force, the underlying paradigm, the view on cause and effect, the focus, and the basic principles and tools of management approaches that either focus primarily on accountability or on learning. From this overview we conclude, together with P. Crawford (2004), that the different epistemological and ontological assumptions underpinning accountability and learning are difficult to reconcile. This tension can be called the 'NGO dilemma'[7].

---

[7] It can be argued that echo's of the complex relationship between the donors and development agencies can often also be felt in the relationship between the field level and the head office level in such agencies.

	Primary focus of management approach	
	Accountability	**Learning**
Main driving force	business imperative (donors)	ethical imperative (beneficiaries)
Paradigm	functionalist	interpretative
Cause and effect relationship	closed systems view (linear cause & effect)	open systems view (complex, non-linear, unpredictable cause & effect)
Focus	process-centred	actor-centred
Principles & tools	managerialist, professionalising, command & control, detailed planning	searching, participatory, empowering

Table 1: Epistemological and ontological differences between accountability and learning, according to P. Crawford (2004)

On the other hand P. Crawford also argues that NGOs have to accept the dilemma and should try to somehow satisfy both accountability and learning demands.

However, I group the work of a number of scholars to question the polarising effect of Crawford's dualistic framework. Although not mainstream at this stage, emerging views on accountability and learning bring a more layered understanding of both concepts. First, several authors (Blagescu et al., 2005, Keystone, 2005, Guijt, 2008) propose an understanding of accountability that goes beyond the functionalist paradigm, both in terms of the aims (moving from control towards inclusion of learning) and in terms of to whom it is directed (from upward accountability towards inclusion of downward accountability mechanisms). Examples of the shift in thinking about the aims of accountability can be found in a number of influential initiatives, such as the Global Accountability Project from the One World Trust (Blagescu et al., 2005), and the Keystone initiative (Keystone, 2005). They advocate the integration of *learning* in the concept of accountability. Along similar lines, Guijt (2008) argues that the dichotomy between learning and accountability is misleading and that achieving accountability can be considered as one of the learning aims of project management systems. Going beyond the functionalist paradigm also means to look differently at the direction of accountability. A growing group of researchers (Watson, 2006; Guijt, 2008; Blagescu et al., 2005) wants accountability processes to be more downward oriented and endogenous so that project staff becomes also accountable to the beneficiaries and local stakeholders of development programmes. While these emerging views on what constitutes accountability open up the thinking about the concept, they also mean that development agencies are faced with new expectations from back-donors and their

beneficiaries over time. These expectations have a cumulative effect on them as visualised in figure 1. While in the 1970s accountability was understood as being efficient (donor resource utilisation), it has gradually expanded to include being effective in a single project, later on for the whole portfolio of an agency (Crawford, P., 2004). As indicated, for some it now also includes learning. New demands do not replace previous ones [8], but become a new funding or performance condition the development agencies have to comply with.

Accountability by demonstrating...
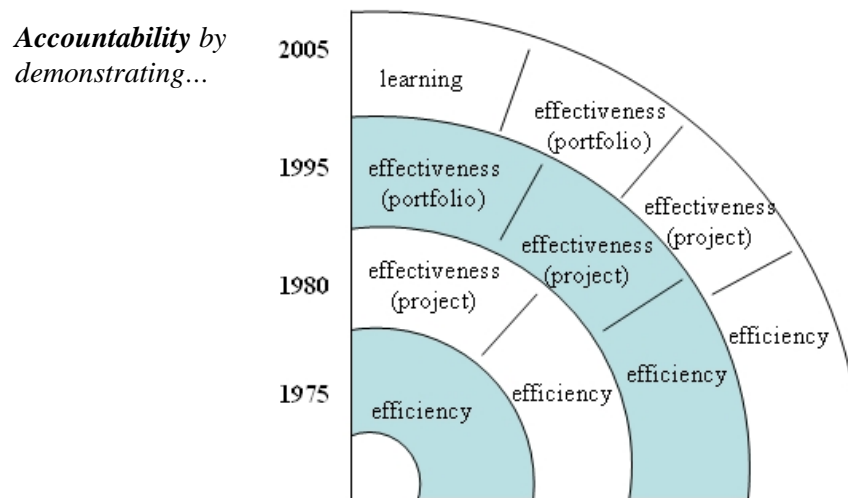
Figure 1: Changes over time in looking at accountability

Secondly, while P. Crawford is putting forward the ethical imperative as the dominant driver for learning in development agencies, a richer and more evolving view of the drivers for learning in the aid sector is developing. This again brings additional relief to the NGO-dilemma as will be discussed in the next section.

2.2 Changing drivers for learning in development agencies

In much of the normative literature on the private sector, workplace learning is "… characterised, conceptualised and promoted as advantageous…for both employers and employees and the State …" (Lee et al., 2004). Motives to promote learning here are:

---

[8] The dates in the graph are indicative because the actual start of the new dimension of accountability tended to vary a lot from actor to actor, depending on their relationship and the specific policies of their funding agencies.

- ▪ the importance for responding adequately to a rapidly changing context in the new 'knowledge economy';
- ▪ the possible improvements in performance and productivity;
- ▪ the opportunities for personal and professional development;
- ▪ the potential contribution towards an equal and socially inclusive society.

Prioritising between those motives is a source of debate, with the workplace seen as a site for quite different purposes (Lee et al., 2004). A number of critiques point at the overall dominance of the discourse of competitiveness and raise ethical questions about the increasing demands that are put on employees in an ever growing search for higher productivity.

The driving forces behind the learning agenda in the aid sector share some of those presented in the private sector. This is quite understandable. A number of practices of organisational learning and knowledge management in the development area have been adapted from the private sector. On the other hand, as Davies (1998) argues, several strands of organisational learning can be traced back to the evolving development practice itself. Pasteur et al. (2006) identify for the last forty years some six sources of such 'homemade' drivers.

1) the influences of concepts on *transformative learning* as a means of fulfilling human dignity, consciousness and self-determination, introduced by people like Freire and Borda (Freire, 1972, Borda, 2001, cited in Roper and Petit, 2003) and in work of NGOs such as Action Aid;

2) the *learning process approach* which emerged as an argument against blueprint approaches to development projects in the 1980s (Davies, 1998, p.7);

3) the extensive writing on the often perceived *lack of organisational learning from evaluations* in the 1990s (Davies, 1998);

4) the rapid spread of *participatory development methodologies* in the 1990s based on work by Chambers (Chambers, 1997, Chambers, 1983), emphasising learning, respecting diverse sources of knowledge, and challenging professional assumptions, attitudes and behaviour;

5) related approaches to *participatory action research*, supporting people to create their own knowledge and learning as a means of individual and wider societal change (Roper and Petit, 2003);

6) the growing *body of* organisational learning *material produced in-house* by NGO staff since the mid-1990s (Davies, 1998), which Pasteur et al. (2006) explain to have been re-enforced by, the values given to embracing change to address the structural and institutional causes of aid (Action Aid, 2007); and the long-standing practices of organisational capacity-building (Roper and Petit, 2003).

In addition to these drivers, McGrath and King (2004) identified a growing interest in knowledge management and knowledge sharing in bilateral and international agencies because of (1) the new knowledge needs that came hand in hand with changes in the aid architecture; (2) an increasing perception in development thinking that knowledge is an important asset for development in the South; and (3) knowledge sharing playing a *manifest function* in empowering Southern partners, but often a *latent function* to actually strengthening the position of Northern actors by defining which knowledge really counts.

In an explicit normative approach, Britton (2005) puts forward four additional reasons why NGOs should be intrinsically motivated to invest and support learning in their organisations:

- it can support NGOs to develop *internal organisational capacity* by systematising learning processes;
- it provides a *potential for strengthening partnerships* through trust building as a consequence of the open learning agenda;
- it can *close the gap* between monitoring & evaluation and planning, through enhanced learning from M&E; and,
- it contributes to *organisational health* by strengthening interpersonal connections and improving communication.

By the end of the 1990s, these partly 'home-grown' traditions of organisational learning became more and more "*eclipsed"* (Pasteur et al., 2006) by private sector concepts and practices (like communities of practice, ICT-based knowledge management systems, and systems thinking). This resulted somehow in a "paradox of origins" (Roper and Petit, 2003), as demonstrated in the analysis of organisational complexity.

Thinking about *complexity* has been an important driver for learning in the private sector. The underlying assumption is that in complex environments the ability to learn is fundamental to adaptiveness in and hence survival for organisations. Similar

concepts emerged in the thinking about public sector reform. Chapman (2004), in his book 'Systems Failure', describes how the public sector is challenged by a growing *complexity and unpredictability* in its internal and wider environment. This has consequences for the way change processes in the public sector can be managed. For example, according to Goldspink (2005) change programmes in education systems (the area of work of VVOB) cannot be managed through traditional top-down approaches:

> Despite many attempts to reform educational systems to make them more effective and efficient, little change has been realised in over a century. Classical bureaucratic, managerial and economics based approaches to reform have proven to be limited in effect. (p.17)

The complexity discourse resonates well with earlier 'homemade' strands of organisational learning in the aid sector, such as the transformative learning approach, the learning process approach, and participatory action research. It has gained significant momentum in the last few years. Influential writing on complexity thinking in the aid sector is found in several areas, of which four are discussed here.

First, in the context of research on capacity development programmes, Morgan (2005) discusses complexity thinking to show how the public sector is even more unpredictable in developing countries. There, the public sector is only partly developed; it is changing rapidly and is highly unstable; it is characterised by weak demand and low public expectations; and finally, informal systems compete over resources and power with the formal ones. These elements in, for example, education ministries tend to increase the unpredictability of outcomes of change programmes. This complexity view on the nature of capacity development programmes has also been picked-up in the publications of the OECD-DAC[9]. Capacity development, according to OECD-DAC, is an "*iterative, non-linear, social development process*" *(OECD-DAC, 2006).*

A second example is the typology of hard and soft projects, developed by L. Crawford & Pollack (2004). The authors argue that the classic distinction between hard (positivist, rationalist, scientific) and soft (interpretive, post-modernist, qualitative) worldviews has a pervasive impact upon *what is done, how it is done and why it is done*. Hard projects can be run through conventional planning- and control-oriented management. Soft projects require a more iterative and learning-oriented management

---

[9] The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) is an international forum where donor governments and multilateral organisations – such as the World Bank and the United Nations – come together to help partner countries reduce poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

approach. The authors identify seven dimensions of projects that can be analysed to identify if projects are rather soft or hard in nature. This framework helps to raise awareness within organisations and project teams of the influence of the hard and soft paradigms on project management practice. Many educational change programmes clearly belong to the soft category. They are characterised by (1) limited goal clarity; and (2) limited tangibility; (3) their lack of quantifiable indicators; (4) being substantially influenced by external forces; (5) often having many different alternative solutions; (6) often requiring high stakeholder participation, and (7) generally having high expectations from the stakeholders towards possible solutions in terms of relationships, culture and meaning.

Thirdly, the CYNEFIN framework (Snowden and Boone, 2007) has been developed originally outside the development sector, but has become very influential in recent thinking about complexity in the aid sector[10]. The authors work with a typology of complexity problems that differs from the dichotomy of hard and soft projects. Depending on whether a problem/situation can be considered *simple*, *complicated*, *complex* or *chaotic*, different styles of 'sense-making' have to be developed. Addressing complex problems, the authors argue, can only be done with an iterative process of probing/acting, sensing, and responding.

Fourth, Reeler (2007), using his experiences with development NGOs, classifies change processes according to their *emergent*, *transformative* or *projectable* character. Most of the projects of NGOs, he writes, involve change processes in the first and second category, with projectable change present in only a small minority of projects.

Learning is thus perceived as bringing a number of benefits for the agencies and its beneficiaries: it increases performance, helps to deal with complex development problems, introduces changes in the behaviour by NGO-staff, and improves relationships between NGOs and their local partners. However, Pasteur et al. (2006) warn that these perceived benefits suppose that at some level in a project/programme/organisation a number of actors are working from a shared set of values and purpose around which they learn and develop their knowledge.

> [However,] there may not be agreement on the very purpose of learning and knowledge in development. (Pasteur et al., 2006, p8)

---

[10] Snowden has been keynote speaker in several conferences in the aid sector in 2009-2010, and the CYNEFIN framework has been discussed in journal articles, reports and blogs in the sector.

2.3 A first evaluation of the literature

The review of the literature has highlighted so far several important aspects of the research problem:

- Development agencies are facing challenges in developing effective learning strategies at the project and agency level.
- Back-donors and management in development agencies have pushed forward the accountability agenda.
- This risks breeding management practices that have a strong focus on planning, control and low-trust interaction between the field and other levels.
- The effect of these practices must be questioned with regard to their effectiveness for the working environment of development agencies such as VVOB.
- The working environments of these organisations are characterised by unpredictability and complexity, which might be better served by learning-oriented management approaches.
- The development sector shows a learning history that goes far beyond external evaluation as a method to support learning practices.

The literature shows, however, some major gaps. Development agencies are regularly approached as rather homogeneous entities, while in reality they are characterised more often than not by very weak links between the individual projects and the central structures. The assumption of homogeneity limits the insights in the learning practice and hinders the detection of opportunities to support learning. This is why the coming sections will deliberately discuss separately field level learning (project and programme teams) and learning that happens at the agency level. Attention will also be given to the difficulties in transferring knowledge and learning from the project level to the agency level and back.

Section 3 Learning in teams: learning in and around the workplace

The exploration of the literature will focus here on concepts and insights with regard to the individual and the team perspective in workplace learning and to the question of support for learning in both situations. Attention will also be given to the specific

contextual features of the learning environment and learning practice in development projects

It will become clear that my thesis research draws extensively from the conceptual frameworks of Eraut (2000, 2005, 2007) both for defining key concepts of workplace learning, as for identifying the typologies that frame the practice of learning in the workplace. Overall, Eraut's findings are based on an extensive theoretical body of knowledge and are backed by findings of long-term longitudinal research. The relevance of Eraut's work will be discussed in the course of the discussion that follows.

3.1 Basic concepts and definitions

Lee et al. (2004), reviewing the literature on learning at work, notice that team learning has recently attracted firm attention of scholars, policy makers, employers and employees. Concepts such as the *learning organisation*, *lifelong learning*, and the *learning society* originated in this development.

3.1.1 Learning, capability, performance, and workplace learning

Many meanings of *learning* exist. There is, currently, no consensus. Preference here goes to Eraut's definition (2000): it is "... the process whereby knowledge is acquired. It also occurs when existing knowledge is used in a new context or in a new combination." (p.2)

This definition becomes more operational after linking it to *capability*. From an individual perspective, capability (and personal knowledge) is defined as "…what individual persons bring to situations that enables them to think, interact and perform." *Learning* then becomes "…operationally defined in terms of a change in their capability, based on evidence of their performances over an appropriate period of time" (Eraut and Hirsh, 2007, p.6 and 41).

Eraut's empirical research (2007) leads him to write that *performance*, the central purpose of learning, involves four distinct but interconnected elements by either individuals or groups, which are:

- assessing clients and situations;
- deciding what action to take;
- pursuing an agreed course of action;
- meta-cognitive monitoring.

People with a higher level of expertise differ from beginners mainly by their situation assessment abilities, rather than their general reasoning skills.

Definitions of *workplace learning* tend to vary significantly: "Workplace learning has itself acquired a broad variety of different meanings. There is no singular definition or one unified approach to what 'workplace learning' is, what it should be, or who it is/should be for" (Lee et al., 2004).

In this thesis the notion will refer to learning that happens in and around the workplace. It is affected by factors at the individual, the team and the organisational level (Eraut and Hirsh, 2007). 'Learning in/around the workplace' is a field of study where *structure-agency interactions*, interactions between the learning environment (structure) and the learners are considered to be very important. Therefore, it is useful to look both at learning from the *individual perspective* (how do people learn, what determines how they use their learning?) and from the *social perspective* (how does the social environment affect the learning?). Historically, the two levels have been the subject of separate research strands[11]. Lee et al. (2004, p.31), however, see a need for an integrated research agenda, because: "...decisions to participate (or not) within learning environments are not simply grounded within 'free will' but are rather constrained or enabled through the positions that individuals occupy across multiple contexts and sets of social relations." I tend to follow Eraut (2000) where he contends that the individual and social perspectives are complementary and illuminate a different dimension of workplace learning.

3.1.2 Formal and informal learning

'Formal' and 'informal learning' are now used extensively in writing about workplace learning. However, authors such as Hager (2004) argue that research about workplace learning has long been dominated by a standard paradigm that has its origins in the field of formal education. The central role of informal learning processes is not yet widely accepted.

After reviewing the broad literature on formal and informal learning, Colley et al. (2002) come to the conclusion that the content of the concepts varies widely. I will work mostly with the vision of Eraut.

---

[11] This is different from the research strands in formal education, which are often put against each other rather on the basis of how they model instructor-learner interactions, from instructivist to more constructivist theories.

1) *Formal learning,* according to Eraut (2002), is a learning situation with any of the following characteristics:

- a prescribed learning framework;
- an organised learning event or package;
- the presence of a designated teacher or trainer;
- the award of a qualification or credit;
- the external specification of outcomes.

2) More and more research stresses the central importance of *informal learning*, both for the learning of early-career professionals as for more experienced people (Eraut and Hirsh, 2007). But, paradoxically enough, most policies on workplace learning still continue to give prominence to formal learning strategies (Coffield, 2000).

Most authors agree that there is no accepted definition of informal learning. According to Colley et al., (2002) it tends "… to be defined in relation to what is not-formal" (cited in Lee et al. 2004, p.15). But, as the same authors say, the status of learning in situations that meet some but not all of Eraut's criteria for formal learning is absolutely not clear, as almost all learning situations have some elements of informal and formal learning. And they conclude that the boundaries or relationships between informal, non-formal and formal learning can only be understood within particular contexts. While it is difficult to clearly define informal learning beyond it being a rest-category of formal learning, I follow Eraut (2007) in his analysis that important dimensions of informal learning relate to the extent to which the learning is *implicit, unintended, opportunistic, unstructured,* and there is *absence of a teacher/trainer*.

Eraut also makes an important distinction[12] between deliberate forms of informal learning and implicit informal learning[13]. It will be a crucial component of the theoretical framework that will be used in the analysis of empirical data (chapters 5 to 7).

In the following paragraph the review of the literature will focus on workplace learning from an individual perspective.

---

[12] Eraut (2000) defines a third category, *reactive learning*, between implicit learning and deliberative learning 'to describe situations where the learning is explicit but takes place almost spontaneously in response to recent, current or imminent situations without any time being specifically set aside for it. This reactive learning is near-spontaneous and unplanned,' (p. 115) This type of learning becomes deliberative when time is taken to reflect about the experience. For reasons of simplification, in the conceptual framework of my thesis this type is not explicitly considered.
[13] In the context of the thesis, this type of learning will be referred to later on as *learning which is the by-product of specific work activities*.

Deliberate forms of informal learning

Informal learning can happen in a way that is *deliberate*, intentional and planned (Eraut, 2000). Kolb's (1984) 'experiential learning cycle' is a theory that highlights this form of learning. It has been very influential in adult education, management education, organisational learning literature, and in various other applied fields. The central argument is that formal learning constitutes only a small part of learning. Experiential learning is, Kolb (1984) writes, ".... the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience." (p. 41) Changes of behaviour are, according to Kolb (1984), more likely to occur where learners go through a variety of learning experiences, in various combinations of action, reflection, conceptualisation and testing.

A number of authors (Eraut, 2000, Holman et al., 1997) have problematised certain aspects of Kolb's learning theory. Eraut (2000) points out that the social nature of a situation complicates the individual presentation of learning from experience, as Kolb (1984) is doing:

> … as the learning will actually be drawing from a much wider range of cognitive sources. (p. 132)

The same author also argues that Kolb's learning theory excludes a significant portion of informal workplace learning as it only weakly describes implicit learning.

Implicit learning as a by-product of specific work activities

This type of learning happens without the intention to learn. On the basis of two major longitudinal studies, Eraut (2002, 2005, 2007) found that the core of learning of professionals happens during a number of specific work activities, with learning as an important by-product[14]: "This was mostly triggered by consultation and collaboration within the working group, consultation outside the working group and the challenge of work itself." (Eraut, 2007, p.25)

---

[14] In addition to processes with learning as the principal object, and work processes with learning as a by-product, Eraut (2007) also identifies a third group of short learning episodes which located within work or learning processes. They typically involve activities such as asking questions, observing or reflecting, and could occur many times in a single process. This third group is not explicitly considered and analysed in the thesis because it requires extensive periods of observation.

Eraut (2007) discusses nine work processes[15] that account for a very high proportion of implicit learning, but are rarely recognised as significant by those involved:

1. Participation in group processes
2. Working alongside others
3. Consultation inside the working group
4. Consultation outside the working group
5. Tackling challenging tasks and roles
6. Problem solving
7. Trying things out
8. Consolidating, extending and refining skills
9. Working with clients

Another relevant notion, both for deliberate and implicit learning, is *tacit knowledge*. Contrary to explicit knowledge, this type of knowledge is highly personal and cannot easily be formalised and codified. Polanyi (1967) originally defined it as "… that which we know but cannot tell", and since then it is steadily growing into one of the central concepts in research on workplace learning, adult learning and management studies. In the context of a growing recognition of the value of informal learning '"...tacit knowledge is not a sideshow, but central to everyday action" (Eraut, 2000, p. 118). It is central to informal learning and strongly affects the four features of *performance*, I discussed earlier, most often in ways that we are not aware of. It also explains learning during the nine working processes, described above. Eraut (2000) sees several reasons for making tacit knowledge explicit, but he is critical about those who claim that such manoeuvre is easy to perform.

The nine work processes will be used in the theoretical framework of the thesis because of the focus and hierarchy they bring in exploring implicit learning in work situations.

3.1.3 Team learning

> Team learning is "… where the rubber meets the road; unless teams can learn, the organisation cannot learn". (Senge, 1990, cited in Eraut, 2007, p. 57)

Teams

For a long time teams have been central in the management of development projects and programmes in the context of bilateral cooperation. The so called parallel project management units or parallel PMU's (OECD-DAC, 2006) are a well known example. Parallel PMU's have, however, fallen in disgrace over time, because they are

---

[15] Eraut presents them as 8 work processes with consultation inside the working group combined with consultation outside the working group. Since these can be quite different processes in project work they are mentioned here separately.

associated with donor-driven approaches which do not make sufficient use of local structures and processes. The Paris Declaration (OECD-DAC, 2005) and the Accra Agenda for Action (OECD-DAC, 2008b), which are joint declarations of OECD bilateral donors and other international agencies outlining principles for a more effective delivery of aid, have been important drivers of that trend. These developments may seem to make teams and various implementation units as obsolete and associated with the old way of doing things. However, several authors (Crawford, 2004, OECD-DAC, 2008a) indicate that up to now the majority of aid is still delivered through projects and programmes[16]. And in the new aid-architecture change processes are still facilitated and monitored by teams, often guided by external consultants. In the NGO-sector too there is a growing tendency to avoid too much hands-on work from NGO-staff in project management teams[17]. Many NGOs withdrew from explicit operational roles in the South and took on a more distant role as funder, lobbyist or source of ad-hoc technical support. (Riddell, 2007, Bebbington et al., 2008) However, here too, (parts of) programmes are often implemented with temporary teams and in several cases NGO field staff work together with local partners. Finally, the literature points at a growing role of team work within all types of organisations, as will be discussed later. Therefore, the study of the work of teams in development projects clearly remains relevant.

The term '*team*' is a rather encompassing construct, covering groups of members that interact minimally and work mainly individually up to highly structured and independent teams (Salas et al., 1992, cited in Eraut et al., 2007). One major element of teams that is often mentioned is the fact that they are supposed to share a common goal or mission: "A shared sense of purpose makes a group or team as opposed to a collection of individuals." (Kolb, 1984). Eraut et al. (2007) add another key feature by stating that the "… combined capability of a team should be greater than that of all its members acting only individually". (p. 42)

Team learning

Teams and their learning have a long tradition as a topic of study, but this area of research is currently increasing fast (Drucker, 2003, Savelsbergh et al., 2009, Decuyper et al., 2010). A comprehensive literature search by Decuyper et al. (2010) for the period 1960-2007 illustrates the explosion of scientific work on *team learning* in

---

[16] The monitoring report of the Paris Declaration of 2008 (OECD, 2008) on the progress of indicator 6 (the number of parallel implementation units) states that the figure is going down only very slowly.
[17] In September 2010, civil society actors agreed on the Istanbul Principles of Aid Effectiveness. They do not contain principles or indicators around this topic.

the last decade[18]. The growing interest in teams is often linked with the emerging demands for innovation and flexibility in the context of increased competition between organisations in a globalising world economy (Ancona and Bresman, 2007). This forces all types of organisations to design flexible organisational structures and decentralise decision making and leadership, with a central role for teams in various shapes and forms.

Decuyper et al. (2010) arrive at thirty different definitions/descriptions of team learning. Definitions range from Edmondson's (1999) " … an ongoing process of reflection and action characterized by asking questions, seeking feedback, experimenting, reflecting on results, and discussing errors or unexpected outcomes of actions" (p. 353) to the long definition (73 words) of the authors themselves. It provides an illustration of the complexity of the processes involved in team learning, and the challenges in researching them in a comprehensive way. Part of the complexity can be explained by the fact that there are several possible sources of agency (or agents) in a team: individuals, sub-groups, the leader, groups as a whole, and that learning will happen differently amongst them (Eraut, 2007).

Team effectiveness

Team learning is most often not seen as an end in itself, but rather as a means towards higher team *effectiveness*. A popular normative perspective was developed by Richard Hackman in his book *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances (2002)* -- one of the standard works on team performance in general. This framework is meant to measure *team effectiveness*, which is based on three key criteria:

- the products/services of the team are acceptable to the clients;
- the team grows in capability;
- the individual team members learn.

This approach is based on research of well-structured teams, that exist over a relatively long period of time and that have clear boundaries (classic orchestras, aircrews, ..). But, it has also been applied in a wide range of settings and has gained credibility and recognition because of that.

---

[18] References to team learning in academic journals increased, for example, from 59 in the period 1980-1989 to 214 in the period 2000-2007.

In the context of development projects, teams would be expected to be judged on their performance/effectiveness in achieving the project objectives[19]. This is also reflected in the best known standard for quality evaluation that has been promoted by the OECD-DAC committee. It involves looking at the criteria of *effectiveness* and *impact*, in addition to more process-oriented criteria such as efficiency, sustainability and relevance. More specific frameworks to assess team effectiveness in the context of development projects could not be identified.

3.2 Team learning quality and its contextual variables

The quality and effectiveness of team learning processes is affected by a wide range of variables [20] at the individual, team and organisational/agency level. The next paragraphs discuss the literature on variables/factors affecting team learning as they operate at the individual and team level, and with regard to their interaction with the organisational level. In addition, the review will distinguish as much as possible between literature that originates from outside and inside the development sector.

3.2.1 The individual level

On the basis of two major research rounds Eraut (2007) developed a two-triangle model (see Figure 2) for workplace learning. The first triangle (learning factors) displays three categories of factors that determine the quality and depth of the learning process. There is the overwhelming importance of *confidence* as a factor determining learning in professional settings, which interacts with the *challenge of work* and the *support* one experiences at work: "… we noted that confidence arose from successfully meeting challenges in one's work, while the confidence to take on such challenges depended on the extent to which learners felt supported in that endeavour by colleagues, either while doing the job or as back up when working independently." (Eraut, 2007, p. 417).

The second triangle puts forward important *contextual factors* that support or hinder the three learning factors of the first triangle. These factors relate to the way work is

---

[19] However, a returning critique in evaluations and studies is that development teams are often assessed on their disbursement rate, because this is a major concern of managers in the head office, rather than their effectiveness. Examples are provided in a recent study of SIDA practices by ANDERSSON, K. (2009) Motivational Dilemmas in Collaborative Learning Activities: the Case of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). *Public Administration and Development,* 29, 5, p. 341-351.

[20] When reference is made to variables in the following sections, I use the term in the sense of 'independent variables' of which studies have shown that they provide explanations in causal terms of the 'dependent variables', in this case 'work place learning' and 'team learning'. (For a definition of dependent and independent variables see 'Online dictionary of the social sciences'). To some extent the distinction between independent and dependent variables covers only part of the reality because it has been proven that learning processes work in two ways or in a cyclic sense. In other words, improvements in workplace learning can also lead to improvements of some of the 'independent' variables, such as confidence.

allocated and structured, the quality of the encounters and relationships with people at work, and the individual participation of employees and the expectations of their performance and progress. The various learning and context factors interact with each other in multiple ways. For example, the allocation and the structuring of work play a central role in professionals being over- or under-challenged, which in turn has an effect on their confidence. It also affects the individual or collaborative nature of work activities and the opportunities for meeting, observing and working alongside others. These are crucial for forming relationships of mutual trust, which also forms the basis for fruitful exchanges of tacit knowledge (through informal learning). Finally, lack of feedback of a normative kind might result in employees not having a clear sense of their performance and their progress, which then tends to weaken the motivation and commitment of employees towards their organisation.
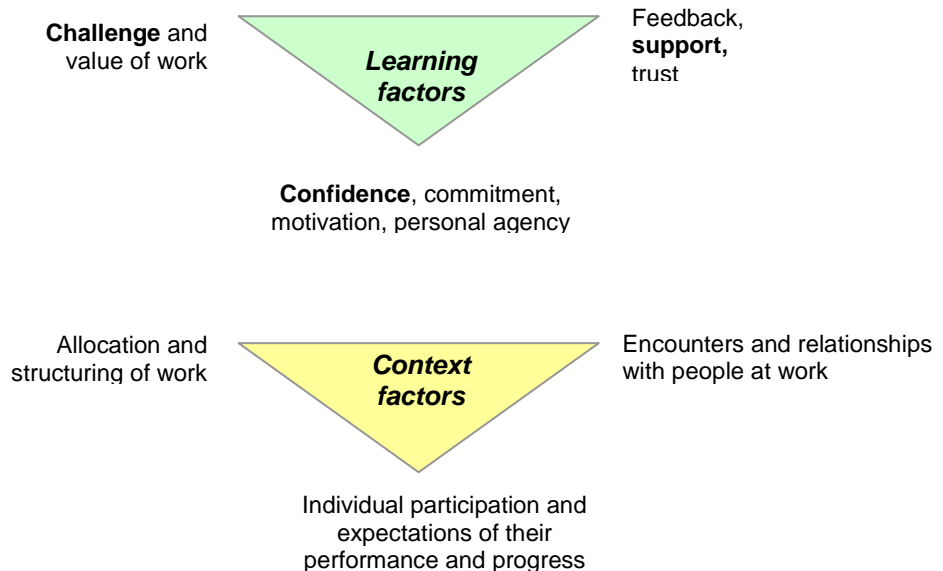
Figure 2: Factors affecting learning at work (early- and mid-career professionals) (Eraut, 2007)

The overall relevance of the findings of Eraut and others for this literature review is multiple. They provide an insight into the underlying processes and mechanisms in workplace learning. In addition, the framework listing key learning activities and context factors in and around the workplace (Eraut, 2007), will be used to explore the learning practice of project teams in the context of VVOB, and will help us to identify those which are more critical than others in this context.

3.2.2 The team level

The factors affecting learning at the individual level are of course also central to the learning at the team level. However, effective team learning involves more than the learning of individual team members. The best known example is that of a soccer team, where eleven top players do not necessarily make a good squad. Many dimensions of team learning have been the subject of in-depth research.

Outside the development sector

Decuyper et al. (2010), in their study on team learning literature since 1960, have made an extensive compilation of the variables research has identified as playing a role. They arrive at a staggering total of 486 different factors, some of them with partly overlapping underlying concepts. Out of that list the authors identify 10 core-variables on the basis of their proven impact on team learning and the number of times they appear in research.

This is a useful attempt to put the literature on team learning on the balance. It is, however, confronted with four important challenges. Firstly, the selection of the 10 core-variables is based mainly on what research since 1960 has been able to demonstrate empirically as having an effect on team learning. It excludes many of the unknown interaction effects between variables and those factors that are difficult to measure or quantify. Secondly, some of the variables on the list (such as leadership, team structure and team development) each cover a very wide range of concepts and sub-factors that cannot easily be translated into one coherent and measurable variable. Thirdly, from the wide range of variables that are related to the individual level, the authors only retain 'systems thinking'. There is no clear justification why only this one is considered. Finally, the authors suggest a complex conceptual framework for future research, but it seems a daunting task to translate all the elements and dimensions into an operational and feasible research design.

To conclude, a comprehensive theoretical framework that is supported by empirical evidence remains still absent.

Eraut et al. (2007) present an alternative vision that is closer to the scope and the perspective of my research enterprise. Building on insights on workplace learning at the individual level they identify five important contextual variables: (1) Supportive relationships, based on mutual respect between the team members, are crucial for

team learning. For these relationships to grow and be maintained over time there is a need for (2) time and opportunities for frequent informal discussions about work amongst colleagues. In addition, (3) formal group processes are needed, like various types of team meetings and project reviews that include (4) deliberations about skills and learning to provide feedback and support to team members. Finally, (5) when dividing work activities amongst team members, attention must be paid to learning opportunities. There is sufficient empirical evidence in Eraut's research to ground this list of five variables. But, as already has been mentioned, his original studies on workplace learning are focused more on the individual perspective than on the team perspective. It therefore can not be considered as a fully comprehensive analysis of factors affecting team learning.

Development specific

The number of comprehensive studies on critical factors in team learning in the development sector is limited. What follows is a list of partial insights.

Perceived lack of time - On the basis of her study of Dutch NGOs, Smit (2007) identified a general perception by NGO staff of a lack of time for reflection and learning. This was also confirmed in research by Ramalingam (2005) and Britton (2005). This recurrent finding might point at a structural problem with the over-ambitious programming of many development programmes, and the resulting lack of time for some core processes such as learning. In addition, Ramalingam (2005) argues that learning tends to be seen as a luxury, an add-on to the normal activities.
 He wonders whether

> this is seen to be something of a red herring in a number of organisations. It is not the lack of time, but rather, the underlying principles by which time is prioritised. (Ramalingam, 2005)

Related to this is the issue around the short project timelines of many development programmes. This may not allow for effective iterative learning cycles, required for in-depth learning processes (Crawford, P., 2004). Both elements stress the importance of the variable 'allocation and division of work' in Eraut's list of variables.

'Island culture' at the head office - Cross-project learning is seriously hampered by what Smit (2007) describes as the island culture in the head office, with staff only focusing on their own projects and with little incentives for cross-project learning. This finding relates to the 'allocation and structuring of work' in Eraut (2007).

Staff turnover - A particular problem is the high staff turnover in the development sector. This, according to Musyoki (2003), goes hand in hand with the finding that new management tends to erase history and to create a new knowledge base. This is in conflict with the assumption in learning that there is an interest in keeping institutional memory as a basis upon which learning can occur. The staff turnover affects variables such as 'team development', and 'supportive and trustful relationships'.

Intercultural differences in how and why of learning - Developments necessarily involve " ... situations where people are expected to learn across cultures and contexts as a result of exchanges between international and local, urban and rural." (Prince and Wrigley, 2007, p.11) My own professional experiences in Zimbabwe have taught me that information is shared and evaluated differently across cultures. When observing evaluative exercises with local stakeholders, I regularly recorded disappointment with expat staff about what they perceived as the low level of critical feedback. A similar experience has been described by Sawadogo (1995). He writes: "I have yet to meet anyone, including myself, who has had a bad training experience in Africa." (p. 287) But of course, he says, below the surface of those positive or neutral responses lies a variety of opinions and critiques about the activities, their content, relevancy, etc. It can be argued that this important issue is only indirectly addressed by Eraut and Decuyper et al. through variables such as 'supportive and trustful relationships',

Over- and underboundedness - 'Overboundedness', a typical challenge for geographically isolated teams, is a recurrent risk (Hackman, 2002) as it can lead to forms of group think, losing responsiveness to the broader environment. The opposite syndrome is 'underboundedness'. Haas (2006), in a study on a large international aid agency where team members were working on several projects, noticed the lack of social cohesion, so that the added value of real team work was lost. This finding relates to the variable 'structuring of work'.

Ineffective knowledge gathering - The extensive quantitative and qualitative research of 96 projects, described above (Haas, 2006), explored the relation between knowledge gathering strategies of project team members and the quality of the projects. This had to be seen in the perspective of a work environment which was characterised by overload, ambiguity, and politics. Knowledge gathering in this environment was best served and most relevant if done by project teams that had sufficient decision making autonomy, significant buffering capability through working overtime (slack time), and had members with substantial work experience. These processes relate to 'allocation

and structuring of work', 'personal agency', and 'level of challenge' (being over-challenged because of lack of professional experience).

Learning in a partnership with a public sector actor - Chapman (2004) has identified a number of obstacles towards learning that can be expected in public sector programmes in general, such as the:

- aversion to failure: administrations prefer playing safe to avoid political embarrassment;
- pressure for uniformity;
- assumption that 'command and control' is the correct way to exercise power;
- lack of evaluation of previous policies;
- lack of time to do anything else but to cope with events;
- dominance of turf wars between departments and individuals.

In addition, Muriithi & L. Crawford (2003), Jackson (2003) and Morgan (2005) describe experiences with human resources management in the public sector in developing countries and notice the influence of a culture of risk avoidance, strong hierarchical relationships, the influence of personal and community networks on decision making, and the fact that institutions are usually only partly developed and are highly unstable. Variables that are likely to be affected by this are 'supportive and trustful relationships', 'personal agency' and 'commitment' (of ministry staff).

3.3 Support policies for workplace learning

Organisations tend to support workplace learning and team learning. The review of the literature discusses the strengths and weaknesses of these policies. The focus is first on the literature of the private sector in Europe and the social welfare area in Belgium, followed by a number of studies from the development sector.

3.3.1 Outside development sector

Eraut & Hirsh (2007) have identified diverging trends in how large companies facilitate or support workplace learning:

- '*Atomised learning approaches*' that focus on improved deliverance of formal training. Here the emphasis is on explicit knowledge and ways of expanding and transferring it. A common strategy here is to look for newer, more flexible, modes of 'delivery': multi-media packages, e-learning, computer supported access to and retrieval of research-based evidence.

- '*Holistic approaches*' that concentrate on implicit learning: "… they are seeking a more integrated learning design, more experiential opportunities supported by coaching and/or mentoring and more opportunities to learn through social relationships."
- '*Blended learning strategies*', combining 'just-in-time' formal training with on-the-job learning and coaching.

The authors find strong arguments to opt for the second and third strategies. These are, however, relatively expensive to deliver and there is less experience in how to implement them.

Similar ideas can also be found in Sterck's work (2004) on the social welfare sector (which is in various ways not dissimilar to the development sector). He distinguishes two ideal-types of learning policies. The first one is a *traditional planning-oriented learning policy*, the second is more *development-oriented*. I present both ideal-types on the basis of the metaphor of a 'human body' (Lipson and Hunt, 2007), a perspective that also will be used in the analysis of my empirical data. It distinguishes between the 'head' or learning agenda (why is learning supported?), the 'spine' (underlying values and principles), the 'arms' (the concepts, methods and tools used), and the 'legs' (the translation into the operations: orientation towards other policy domains, role division and others).

A traditional planning-oriented policy is found in the majority of the social welfare organisations; it is characterised by an orientation on formal learning activities ('arms'); it takes a blueprint approach as guiding paradigm ('spine'), and is organisation-oriented ('head'). It is found to be limited in its capacity to improve the learning pattern of organisations. The second has a broad perspective on team learning in organisations (with firm emphasis on informal learning); it has a consultation approach as paradigm and a tendency to negotiate and harmonise the various interests on learning within the organisation. Table 2 is a box-wise presentation of the two ideal-types

	Planning-oriented strategic CPD-policy	Development-oriented strategic learning policy
Head *(Learning agenda: why is it important to support learning at project level?)*	▪ Mainly oriented on the interests of the organisation	▪ Oriented towards alignment of interests of the organisation and the employees (consensus or compromise)
Spine *(Key values and principles of learning policy and practice)*	▪ Blue print approach	▪ Consultative approach

Arms *(Concepts, methods, tools)*	▪ Supply of formal learning activities	▪ Broad perspective on learning: attention for formal and informal learning
Legs	▪ Alignment of the learning policy to other policy domains ▪ Learning coordinator as expert and key-person	▪ Learning policy in continuous interaction with other policy domains ▪ Shared responsibility for learning policy between various actors; learning coordinator as facilitator and stimulator

Table 2: Two ideal-types of learning policy in social welfare organisations in Belgium (Sterck, 2004)

3.3.2 Development specific

Within the development sector, writing about policies in support of workplace team learning is rather limited. At the individual level studies focus mostly on human resources development. At the team level, the main source of information relates to the relevance of external evaluation, and internal monitoring and evaluation.

Weak human resources development practices

A first study comes from the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP). Houghton et al. (2003) interviewed field level staff on its learning experiences. It found that the respondents had a preference for informal learning approaches, such as mentoring, peer-to-peer exchanges and networking. Formal training or learning by reading guidelines or books was perceived as less effective. Research by Ramalingam (2005) discovered that most funds were directed towards the promotion of learning as an individual activity and less towards supporting learning as a group-process. A study, based on the observation of 14 Dutch NGOs (Smit, 2007), found that only a limited number had explicit learning policies and clear concepts about learning in the organisation. Several staff of the head office assumed that learning mainly happens by doing things and demonstrated 'activist' learning styles, with weaker practices related to reflection and conceptualisation**.**

Mixed experiences with external evaluation

> If evaluation is about learning, then how come evaluation methods are based on management, planning or economic theories and not learning theories? (Williams, 2008)

In a keynote address discussing his latest book, Patton (2008) lists several developments in the field of evaluation since the end of the 1990s. There is, he contends, a significant expansion of the evaluation profession over the last decades[21] and a proliferation of evaluation models. He also sees a growing societal influence and

---

[21] According to Patton the number of evaluation societies has grown from 3 to 60 since the 1970's.

a politicization of the sector, a development also mentioned in the first section of this chapter 2.

At the same time, insights into the limits of evaluation processes have emerged for some time now. First, the limited use of and learning from evaluation results have come to be viewed as the Achilles heel of the aid sector (Horton et al., 2003). Patton (1997) himself has spoken of a symbolic and indirect use of evaluation results. In response certain evaluation approaches, such as 'Developmental Evaluation', 'Utilisation Focused Evaluation' and 'Realistic Evaluation' try to find a better balance between accountability and learning. However, external evaluation is still limited in the role it can play in supporting learning in projects. Pryor (2005) lists a number of problems: evaluation processes are complex and rely on experts; they are expensive as those who can be trusted and carry sufficient authority are pricey; and the evaluation is transitory as it can take place only occasionally. The author adds that the managerialism dimension, introduced by the increased focus on accountability through evaluation, also creates problems of control. It dilutes the message (from senior to lower levels and back up) and it transfers trust from the practitioner to the manager. Guijt (2008) adds that evaluations often do not feed into decision-making and do not force organisations to engage in regular reflective processes.

Poor track record of internal M&E
In her thesis on monitoring Guijt (2008) argues, based on a number of important trends in development thinking, that better learning is widely seen as the critical factor for development programmes. She notes that "… all eyes are turning to M&E approaches to fulfil these needs". (p.27) The author uses the term 'mainstream M&E' to describe the most common way of organising and implementing internal M&E. Mainstream monitoring, it is argued, does not contribute to learning because it is often limited to data-collection, tends to be missing sense-making and does not seize unpredicted outcomes.

If and how internal M&E can contribute significantly to learning is a source of debate (Crawford, P., 2004; Watson, 2006; Guijt, 2008). There is a paradox here: much of the normative M&E-literature stresses the importance of learning and reflection, while in reality many studies point at the failure of mainstream M&E approaches in these areas (Biggs and Smith, 2003, Guijt, 2008, Smit, 2007). And while the evaluation field has developed fast and has been theorised extensively over the last few decades, for

monitoring there is "… no such diversity or depth or theoretical articulation, not such an elaborate body of literature." (Guijt, 2008, p.28)

Mebrahtu (2003, p340) identified diverging views on the role of M&E among staff at different levels of an international NGO. While the head office thought it was crucial for accountability and learning, field staff saw it mainly as an administrative requirement. Similar findings came out of research by Guijt (2008). Roper and Petit (2003) linked the conventional M&E practices with power asymmetries and control over resource flows, which was also echoed in other research (IDRC, 2001, Crawford, 2004).

There is an extensive school of researchers and practitioners linking the problems with learning from internal M&E processes with the logical framework (logframe), the standard planning, and M&E approach in the aid sector for many years. An extensive literature review (Huyse, 2006), based on work of Gasper (2001), Earle (2003), Biggs et al (2003), den Heyer (2003), Ortiz (2005), Earl (2001), Crawford (2004), Davies (2005), Bakewell and Garbutt (2005), and Watson (2006), clustered the critical remarks into a number of areas. Here the focus is on the documented problems with learning via logframe-based M&E approaches. First, the lack of learning, as several studies indicate, results from the very nature of these approaches. The underlying logic in the logframe is seen by many scholars as a typical example of the functionalist paradigm. This perspective has a strong focus on accountability and control, and tends to be in conflict with the interpretive paradigm that is required for learning and reflection. At the same time, several authors argue that it tends to push out or ignore context and values. Thirdly, a number of publications mentioned above have pointed at the perceived rigidity of the logframe, which has been labelled the 'lockframe'. The fact that changes in higher level objectives of the framework often need approval by many layers in the aid-bureaucracy is perceived by the field as hindering the flexibility which is required for learning in the project cycle.

At the agency level, the dominant logic in the design of mainstream M&E systems can be described with the *biological metaphor* (Crawford, P., 2004) in which information is captured by the sensing parts of the 'body' (the projects) and transmitted to the 'brain' (head office) where decisions are made and instructions are issued. This paradigm supposes a unidirectional flow of information, from 'reporting agents' to 'report recipients' with an emphasis on decision-making concentrated in the seat of power (Crawford, P., 2004). This low trust- and control-oriented approach for internal M&E creates some similar side effects as with certain types of external evaluation (for

example, it transfers trust from the practitioner to the manager), and typically leads to superficial reporting.

For monitoring to contribute to learning, Guijt (2008) defines a range of additional principles, processes, and activities that have to be incorporated, including improved sense-making and critical reflection. The central role of sense-making in monitoring is also a clear outcome of research at MIT (Sutcliffe and Weber, 2003) in the private sector. It indicates that organisations that focus on sense-making on the basis of rough information are often more successful than those that invest most time in collecting data and trying to measure every detail of the impact of their actions. For Guijt (2008), making monitoring more relevant also involves taking informal communication processes seriously as alternative ways of monitoring, because "… a more relational perspective on monitoring allows space for cultural appropriate ways to keep an effective 'finger on the pulse' and to communicate problems, where deliberate and formalised monitoring constitutes an alien practice." (p. 280).

Section 4 Organisational learning

This section will outline some of the central concepts underlying organisational learning and knowledge management (4.1). It also looks at the contextual variables that impact on these activities (4.2). And, finally, some support policies will be discussed (4.2)

4.1 Basic concepts

Organisational learning in the sense of *learning by organisations* has long been a neglected field of study. A major step forward came with the work of Argyris & Schön (1974), who provided insights into how culture and structure hinder organisations to develop deeper forms of learning. The authors distinguished *single* and *double loop learning*. The former happens when organisations are dealing with what Argyris and Schön describe as 'first-order problems' and solutions are symptom-oriented without questioning or changing the procedures and underlying principles. On the other hand, double loop learning involves more fundamental reflection and questioning about existing frames of reference and the strategy of the organisation.

Since then at least three important concepts on organisational learning have come to the foreground. Senge (1990) introduced the notion of *learning organisation*, based on the argument that such organisational status could be developed with the help of five

disciplines (see 4.2.1). This notion is thus of a more applied and normative nature, putting emphasis on how organisations should learn. Two more concepts arise from Easterby-Smith's & Lyles' (2003) distinction between *knowledge management* and *organisational learning*. It is based on the dichotomous terms 'content-process' and 'theory-practice'. Knowledge management is seen as an applied field and has traditionally been associated with approaches that present knowledge as an asset, something that needs to be managed and can be captured, stored and disseminated. Writing about organisational learning has been more theoretical and conceptual. It presents learning of organisations as a process and focuses on raising understanding about how organisations learn. What activities organisations develop to improve learning will be determined strongly by their choice for one or more of the three approaches. I will use the term organisational learning for both literature under that heading and writing about the learning organisation.

Organisational learning is now a fundamental concept in the theory of organisations and the literature on the subject flourishes. But, according to Friedman et al. (2005), the issue still remains elusive for researchers and managers alike. Part of the complexity of the study and the implementation of learning in organisations comes from the fact that it touches on multiple disciplines (Pasteur et al., 2006). None of the attempts to structure the various approaches and concepts into one comprehensive framework have obtained a broad consensus.

4.2 Contextual variables

4.2.1 Outside the development sector

The variables that were put forward in the sections on workplace learning and team learning are also relevant at the agency level. But, as the complexity of the learning processes increases significantly at this level, because of the growing number of actors involved and of the variety of internal and external factors affecting learning, more factors become relevant.

A popular framework for analysis has been developed by the Harvard Business School (Garvin et al., 2008). It has three building blocks which are a mixture of variables, and learning-oriented activities (mainly informal learning): *supportive learning environment*, which refers to psychological safety, appreciation of differences, openness to new ideas, and time for reflection; *concrete learning processes and practices*, which relate

to experimentation, information collection, analysis, education and training, and information transfer; and, finally, *leadership that reinforces learning.*

Development organisations are often strongly geographically dispersed and involved in multi-stakeholder programmes. Research by Caruso et al. (2007) in the private sector revealed that strongly decentralised organisations often face problems in developing a shared vision in all decentralised units, mainly because they develop poor negotiations across the organisation. The authors identify three barriers that are depressing spontaneous and responsive coordination of information and activity:

- Intergroup bias: psychological bias towards favouring members of one's ingroup.
- Group territoriality: territoriality by or on behalf of organisational groups
- Flawed, value-destroying approaches to cross divisional negotiations.(p. 25)

The difficulty of sharing tacit knowledge in firms that are relocating or are geographically dispersed has become the subject of extensive study in the economic geography literature. The influential work of Gertler (2003) is interesting in view of his addition of a fourth dimension that is required for effective sharing of tacit knowledge. Typically, research will point at the importance of spatial proximity (geography), organisational proximity (common corporate ownership and culture), and/or relational proximity (occupational similarity, or bonds arising from past interaction). He provides evidence of the importance of institutional proximity, "… that is shared norms, conventions, values, expectations and routines, arising from commonly experienced frameworks of institutions" (Gertler, 2003). Gertler's arguments would make this seem as a critical condition:

> Technological fixes and corporate may not be sufficient to overcome these obstacles. Nor will occupational similarity …. The barriers that matter most in these situations are less cognitive and more institutional in origin. (p. 95)

4.2.2 Development specific

A large number of factors that play a role here have been identified in the aid sector literature. They refer to certain unique characteristics of development organisations, such as the (lack of) incentives to learn, the geographic dispersion and decentralised set-up, the approach to draw lessons from the field, and the complex head office – field relationship.

Number of incentives to learn. Barnard (2003) compares the situation of donor agencies with the private sector and concludes that the incentives to learn are very weak here:

- Accountability towards beneficiaries is low because they are on the receiving end with most often no structural opportunities to provide feedback on the services they receive. Donor agencies can therefore "…get away with not learning from their mistakes for longer" (p. 2);
- Most intellectual property is this sector is in principle public. That decreases its strategic value;
- The organisational culture forces people often to operate in slow-moving bureaucratic environments.

Approach to draw lessons from the field. Numerous evaluation reports of development projects and programmes in international and bilateral agencies (BTC, 2007, 2008) and NGOs (Britton, 2005, HIVA, 2009) have found that only very few agencies develop activities to systematise lessons from individual projects at the organisational level. Several explanations have been forwarded. Some refer to the island culture in programme divisions and in head offices (Smit, 2007). Others signal the lack of supportive policies and practices in development agencies, which seem to be caught in an 'action-mode', with a low prioritisation for reflection and learning (Ramalingam, 2005; Britton, 2005; Smit, 2007). Ramalingam (2005) identified a gap between the aspirations on the one hand and the practice of M&E in support of agency-wide learning in 13 international development agencies.

> ..there is little evidence yet of cases where learning in such contexts can transcend the bureaucratically-driven communication processes that are common to M&E frameworks. (Ramalingam, 2005)

The recurrent findings on the lack of organisational learning from M&E processes is clarified in an interesting way in a working paper by Simister (2009), indirectly referring again to problems with the vertical logic of the biological metaphor.

> Unlike formal reporting – which is frequently carried out on a vertical, hierarchical basis – learning often needs to be disseminated horizontally, between different sectors, regions, countries and programmes and across teams employing similar working approaches… Experience suggests that unless an organisational M&E system is specifically designed with learning in mind, there is an inevitable drift towards its use as a vehicle for demonstrating formal accountability upwards. (p. 27)

Degree of identification of field staff with agency. (This paragraph is based on my experiences in Zimbabwe and from participation in many evaluation activities).

Field staff:

- often only work for a relatively short period in the agency and normally have limited opportunities to build a strong relationship with the head office;
- work in partnerships with other actors and donors and are often accountable to several stakeholders in the project or the programme;
- are more and more recruited outside the country where the head office of the agency is based and thus tend to have less cultural and social linkages with the organisation;
- and are spread out over many locations in different settings and contexts.

Nature of power balance between field staff and head office. An imbalance may destroy trust and creativity, which are considered to be essential conditions for mutual learning (Chambers, 2004). Musyoki (2003) sees organisations in general as political systems and questions the feasibility of learning from participatory processes in a highly politicised context, characterised by multiple actors, competing interests and conflicting goals.

Political dimension of knowledge management. On the basis of 51 interviews in seven development agencies, networks and Southern NGOs, and a broad screening of the literature, Ferguson et al. (2010) find an important gap between the latent goals and active knowledge management practices. A main stream 'rationalist approach' is found in a majority of the agencies. This is focused on knowledge transfer, following an objectivist approach, which translates itself into an 'engineering'-like implementation. This approach is argued to lead to a Northern dominance of what knowledge is valuable, to strengthen existing power imbalances, and to result in ineffective development interventions.

4.3 Support policies for organisational learning and knowledge management

4.3.1 Outside the development sector

Knowledge management

While the first generation knowledge management studies treated knowledge mainly as a commodity that can be codified, stored and disseminated, second- and third-

generation approaches have moved towards a more relational understanding of knowledge and see learning as a social process, now merely facilitated by information technologies (Pasteur et al., 2006). In the last decade, with the arrival of the social media, new opportunities have emerged to build in social processes and a knowledge sharing component in ICT-based systems.

Learning organisation

Senge (1990) made a strong argument for what he describes as the 'five disciplines' of the learning organization: personal mastery, mental models, building a shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. These are important areas that organisations should focus on if they want to become a learning organisation.

Communities of practice

Communities of practice are a way of organising team learning or organisational learning. It is defined by Wenger (1999) as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. To define a community of practice, Wenger (2006, p.1) argues that three characteristics are crucial, that is (1) the domain, or the identity defined by a shared domain of interest; (2) the community, with members interacting and learning together; and (3) the practice, or a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems. This takes time and sustained interaction. A community of practice consists of combinations of these three elements. (Wenger, 1999). They were massively picked-up in the private sector and beyond by the end of the 1990s as an approach to organise knowledge sharing through ICT networks across organizational and geographic boundaries.

Expansive learning

In a previous section, mention was made of the problems around learning in decentralised organisations involved in multi-stakeholder programmes. Expansive learning (Engeström, 2001) builds on third generation activity theory to support 'cross-boundary learning'. In essence, "it is intended to develop conceptual tools for understanding dialogue, multiple perspectives and networks for interacting activity systems" (Edwards et al., 2009, p. 198). It is often done through 'change labs', "in which researchers and practitioners jointly interrogate the structural tensions in and between the different dimensions of activity, such as the rules, tools and division of labour, that have emerged in collective work practices over time and which constrain

the development of future activity" (p. 199). It is brought forward in chapter 8 as an approach that can support the answering of question 4.

4.3.2 Development specific

In the introductory chapter the divergence in views about organisational learning in the development sector were discussed. True, there is a broad consensus on the importance of learning. But, visions differ on why development agencies should learn, what they should learn, and how they should learn. The previous section referred to external evaluation as one area that has been put forward as an important instrument to improve learning at the field level and at the agency level. Here findings of other development-specific studies will be presented.

Strong preference for ICT-based solutions. In the last decade many development agencies have oriented their learning activities at the agency level towards knowledge management approaches, often ICT-based. Based on approximately 250 interviews with agency staff, McGrath & King (2004) picture two broad trends with regard to knowledge-based aid in three important bilateral agencies and the World Bank. Two of the agencies and the World Bank worked with a technological approach, attempting to capture knowledge present in the organisation and have it codified into forms that are widely applicable, preferably stored in databases and intranets. Britton (2005) also refers to the technological reflex of many NGOs and development agencies during the 1990's: "Development managers hoped that knowledge management might hold the promise of helping to solve the problems of organisational amnesia. Additionally they hoped it would unleash the power and promise of ICT to achieve the 'magic' of turning raw information into the knowledge that would deliver solutions to the new problems and challenges they faced." (p. 7) Only one agency (the Swedish SIDA) in the McGrath & King study (2004) developed a social perspective on knowledge and focused more on knowledge sharing, on connecting people in the agency, and on experiential learning and informal learning. In her study of the learning practice of Dutch NGOs, Smit (2007) identified a contradiction in the dominant view on how learning at the agency level should be promoted (by writing down, storing and disseminating knowledge) and what people feel are the most effective learning strategies they are currently using (by exchanging information with colleagues). Ramalingam (2005) misses the human factor in many of these systems and sees them turning into 'information graveyards'.

Although McGrath & King (2004) find a growing awareness for the tacit and social nature of knowledge, including the role played by power and ideology, they did see almost no signs of structural changes in the way the four researched agencies behave. They write: "...knowledge-based aid can easily mean better internal knowledge management of the kind where the official version is reinforced… Agency generated knowledge is still more likely to be valued than that from external sources. Headquarters' knowledge still tends to dominate over field knowledge… Quantitative, scientific and economic knowledge is usually taken more seriously than that of other kinds" (p. 179). The same authors also analyse the power effects of knowledge-based aid on the various departments of development agencies and describe how groups inside feel threatened by them.

Low prioritisation of organisational learning and knowledge management. In addition, in his study of the learning practices of 13 development agencies, Ramalingam (2005) concluded that many knowledge management initiatives tend to be marginalised within development agencies, are not taken seriously by programme staff and are often perceived as 'a solution looking for a problem' (p. 28).

Problems in visualising effects of learning. Krohwinkel (2007), reviewing the literature on knowledge and learning for the Swedish Agency for Development Evaluation, notices the lack of specific frameworks for assessing the outcomes of knowledge and learning activities. Ramalingam (2005) turns the question around and argues that nobody knows how to measure the costs of not having an effective knowledge strategy. The fact that the impact of learning initiatives can not be easily measured and quantified hinders the maintenance of momentum in these processes, since it is difficult to capture progress. In addition, it lowers the enthusiasm at management level to invest time and resources.

No integration of learning into other organisational processes. Organisational learning is often perceived as an 'add-on' to existing procedures and practices (Ramalingam, 2005). Engel (2005) warns that staff and stakeholders soon lose interest in learning if they do not notice policies being changed in line with their own experiences.

Three conditions of organisational learning. Finally, a normative framework to facilitate organisational learning in development agencies has been introduced by Britton (2005), who is attached to the UK-based International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC). It has not been empirically validated, but its relevance lies in its

being based on practitioner experiences and insights and it being rather comprehensive in the number of elements it addresses. Table 3 lists 11 factors, found to influence the effectiveness of organisational learning (OL) strategies. They are clustered in 3 groups: (1) the means to do OL have to be available; (2) the motives to participate to OL activities have to be there; and (3) sufficient opportunities need to be created. This is inspired by the metaphor of '*learning as a crime*': three conditions have to be in place to commit a crime: a motive, the means, and the opportunity - each operationalised in a number of more detailed elements. A similar set of conditions is required for changing the learning practice in organisations.

Conditions for organisational learning	Factors
Means	Conceptual clarity
	Competences for learning (OL, WPL)
	Methods and tools
	Specialist support
	Financial resources
Motive	Ensuring supportive leadership
	Developing a culture supportive of learning
Opportunity	Formal spaces for OL
	Informal spaces for OL
	Individual learning opportunities
	Collective learning opportunities

Table 3: Britton's (2005) framework in support of organizational learning in development agencies

Section 5. Learning patterns: components and contextual variables

Differences in the way teams and organisations learn can not be understood by looking at the effectiveness of individual learning activities. Exercises to compare the effectiveness of learning between teams or between organisations need to consider the overall learning practice, the full picture of learning in a given situation. In addition, a recurrent challenge is changing existing ineffective practices or introducing new ones. Such attempts often fail.

The discussion in section 5 will be based mainly on the works of Sterck and Eraut.

5.1 Basic concepts and definitions
Part of the literature on team learning and organisational learning has advocated dealing with the difficulty of changing learning practices by planning and structuring

learning better. As indicated under section 3.3, Sterck (2004) calls these approaches 'planning-oriented strategic learning policies'.

5.1.1 Outside the development sector

In light of the recurrent findings that these policies seldom manage to bring change, Sterck (2004) has introduced the concept of *learning patterns* with the aim to better explain why the learning practice in organisations/organisational units is often difficult to change. The notion is based on earlier research on learning in social welfare organisations in Belgium and is defined as "... the more or less sustainable and crystallised configuration of learning opportunities for employees that perform similar work in an organisation". (p. 4) Depending on the context, a learning pattern can apply to an organisational unit such as a team, a department or a whole organisation. An organisation can have different learning patterns for different units. According to Sterck the properties of learning patterns are that:

- o they are shared by all employees who perform similar work in a given organisational unit;
- o they are unique for every organisation/organisational unit;
- o they strongly influence if and how an organisation/organisational unit can change its own learning practice.

Direct references by other leading authors to the learning pattern concept as defined by Sterck (2004) seem to be absent. According to Sterck an indirect similarity exists in notions that refer somehow to patterns of behaviour, such as the 'corporate curriculum' (Kessels, 1996), the 'learning infrastructure' (Tjepkema, 2003), the 'learning practice' (Sprenger, 2000), and 'the learning network theory' (Van der Krogt, 1995). More recently, research at Harvard Business School (Garvin et al., 2008) also finds that different local cultures of learning exist within an organisation, reflecting variations in norms and behaviours of the staff of organisational units.

Sterck does not mention the concept of 'organisational configuration', although the configurational approach resonates well with his notion of pattern. The configurational approach is a strand of research that has grown popular over the last few decades in management and business. (Meyer et al., 1993, Short et al., 2008). Its main concept refers to "… any multidimensional constellation of conceptually distinct characteristics that commonly occur together" (Meyer et al., 1993, p. 1175). Typically, configurational

researchers will try to identify typologies or taxonomies of groups of organisations, starting from the assumption that the potential combinations of variables determining an organisational process are limited because of the "… attributes' tendency to fall into coherent patterns" (Meyer et al., 1993, p. 1176). This strand of research works with an open-systems perspective and rejects linear cause-effect relationships, and has linkages with complexity theory:

> Rather than trying to explain how order is designed into the parts of an organization, configurational theorists try to explain how order emerges from the interaction of those parts as a whole. … Nonlinearity is acknowledged, so variables found to be causally related in one configuration may be unrelated or even inversely related in another. (Meyer et al., 1993, p. 1178)

5.1.2 Development specific

In the development literature, the related concept of 'self-organisation' has been introduced to explain organisational change. It refers mainly to the fact that types of organisational behaviour tend to develop through internal dynamics. Olson and Eoyang (2001) define it as follows:

> Self-organisation is defined as the tendency of any open system to generate new structures and patterns based on its own internal dynamics. Organisational design and behaviour is not imposed from above or outside; it emerges from the interactions among the agents in the system. (p.10).

Two publications, in their discussion of how difficult it is to change the way development organisations learn, work with a terminology that is close to Sterck's pattern concept. That is the case in Britton's metaphor of learning as a crime (see section 4 of this chapter). Baser and Morgan (2008), in a multi-annual study about capacity development projects in bilateral development aid, conclude: "Capacity development involves the transitioning from one pattern or configuration of behaviour to another" (p. 20).

5.2 How to identify a learning pattern

In his case study on three Belgian welfare organisations Sterck (2004) identifies their patterns in two steps.

First, he lists the learning activities that form the basic elements, the 'atoms' so to say. In the case of formal learning these are, for example, the nature of external and internal training and education, of the training of new employees, of performance appraisal, of coaching …. The author is of the opinion that it is much more difficult to make the same firm exercise for informal learning, because of its tacit nature. He

therefore proposes the use of a detour, that is to look at the factors or conditions that impact on this types of learning. While understandable, this leads to conceptual confusion. The factors bring in an explanatory perspective for the nature of informal learning, rather than the description of the way it is made operational through work activities. Eraut, as will be discussed later in this subsection, delivers a method to escape from that problem.

A second step involves checking the present basic elements for five essential content characteristics: the *dominant component* (for example, 'variety of formal learning activities'), the *level of recognition of learning opportunities* (to what extent do staff explicitly recognise learning processes), the *degree of crystallisation* of the pattern (stable over time or evolving), the *strategic orientation* of the pattern, and the *imperative character* (monitored by management/staff or free of obligation).

The two stages of the exercise lead Sterck to label the three cases of his study individually (and to highlight their strengths and weaknesses). As an example, Case 1 is labelled 'Helpdesk' pattern: employees have access to a system which refers to updated procedures for the follow-up of patients, and which can also involve asking advice from experts.

Earlier in this chapter a discussion of Eraut's research included the presentation of work processes and activities that influence the quantity and quality of deliberate and implicit informal learning. This approach will be integrated in the conceptual framework of my research (see section 7).

A point of critique on Sterck is that a mere listing of work activities does not automatically reveal the pattern. In section 7 a number of transversal characteristics of learning activities will be added to the analytical tools. The same section will add, in the context of constructing my own conceptual framework, other changes to Sterck's approach of the pattern concept. One such change is the substitution of the expression 'configuration of opportunities' by 'configuration of practices' in the definition.

5.3 Contextual variables

The variables that might explain the rise and life cycle of a learning pattern appear in the broader context of an organisation and its subgroups. Sterck (2004) noticed that learning patterns are deeply entrenched in the DNA of an organisation. This is explained largely by *historical elements* and *micro-politics*, more specifically:

- o All actors in the organisation have a specific interest in learning. The author distinguishes between eight possible interests: acquiring knowledge and competencies to improve work; spreading the vision or values of the organisation; working effectively and efficiently; maintaining the satisfaction of work; maintaining social relationships; furthering the development of the career; maintaining or improving ones position in the organisation; and respecting the professionalism of work;
- o These interests play-out in what Sterck describes as the 'learning arena';
- o The most powerful people in the organisation decide on the rules of the game in the learning arena. They determine what constitutes learning and who can learn.

Baser and Morgan (2008) refer to configurations or patterns in the behaviour of organisations that are the consequence of micro-politics. They conclude that learning of organisations (capacity development) is heavily affected by these patterns:

> … capacity development is about altering the access of people to authority, resources and opportunities. It privileges some groups and individuals and not others. Coalitions with power inside or outside must, in some way, either directly support or tacitly accept these altered patterns and their implications for their own interests… (p. 20).

In the 'configurational approach', shortly described under section 5.1, patterns in organisational behaviour are also seen to result from micro-political dynamics. Here, they are described as a "…functional relationships among organizational components and replication of time-honored practices through social construction." (Miller, 1987a, cited in Meyer et al., 1993, p. 1176). These authors suggest that patterns can derive from other external and internal forces or processes (Meyer et al., 1993).

5.4 The learning pattern concept as an analytical tool

The insights that are discussed in the previous subsections resonate well with my professional experiences with supporting learning in VVOB. They highlight the fact that organisational units over time develop their own way of learning and this turns out to be difficult to change because of a number of underlying dynamics.

The learning pattern concept describes sets of learning practices of people who perform similar work in an organisation. Although not mentioned explicitly by Sterck,

there is also an assumption that the people who share a learning pattern are working physically close to each other and are interacting on a regular basis, as is the case in the three case studies of Sterck (2004). A second implicit assumption of Sterck is that it looks at employee's who have shared operational goals in the organisation. It fits well with the reality in most project teams of VVOB, and can be a useful instrument to provide insights in their learning processes.

The assumption of proximity is less obvious from a perspective of agency-wide or agency-level learning. The decentralised set-up of development agencies means that there is very irregular contact between individual projects and head office staff on the one hand, and across projects on the other hand. Secondly, while all project teams are working towards improving educational quality in their own context, they are most often not sharing operational goals with teams in other countries. The question can be raised if the learning pattern concept can be extended to these situations.

The issues around proximity and shared goals clearly provide fewer opportunities and motives to develop joint ways of doing things. There are, however, signs that development agencies not only develop patterns at the project level, but also in the way they learn at the agency level. Some indications can be found in the literature (De Meyer et al., 1993, Snow et al., 2008, Britton, 2005, Baser and Morgan, 2008, Ferguson et al., 2010). In addition, looking back at ten years of working with VVOB, and participating in an external evaluation of the organisation another three years down the line, the strong impression remains that certain practices of agency level learning remain stable for a long period of time and are indeed very difficult to change.

Therefore, the learning pattern construct will also be used to explore learning at the agency level. In the long list of possible variables that affect learning at this level, the focus will be on those that describe the vertical interaction between individual projects and the head office and those that describe the horizontal interaction across projects.

As such the concept of learning patterns in its various dimensions is a crucial tool in dealing with the research questions that guide the main perspective of my research. It makes it possible to describe and explain, be it of course in a partial way, how teams and agencies differ with regard to learning practices and, consequently, develop different degrees of learning outputs. It also may help to understand why and how attempts to change such practices tend to fail. Finally, it can also direct the search for ways to reduce the impact of obstacles to change.

Section 6 The literature on learning in development agencies on the balance

In this section a number of blind spots in the current body of knowledge about learning in development agencies is discussed. Their existence will be an important source of inspiration in developing the conceptual framework (section 7), the methodological design (chapter 3) and the empirical analysis (chapters 4 to 7).

6.1 A widening gap between theory and practice

There is, undeniably, a growing body of literature on learning in the development sector. But detailed accounts of the actual implementation of the experiences with learning approaches are quite limited. Studies have focused on 'pockets of innovation in learning', where projects or programmes tried out an alternative approach, but only few studies have identified and documented successful organisation-wide learning initiatives in the sector[22]. On the other hand, Pasteur et al. (2006) conclude that organisations are facing difficulties in effectively translating lessons from the academic realm into routinised practices. Consequently, this thesis builds on the proposition that there is an under-estimation of the difficulty of changing learning patterns and a need to gain more insights into the factors that are causing this problem.

6.2 Too modest insights into the daily learning practice

A large portion of the research on workplace learning has been performed pragmatically by interviewing head office and field staff of NGOs (Houghton et al., 2003, Smit, 2007) and of bilateral and multilateral agencies (Ramalingam, 2005, McGrath and King, 2004). In addition, there has been a structural bias towards researching learning at the head office level, neglecting the field level[23]. Finally, most studies take a snapshot of the learning situation in an organisation and do not document daily experiences with learning over a longer period of time. Eraut, in his studies on the private sector, has criticised the heavy reliance on interviewing. The problem is that much informal learning that takes place is not recognised or recalled by

---

[22] An exception is the work of Action Aid, with the introduction of the Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS): DAVID, R. & MANCINI, A. (2004) Going Against the Flow: the Struggle to Make Organisational Systems Part of the Solution Rather than Part of the Problem. The Case of ActionAid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System. *Lessons for Change,* Sussex, Institute for Development Studies (IDS).

[23] The collection of studies in the book from Roper and Pettit (2003) provides an exception to this trend.

the staff. However, studies that have made use of a wider set of data collection techniques (observation, assessment of performance, and so on) and that have brought in a longitudinal dimension focus mainly on workplace settings and context in the Western world, and even then only a limited number of work areas have been selected.

In sum, the day-to-day learning reality of development project and programme teams remains a blind spot.

6.3 The link between projects and the overall organisation is missing

The lack of information, noted in the preceding paragraph, is particularly visible in the question of the interplay between the different levels in development agencies. Many studies concentrate on only one of the levels or treat an agency as a homogenous structure, or even perceive the link between levels as uniquely hierarchical (P. Crawford, 2004). How the participating development agencies can learn across individual projects and programmes is, however, not fully resolved.

To conclude: part of the research on learning either does not consider agency wide learning or obviously underestimates the impact of the strongly decentralised character of the set-up of development agencies.

6.4 Unhelpful worldviews about learning

A heavy reliance on external evaluation risks imposing low trust management practices and leads to a continuously questioning of the professionalism of field level practitioners. ICT based solutions for knowledge management have proven to be insufficiently taking into account the social dimension of learning and the difficulty of sharing tacit knowledge. With regards to continuous professional development (CPD), studies demonstrate unproductive strategies for the promotion of learning that focus mainly on formal training through formal learning strategies.

Section 7 Towards a conceptual framework to research learning in VVOB

This section presents the conceptual framework that will guide, through the analysis of the collected empirical data, the hunt for answers to the four general research questions (as formulated in section 4 of the first chapter). Such framework consists of separate concepts that, via hypotheses, are linked together in one or more models.

The construction of a conceptual outline is based on a number of choices and options. At various places in the review of the literature preference has been expressed for certain concepts and paradigms. The time has come to present the theoretical and methodological/methodical options behind the preferences that, in chapter 2, were expressed in a diffused order

Those options relate to:

1. the content of a key concept, like 'learning' (borrowed from Eraut: "…the process whereby knowledge is acquired. It also occurs when existing knowledge is used in a new context or in a new combination.");
2. the way a concept is made operational, that is made accessible for empirical screening (like the distinction between individual, team and agency or organisational learning);
3. the relative weight that is given to each element in a set of concepts (like the high emphasis that will be given to the notion of implicit learning);
4. the latter type of choices depends on the basic hypotheses in my research (for example, the proposition that more learning than usually is assumed results largely from the implicit knowledge generated in work processes and activities that are not necessarily oriented towards learning);
5. the general research questions;
6. and finally, the limits that exist for a research enterprise while being full time employed.

These various choices will now be elaborated in the following subsections.

7.1 Learning

The learning process is discussed as it develops on three levels: the individual, the team and the organisation. Although the first and the third will absolutely not be

neglected, priority will be given to team learning. Two reasons justify this choice: learning in projects is to a very high degree a group or social event; the focus in my research is on the project teams inside VVOB.

Learning is produced in at least three ways: through formal/explicit, deliberate informal and implicit informal activities and techniques. One important research decision here is to perceive and operationalise each type of learning activity as a continuum. It is possible to describe deliberate formal learning, for example, in its ideal-typical characteristics. But, in real world terms all depends on the dominant mode to 'place' a given learning activity as formal or rather informal.

As has already been noted, contrary to many other studies about learning in development, an important focus will fall on implicit learning – the second important decision. Inspiration for this choice has been found in the publications of Eraut and in my own experiences when working in the area of development-oriented learning. The consequence is that special attention has to be given to the practical elaboration of that notion. This will be done in three steps. The first is to study the *9 work processes* from which learning derives as a by-product and are, therefore, rarely recognised as significant learning by those involved (Eraut, 2007). The second step involves the identification and the assessment of *work activities* in the context of VVOB that typically involve one or more of the nine work processes described above. These activities differ according to the organisational level (project, agency) and the initiating actor (head office, country office, project team). Chapter 6 will have a detailed discussion of this particular research phase. The third step focuses on the *factors/independent variables* that might explain the frequency of implicit learning. Here, the fourfold set of variables is based on the work of two authors that were discussed in chapter 2.

(1)   Allocation and structuring of work (based on Sterck and Eraut)
- Work pressure and stress
- Opportunities for reflection
- Degree of autonomy and decisional latitude
- Variation
- Complexity of the job
- Development pressure

(2)   Encounters & relationships with people at work (based on Sterck and Eraut)
- Informal dialogue with colleagues

- Formal consultation (working groups, meetings,..)
- Open communication
- Atmosphere between colleagues
- Networking inside the organisation
- Networking outside the organisation
- Physical characteristics of the work environment (office lay out)

(3) *Individual participation / expectations of performance and progress* (based on Eraut)

- Individual participation ("sense of choice over work activities")
- Expectations of performance and progress ("sense of progress")

(4) *Information environment* (based on Sterck)

- Systems of documentation
- Email and internet
- Information flow in organisation
- Availability of articles, books and information folders

7.2 Learning pattern

The most crucial choice, given the wording of the general research questions, is the focus on the concept of learning pattern. This notion is defined here as 'the more or less sustainable and crystallised configuration of learning practices for employees that perform similar work in an organisation'. The definition is Sterck's with the exception of the use of the expression 'configuration of learning practices'.

The making of its operational format, to be applied in chapter 7, will be stepwise. The first move is the identification of the components of a pattern. The next one is the listing of the VVOB-relevant activities that are the concrete expression of the components. Both steps are visualised in the following table.

Building blocks/components of learning patterns	Example activities in context of VVOB projects
Processes with learning as a principal object	
Formal learning	• Induction of new staff • VVOB manuals • Professional development (training, conferences),
Deliberate informal learning	• Cooperation advisors • Performance appraisal: interviews • Project websites • Internal M&E and External evaluation

Processes with learning as a by-product	
Within the working group	
(1) participation in group processes working towards a common goal or set-up for a special purpose, and responding to external changes (2) working alongside others to observe and listen to others, and to participate in activities (3) consultations to co-ordinate activities or get advice	• Identification and formulation of new projects • Execution and management of projects
Outside the working group	
(4) consultations outside the direct working group or outside the organisation to co-ordinate activities or to get advice (5) working with clients	
Challenge of work itself	
(6) tackling challenging tasks and roles (7) problem solving, individually or in group (8) trying things out (9) consolidating, extending and refining skills	

Table 4: Components of a learning pattern

A further step in making the definition of a learning pattern operational is the interpretation of the term *durable*. Sterck measures the degree of durability by looking at the *degree of crystallisation* of the configuration (is it stable or evolving).

The key notion in the definition is, however, *configuration of learning practices*. Its operationalisation is a much more complex exercise. Sterck's solution is to focus on the *dominant component*. This is a too simple solution. Patterns vary in a number of ways. Therefore, in a fourth step, I propose to take account of *three transversal characteristics* of a configuration of learning opportunities. These notions have to be treated as continuums. A pattern, for example that of agency learning, is then identified by looking at the position the various learning activities at that level occupy on each continuum. The label given to a pattern is based on the resulting configuration of the positions. Chapter 7 contains the empirical testing of these concepts.

Transversal characteristic 1: Knowledge as a commodity versus knowledge as a continuing process
This ontological characteristic deals in essence with diverging worldviews (within organisations) on the nature of knowledge. Formal and informal learning activities that are build on the perception of knowledge as a commodity might have a bias towards its codification, which can then be stored and transferred. In the development sector, this tends to go hand in hand with a preference for expert and/or head office knowledge. On the other hand, learning actions that are based on the idea of knowledge as a process, focus more on its social construction and therefore of its sharing. In a setting of development projects, these activities tend to focus on locally constructed knowledge or field knowledge.

Transversal characteristic 2: Learning as add-on versus learning during work

This characteristic relates to diverging views on the nature of learning in and around the workplace. Learning activities that are organised as an add-on to other organisational tasks tend to be biased towards formal learning, often arranged as an individual way of activity. In the development sector, often characterised by chronic overwork and a general 'to-do mode', a constant struggle exists to find time for these additional assignments. On the opposite side of the continuum, learning activities of teams or organisations will be rather typified by their social dimension (for example, through team learning), and by a focus on deliberate and implicit informal learning during the actual work. Activities here will be oriented towards the creation of a 'reflective-practice mode'. This is developed by paying attention to the learning opportunity of work processes, and by time for reflection and for personalised follow-up.

Transversal characteristic 3 (only at the agency level): Organisational learning in agencies seen to happen within homogenous and centralised entities versus within heterogeneous and loosely-coupled entities

This is related to different views of seeing organisations as closed systems or open-systems. Organisational learning activities on this side of the continuum assume a shared interest and motivation among the field staff and the head office to contribute to agency learning. The focus is on a central collection and storing of the learning outputs, via external evaluation, databases or through the head office staff (field visits), and then sending it back to the field. In the other category the assumption is that links between the head office and the field, and between projects are weak. Here, the activities are oriented towards building organisational, relational and institutional proximity (see 4.2.1), through social networks, group events, and so on.

7.3 Learning support framework

The learning support framework[24] includes the policies and strategies with regard to learning. The concept will be made observable by:

- looking at the underlying agenda for learning (the 'why');
- listing the underlying values and principles of learning (related to the 'why' and the 'how');

---

[24] Framework is understood, in this context, as a tool for understanding the motivations behind the learning activities, for analysing the underlying principles, values and tools, and for thinking through the programmatic choices that are made.

- presenting the employed concepts, tools and methods, and the way they are implemented ('what' and 'how').

Note that, with the growing insights in the importance of informal learning during work processes, other organisational policies (allocation of work, HRM ...) have to be taken into the picture.

The description will be developed with the help of the metaphor of a 'learning man'. This is an analytic tool that was originally developed to analyse capacity development strategies of Northern NGOs towards their Southern partners by INTRAC (2007). It is a different context than the one of my research, but it seems still helpful as a way to visualise the various dimensions of the learning policies and strategies. It distinguishes between the 'head' or learning agenda (why is learning supported?), the 'spine' (underlying values and principles), the 'arms' (the concepts, methods and tools used), and the 'legs' (the translation into the operations: orientation towards other policy domains, role division and others).

7.4 How patterns and support frameworks are related

Learning patterns do not come in a vacuum. They are shaped by a number of forces that operate inside and outside an organisation. Consequently, this study sees the learning patterns in VVOB as the dependent variable in the search for explanation. The main independent variables are the learning support frameworks that are deployed by the various actors in VVOB. The support framework of ZimPATH, for example, is the combined result of the visions, values, concepts on learning that are initiated, discussed and implemented by the head office, the country office and the management and team of the project (figure 3). From his micro-political perspective, Sterck stresses the interests of the management and other employee's in the configuration of learning as the main drivers of a pattern. The learning policy is seen as a regulating factor between those interests. However, by pooling all players together in the learning arena the dominant role of management gets underexposed. The use of the learning support framework in the thesis acknowledges the centrality of the learning interests of management (the 'why') in determining the 'what' and 'how' of learning, while at the same time acknowledging that the final influence on the learning pattern is mediated, amongst others, by the compliance of other staff members. Therefore, the relative weight and the impact of each actor depend in their turn on the workings of two intermediary variables: the degree of imposition of the framework by its source and the degree of compliance by, in the example, the ZimPATH team.

LSF
head office (HO)

LSF
country office (CO)

Degree of
imposition by HO /
compliance by project staff

Degree of
imposition by CO /
compliance by project staff

| Resulting LSF ZimPATH | ← | LSF ZimPATH management |

Degree of
imposition by ZimPATH management /
compliance by project staff

ZimPATH
learning pattern
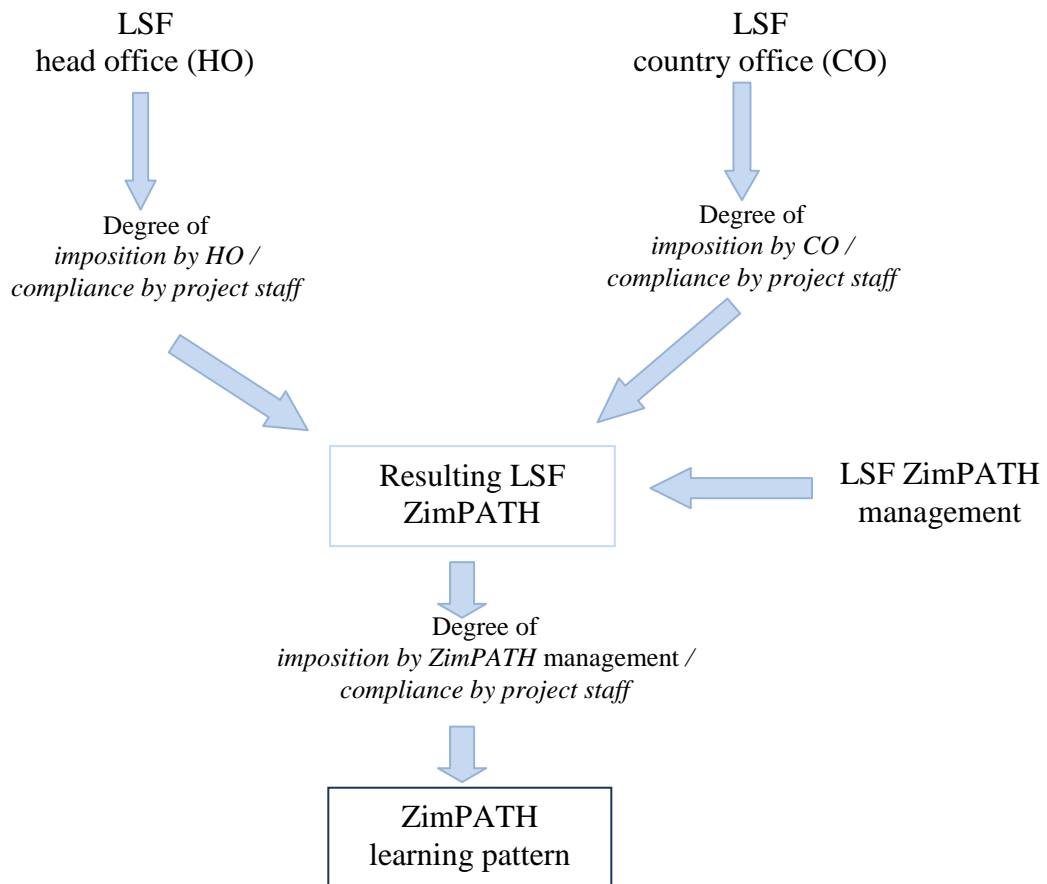
Figure 3: Three learning support frameworks (LSF) and their interaction with the learning pattern of ZimPATH

It would be a mistake to envisage learning support frameworks as closed system outputs, which are developed integrally inside VVOB and its various levels. Indeed, they are also the product of external forces that originate in the social, political and economic dimensions of the environment of the organisation and its subunits. Due to the restricted availability of time and resources this part of the paradigm will only be briefly dealt with.

Chapter 7 will, based on the empirical findings in the chapters 5 and 6, try to reconstruct the proposed link between the reported learning patterns and the support frameworks. The author of this dissertation is well aware of the many methodological difficulties and pitfalls that accompany all discussions of causality. As a result, the conclusions of chapter 7 can not be more than tentative.

Chapter 3
Methodology and methods

Section 2 of the introductory chapter told how my professional experiences with the development sector have strongly shaped the central questions this thesis tries to address. Chapter 2 reviewed the key sources of literature and presented the resulting theoretical framework that was guiding the research.

Chapter 3 presents the underlying methodological principles of my research (section 1.1); the methodological design (1.2); a further discussion of the challenges the double role of researcher and practitioner provokes (1.3); and the way the methodological design has been operationalised through the choice of a variety of observation techniques (section 2).

Section 1 Methodology

1.1 Underlying principles

It was a compelling book by Flyvbjerg (2001) that provided the broader methodological framework for this research. In *Making Social Science Matter*, Flyvbjerg (2001) addresses the question of why the social sciences do not seem to live up to the expectations. On the basis of an in-depth analysis of the current crisis in the social sciences, Flyvbjerg concludes that they have tried too much to compete with the natural sciences, looking for universal truths and predictive theories. Flyvbjerg brought live again into an old debate that seemed to have been stuck between the dominant positivist positions in social research and those that promoted pluralism (Schram & Caterino, 2006).

The central argument in Flyvbjerg's work is built on the impact of tacit knowledge on human performance (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1988, in Flyvbjerg, 2001) and the resulting unpredictability in human behaviour. The Dreyfus model concludes that the higher levels of performance can not be achieved through rational and rule-based thinking and learning. Consequently he argues, in essence, that social research can not develop predictive theories in the Kuhnian sense of the word. He also states that the dominant focus of instrumental rationality, ignoring context, culture, values, and power

in our societies of today, does not provide answers to problems related to sustainable development. This also requires value rationality, or reflexive analysis of goals, values, and interests.

Flyvbjerg (2001) works with Aristotle's classification of the sciences as episteme, techne, and phronesis, and positions the social sciences clearly in the latter one. In that classification, *episteme* is seen as being closest to the natural sciences. It typically aims at developing universal theories, which are invariable and context-independent. Research into learning of development agencies practiced as episteme would be concerned with uncovering universal truths about learning in organisations. Science practiced as *techne* can be described as craft/art. It is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent, and oriented towards production. Such approach would force the researcher into the role of a consultant, who tries to improve the running of VVOB as an organisation by evaluating different experiences and approaches to organisational learning. As such the researcher would stay within the boundaries of the value-system of the organisation. This will not be my position. On the contrary, I will argue that learning approaches, used by development agencies, are not value free. They are applied in what is described as a working environment, characterised by ambiguity and politics. *Phronesis*, the third type of science, shares its orientation towards practice, context-dependency and variability with techne. However, phronesis-based research distinguishes itself from techne, because it involves value deliberation. It also gives power a central place in the analysis. It is, as such, problem-driven and not methodology-driven. Phronesis will be my methodological position.

Flyvbjerg advocates the need for social research that gets close to reality, which is understood as getting close to the phenomenon or group one studies. A favourite approach in the phronesis-based approach to research is the use of case studies, in line with the argument for primacy of context and situational ethics. And finally, phronetic research attempts to link agency with structure.

In summary, the literature review follows the argument that, context-dependence in social development does not mean just a more complex form of determinism, but involves an open-ended relationship between contexts and actions and interpretations (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

1.2 Methodological design

New experiences, both as a practitioner and as a researcher, have been a continuous invitation to deliberate on the research questions and the corresponding methodology, involving me in an iterative cycle - from fuzzy research questions and methodology to less fuzzy questions and methodology. This way of developing one's research strategy is considered appropriate for complex problems (Bryman, 2004). It has characteristics of action research as defined by Dick (1997), where a problem is tackled in various iterative cycles by improving the strategies to address the problem (action) on the basis of insights derived from applied research on the effectiveness of previous strategies (research). It would, however, not be justified to label the overall guiding methodology for this thesis as action research. While periods of empirical research have alternated with forms of action, the actions taken were limited by and heavily influenced by other dynamics in the organisation that was the main subject of study. The actions could, therefore, not always build on insights derived from the various research phases. As such, there was no structured attempt to experiment with an improved approach to organisational learning. In a sense, the study contributed to understanding the problem and tackle elements of it in a way as described by Bassey (1999).

> The popular idea that where there is a problem the job of the researcher is to find a solution is usually unrealistic. The research purpose is more likely to be to formulate and try out ways in which the problem may be better understood and so be alleviated or the difficulty reduced. (Bassey, 1999, p. 67)

The purpose of the research was mainly descriptive and exploratory within a given 'bounded system' (Bassey, 1999, p. 30). It was therefore decided to use a qualitative case study approach. Such design "… emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data…" and is inductivist, constructionist, and interpretivist (Bryman, 2004), not necessarily oriented towards generalisation (Stake, 1995). It is also the most appropriate methodology for the context in which the research was done. Indeed, with its focus on researching the own practice, the professional doctorate resonates well case study research where the actual working environment is the case to be studied. Here it is VVOB, a Belgian development agency where I worked from 1997 to 2007, and which I assessed as an external evaluator in 2010 (see section 2.1. on methods).

1.3 Researcher – practitioner challenges and other limitations

Aligning my methodology with the principles of phronesis based research implies certain ontological and methodological assumptions that are, at the same time, strongly influenced by professional experiences and previous education and training. My original training in engineering definitely affected the way in which I used to look at social systems and the way I analysed them, originally mainly from a positivist viewpoint. Most of my post-graduate training has, however, been in the social sciences. This has introduced me to frameworks for deliberating about different worldviews. As has been discussed in section 1.2 my current position has elements in common with a constructivist and interpretivist perspective.

The methodology of the thesis is therefore affected by my own ontological and methodological assumptions, but also by my specific relationship as researcher-practitioner with the central case. To analyse these elements, use has been made of Pryor's & Ampiah's (2003) idea of methodology as a rubber sheet pulled from different sides by (1) ethical and macro-political issues, (2) practical and micro-political issues, (3) epistemological and ontological issues.

Researching one's own practice tends to raise several methodological challenges. As a practitioner, I was involved in the management of some of the case study projects at the time of the data collection. This created epistemological issues around donor-recipient dynamics and employer-employee relationships, which have the potential to influence the research process and its outcomes. In addition, the closeness with the topic of the research might strongly affect the assumptions underpinning the research design, as described by Drake and Heath (2008):

> Insider researchers often choose their project as a result of several years of experience with the issues. Thus they often have assumptions and ideas about what they expect to find out, and on the basis of experience as a practitioner, they actually have a theoretical stance before beginning their project. (Drake and Heath, 2008)

To deal with the problem of closeness forms of 'self-triangulation' of the data interpretations have to be stimulated through constant reflexivity (Drake, 2010). The trust based relationship that has been built up over the years with some of the projects and teams made it possible to discuss many questions in a frank and critical way. There were, on the other hand, several instances where the subjects of my study 'answered back' (Flyvbjerg, 2007), and I needed to negotiate and re-negotiate relationships with my colleagues (Drake and Heath, 2008).

Practical issues that affected the research were related to the continuous challenge to find time and space for it. The topic of the study was perceived relevant for the organisation and the wider development community. It was also within my sphere of influence in the organisation. It challenged and fascinated me. But it took time to accept the very different end goals of a typical doctoral research on the one hand and the logics/demands of a problem solving process in an organisation on the other hand.

An additional complication of doing research in one's own professional 'play-garden' lies in the direct and constant confrontation with the consequences of, for example, theoretically interesting but pragmatically unrealistic ideas, and the risk of losing credibility because of this. 'External' researchers can always fall back on their own safe academic environments if the outside world turns out not to be ready for their innovative ideas. As such, it was not easy to dream about alternative ways of organisational learning and needing time to develop them, when there was pressure to develop quick-fix solutions for existing problems. However, a reduction of the research to 'techne' was no option as I also learned the hard way, for example through the failure of the virtual community that I was setting-up. I learned that learning activities fail if they do not address some of the deeper power structures and value issues in the culture of an organisation.

Section 2 Methods

When deciding about the kind of methods to use, I wanted to avoid what Eraut (1984) calls the most common mistakes: (1) to devote too many resources to data collection and too few to data analysis; and (2) to devote too many resources to a single method of data collection. The first mistake I have tried to avoid by keeping the number of interviews under control. The second area of attention was addressed by an active strategy for *triangulation*. I used triangulation (1) by *data source* through applying the same type of focus group workshop with different project teams, (2) by *method* through working with both observations and interviews, small surveys and focus groups, (3) and partly by *data type* through a combination of quantitative methods and qualitative instruments, for example on the relevance of M&E for learning. I also used *respondent validation*, where possible, by asking feedback on the written notes of the interviews and on case study reports.

2.1 Case studies

The thesis is built around a number of case studies, looking at learning at the project level, country level, and agency level. The analysis of two cases of VVOB projects in Zimbabwe (ZimPATH and St2eep) should lead to a deeper understanding of the learning practices of the project teams. For the selection of the cases, I followed an approach that Flyvbjerg (2001, p. 79) labels as *'information-oriented selection'*, to "… maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases. Cases are selected on the basis of the expectations about their information content". Such selection is designed to identify, amongst other, 'extreme/deviant cases'[25]. Observations made during visits to VVOB country programmes (in Zimbabwe, Zambia and Cambodia), document analysis, and the presentations of projects during VVOB seminars (e.g. international conference in November 2006) lead me to select ZimPATH and St2eep. Both projects have invested significant amounts of time and resources in supporting learning in their teams (as described in detail in chapter 4). The former has experimented with a range of approaches to improve reflective practice in the project team. St2eep has researched its own practices extensively and has piloted an innovative learning-oriented M&E framework.

A third case is the Zimbabwe country office, as intermediary between the projects and head office. The fourth case is VVOB as an agency. The reason behind this decision is the need to collect information on (and develop understanding of) the practices of the management of the organisation, and the interface between the individual projects and the agency.

No attempts have been made here to measure the outcomes of learning in such ways that it would be possible to quantify and compare the impact of those learning practices on team effectiveness from one project to another. This would have required a broad screening of the learning patterns and an independent assessment of the team performance in a representative sample of projects. Instead I have used evidence-based frameworks (Eraut, 2007, Sterck, 2004) on workplace learning to evaluate the presence of certain process characteristics and contextual factors in the projects that have shown to be crucial for effective learning. In addition, in each case study attention has been given to a *thick description* (Guba & Lincoln, 1984, in Bryman, 2004) of the context and the research activities. This might give the reader the necessary

---

[25] Flyvbjerg (2001, p.71) defines these type of cases as those that are selected "…to obtain information on unusual cases, which can be especially problematic or especially good in a more closely defined sense."

information to make judgements about the possible transferability of findings to other environments.

2.2 Researching workplace learning and organisational learning

Section 7 of the previous chapter presented the theoretical framework that has been choosen for this study. Its operalisation into a tool box with relevant data collection techniques is a real challenge. Several studies have indicated how researching workplace learning is complicated by its tacit character (see chapter 2).

Recent longitudinal research (Steadman, 2005, Eraut, 2005) has dealt with these challenges by combining extensive observations and regular interviews over a significant period of time. This kind of research is too labour intensive and too time consuming for the project that is discussed here. An alternative approach is provided by Smit (2007). She argues that research of team learning is more effective when it is carried out together with the people in the organisation concerned, as part of a process of action and reflection, based on the building blocks of action research. In that way, it enables people to gain a more specific understanding of their own learning processes, and this allows them to talk about learning more explicitly.

In view of the arguments described above, learning processes were documented and examined in the thesis through a variety of data collection methods (subsections 2.2.1 to 2.2.7)

2.2.1 Action research workshops.

Action research workshops were used to explore learning processes in project teams through the re-construction and analysis in group of a specific learning event. The central part of the workshops consisted of the development of a learning history[26] on the basis of a specific case. The exercise can be seen as an exploration of the type of (learning) activities project teams develop over time to solve problems or challenges, and how people experience the relevance of these activities from a learning perspective. Participants were selected through the purposive sampling method, '… whereby information-rich participants with both depth and breadth of experience and who share commonalities will be identified'. (Brotherson, 1994, cited in Schurink et al., 1998, p. 91)

---

[26] More details on the learning history approach can be found in appendix B.

This type of workshop was done with five projects during two missions (only two cases were retained in the final analysis) and with the head office team in Brussels.

2.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were applied to collect data with the project coordinators, mostly on site, in the actual context of the project. For practical reasons, a number of the interviews had to be done afterwards via telephone. The audio transcripts were sent to individual coordinators for respondent validation. About 20 interviews were done in the period 2005-2010, including during the broad evaluation I participated in as an external evaluator in 2010.

2.2.3 Focus group sessions with field staff

During the 'VVOB-Days' in November 2006, three working group sessions (each time with about 15 to 20 participants) of about two hours have been set up to examine organisational learning in VVOB. Britton's (2005) model to examine organisational learning and the 'eight functions framework' of a learning organisation (Slim, 1994, in Britton, 2005) were used to guide the discussions in the sessions. (see also appendix C)

2.2.4 Web survey amongst Belgian development agencies

To make it possible to frame the case of VVOB in the broader development field in Belgium, I conducted a web survey amongst a group of larger Belgian development agencies (10 agencies and VVOB). The web-based survey probed for perceptions, intentions, practices and strategies towards continuous professional development, knowledge management and organisational learning, mainly through the use of closed-questions, with a possibility of ranking statements according to various Likert scales. (see also appendix C)

2.2.5 Email surveys

In separate surveys, field staff members were asked to identify factors hindering organisational and team learning, using their experiences with organisational learning in VVOB. Also feedback was asked about specific initiatives the organisation had taken with regards to organisational learning. Other email surveys were organised with VVOB field staff in Zimbabwe (on the VVOB virtual community and on learning needs), the project websites (Ecuador, Kenya, and Zambia), and with the St2eep project (on learning from external evaluation and learning through the St2eep website)

2.2.6 Observations

During research and during normal work activities, notes of observations and a research diary were kept in the period 2005-2010. Impressions and experiences were systematically stored on notebooks I was carrying with me. These observations would, however, not qualify for what generally is understood as participant observation (Bryman, 2004), since they were not written down in a very detailed and structured way.

2.2.7 Review of secondary data (study reports, M&E reports, evaluations, policy documents)

Over the whole period of the research (2005-2010), a wide range of documents have been collected and analysed, mostly related to the period 2000-2010. Important sources of information have been specific study reports (for example on the survey of the performance appraisal system and M&E), monitoring and evaluation reports, reports from various seminars, policy documents, and so on.

2.3 Final overview and data analysis

Table 5 provides a summary of the way the methodological design has been operationalised through the choice of various observation techniques and research activities. The actual research phase of the thesis has covered the period 2005 – 2010, with the bulk of the field work happening between November 2006 and April 2008 and between February-April 2010.

Methodological design for research questions	
Research topics	Observation techniques and research activities
Question 1-3: How to describe the variation in the learning practices inside VVOB? How to understand the reported variation in learning patterns? How to explain the obstacles to change in VVOB?	
▪ Literature review	○ Broad literature on workplace learning, team learning, organisational learning, accountability, monitoring and evaluation, complexity thinking, and aid effectiveness
▪ Case study 1: VVOB *Analysing the context of VVOB*	○ Web survey on the learning practice and strategies in 11 Belgian development agencies (March 2008)
▪ Case study 1: VVOB (2005-2010)	○ Email survey on team learning and organisational learning within VVOB: 9 field staff, 3 country coordinators, May 2007 ○ 3 focus group discussions on organisational learning in VVOB: between 15 to 20 participants per group, 70% VVOB field staff and 30% local partners, November 2006 ○ ½ day workshop on organisational learning in VVOB with head office staff and field staff (6 programme officers, 5 field staff via Skype), 25 May 2007 ○ Action research workshop on learning-in-action with head office staff (7 persons), March 2008

	o Action research in the context of various organisational learning initiatives (Virtual platform, VVOB learning days, 3-monthly newsletter on capacity development) o External perception survey on performance of VVOB (49 external stakeholders of VVOB), October 2006 o Document analysis over the period 2005-2010 o Reflective observations in the period 2005-2010 o Interviews with Kenya field staff and head office staff during February 2010 evaluation o Workshop on knowledge management and organisational learning with VVOB field staff in April 2010 (12 field staff)
▪ Case studies 2, 3 and 4: Zimbabwe (2005–2008)	o 2 action research workshops on team learning-in-action (March 2008) with project teams (6 - 8 persons) o 4 semi-structured interviews with project team members, and about 30 informal interviews during project visits o Participation to 3 external evaluations of St2eep and ZimPATH o Two workshops on introduction of learning-oriented M&E system (Outcome Mapping) in St2eep, 2005-2006 o Interviews and document analysis for 2 research papers on introduction of Outcome Mapping in St2eep o Document analysis over the period 2005-2010 o Reflective observations in the period 2005-2010
Question 4: How can development agencies better support field level and agency-wide learning?	
▪ Cross-case analysis ▪ Design principles for better learning in VVOB	▪ Cross-case analysis 1 – 4 ▪ Literature review dealing with identified problem areas

Table 5: Overview of the methodological design

Data analysis happened in several, partly overlapping, rounds. A first round of analysis (in the period 2005-2008) involved the examination of individual formal and informal learning activities, both head office and country office driven. For each activity (M&E, professional development, intranet, ...) the available material was organised in terms of what worked well, what did not, what were the explanatory factors. A second round (in the period 2007-2008) was focused on the two case study projects. The material from interviews, the action research workshop and other sources was brought together in tables, and coded in terms of how they were learning, what inhibited learning, and what knowledge resources they were making use of. In a third round (in the period 2009-2010) the material of the two previous rounds was brought together and analysed on the basis of the pattern concept and the learning support framework concept. Additional document analysis triangulated some of the findings that were emerging from the analysis on the basis of the two concepts. Finally, in a last round in 2010, the evaluation reports of the nine field missions, new policy documents on professional development, HRM, and communication were screened in terms of the central topics of the thesis, together with notes from my participation at the international seminar with the field staff. This lead to an updated version of the learning support framework and provided indications of the current learning practices in the programmes.

2.4 Degree of fit

In the introduction to this chapter, I explained the relevance of phronesis based research, and the inspiration it provided in guiding the overall methodology of the thesis. In this section I will assess the degree of fit of the resulting final research process with the quality criteria that Flyvbjerg (2001) outlines for phronesis-based research.

focusing on values, and placing power at the core of analysis

By centring the research questions of this review on the specific working context of VVOB, its history, and the challenges it is facing, the review attempts to take the discussions about values into the research. I tried to identify some of the implicit theories and assumptions about learning in VVOB (and the broader sector) that are based on an implicit value-system affecting how learning should be done, who should be involved, and what counts as knowledge. When analysing learning in development agencies I tried to be critical about who is gaining through the current approaches to learning, and who loses, and through what kinds of power relations. I also explored some of the possibilities available to change existing power relations.

In addition, I reflected actively about the consequences of my training and professional background, and the tensions of being a practitioner-researcher and the obvious impact it has on the worldview I hold and on the dynamics with the respondents.

getting close to reality and dialogue with a polyphony of voices

Throughout the thesis process, I discussed ideas and exchanged drafts with a number of VVOB staff in Zimbabwe and head office. I actively engaged in a dialogue with the whole organisation and the funding agency on topics around organisational learning through raising it in meetings at many different levels, presenting discussion papers, and by launching a number of initiatives. In addition, I spent significant time in following-up and contributing to specialised email lists with practitioners and researchers, related to the topic of the review.

studying cases and contexts, and looking at practice before discourse

I deliberately choose to give a prominent role to a number of case studies of field level learning and analyse it through 'practical activity and practical knowledge in everyday situations' (Flyvbjerg, 2001). By analysing the working environment of VVOB and its impact on the learning at field level and organisational level, I also try to gain understanding on what might work, for whom and under which circumstances. By

providing *thick descriptions* of the learning practice in this context, it becomes possible for readers to evaluate if my interpretations also carry relevance in other contexts.

joining agency and structure,

Workplace learning in organisations and projects is an activity with a strong interplay of the actors and the structures in which they operate. In line with the principles of phronetic-based research, and with insights into workplace learning (Lee et al., 200x), I have analysed the actors and their practices in relation to the structures and, also the structures in terms of agency. This interaction between the two became very relevant when analysing on the one hand, the way learning of field staff is affected by structural issues in the agency, like the organisational culture and the organisational set-up and procedures, and on the other hand, the low identification of field staff with the organisation, issues around personal agency, and cross-cultural issues hinder the organisation to learn from the past.

Part II
Empirical analysis

Chapter 4
Getting acquainted with the cases

As the preceding chapter has announced, the main empirical data were collected by studying VVOB (as an agency) and two projects in Zimbabwe. The following pages present several aspects of these cases, such as their scope, the composition of the staff, their research relevance, the social and economic context and their position as learning environment

But the chapter first deals with the results of a study of learning policies and practices of Belgian development agencies. The aim is to roughly position VVOB in the broader landscape of comparable agencies in Belgium. The analysis is based on the results of a web-survey in March 2008 on the policies and practices on organisational learning and knowledge management of 11 Belgian development agencies. Finally, relevant insights are integrated from 1) my participation in 2008 as co-team leader of an evaluation exercise of the Belgian bilateral development agency (BTC), 2) as team leader of the evaluation[27] of 40 Belgian NGO programmes in 2009-2010 (Huyse et al., 2010); and 3) a national survey about the public support for development cooperation[28].

Section 1 Learning policies and plans of Belgian development agencies

The literature review described the growing critiques in the media and in the public at large about the perceived lack of learning from the past in development agencies. In Belgium no clear data on the perceptions of the wider public were available. To get a sense of the perceptions of the public, I included the following question in a national survey (on a variety of issues) that was launched by my HIVA research group (Pollet,

---

[27] The evaluation was the largest evaluation in the NGO sector in Belgium since 1998, and involved a range of data collection activities in Belgium and in the field, visiting 31 NGO programmes in 6 countries. The evaluation team consisted of 10 Belgian evaluators from 3 leading research institutes and consultancy bureaus, and 9 experienced national evaluators from the country visited.

[28] A few questions were inserted with regards to learning of development agencies.

2010): '*Are development agencies drawing lessons from the past to improve their approach?*'. Four in ten interviewees (43%) had a (rather) positive appreciation. About half of the interviewees doubted (33%) or gave a negative appreciation (19%). Although the findings provide little insight into the why and the how of the scoring, they do show that the general public has mixed opinions about the learning in the development sector.

There has also been little systematic research here to inform this debate. A few individual agencies have reflected on their own learning experiences, but these exercises were limited in scope. There are also indications to be found through the screening of the 2008-2010 funding applications of domestic NGOs that receive funding from the Belgian federal funding agency (DGOS). The general report concludes that 'most NGOs do not have strategies to systematise learning from experiences in the North and the South'; and 'the policies on human resources management for NGO-field workers are weak' (Reynaert, 2008). The 2010 evaluation on the capacity development practices in 40 partnerships of 21 Belgian NGOs concluded the following about the learning practices:

> … most NGOs are still at the start of a development towards learning organisations. .., in practice most NGOs appear to be under too much pressure of time. Consequently, the focus tends to be mainly on the implementation of action plans leaving the organisations with too little time, resources and internal expertise building for learning. (Huyse et al., 2010, p. 89)

However, all in all, the picture remains very partial.

1.1 The population of the March 2008 web survey

Belgium has a total of 115 officially recognised development NGOs, 1 bilateral development agency (BTC), and 4 special agencies that have a quasi-governmental status (VVOB and APEFE) or are linked to the education sector (VLIR-UOS and CIUF-CUD). In the group of 115 NGOs, more than 70 are very small organisations, with only 1 or 2 staff members and a very limited annual budget (Coprogram, 2008). Such agencies tend to have very specific challenges and needs with regard to organisational learning, which makes them less relevant in the context of a study of VVOB. The web survey therefore focused on the group of medium to large development agencies with a size and a way of working that are more similar to VVOB. A number of agencies in this category were not contacted because their operations were very different from those of VVOB (humanitarian agencies, organisations that only work in Belgium,

Belgian NGOs that are part of large multilateral or international agencies). Of the remaining NGOs the 20 largest were selected of which 11 responded.
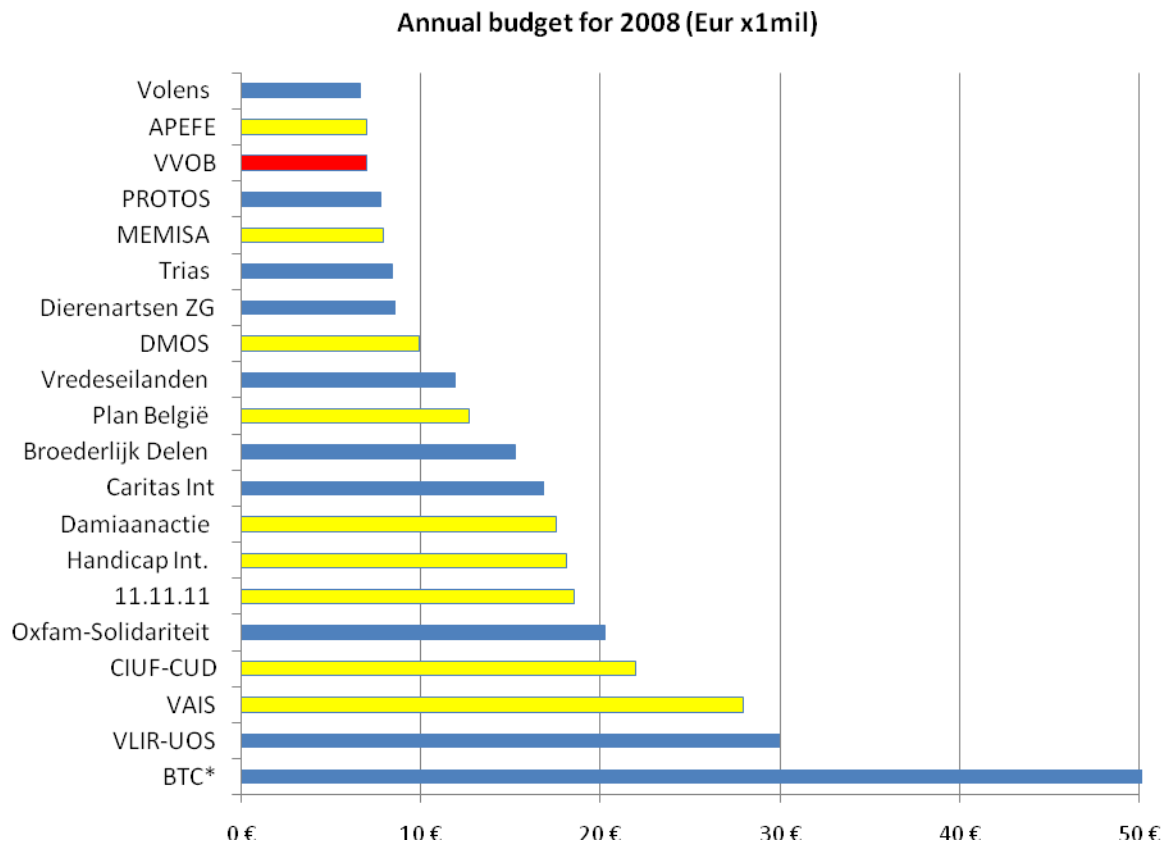

Figure 4: Analysis of web survey population in financial terms (n=20, March 2008)

(* budget of BTC in 2008=217 million euro)

Legend: The agencies that responded are marked in dark blue (VVOB is marked in red), the agencies marked in yellow did not respond[29].

The actual respondents were: the managers/general directors of the respective agencies (in 3 of the cases), the person responsible for quality control and/or organisational learning/knowledge management (4), someone from the geographical desks / programme officers (3) or human resources development (1).

---

[29] Abbreviations: APEFE: Association pour la Promotion de l'Education et de la Formation à l'Etranger (Walloon counterpart of VVOB); MEMISA: Dierenartsen ZG: Dierenartsen Zonder Grenzen; Caritas Int: Caritas International; Handicap Int: Handicap International, CIUF-CIUD: Inter-university cooperation by Walloon region; VLIR-UOS: Inter-university cooperation by Flemish region; VAIS: Flemish International Cooperation Agency; BTC: Belgian Technical Cooperation

1.2 Gap between intentions and practice

Most agencies planned to invest in the near future more means (time and space, personnel, and funding) in organisational learning and knowledge management (figure 5).
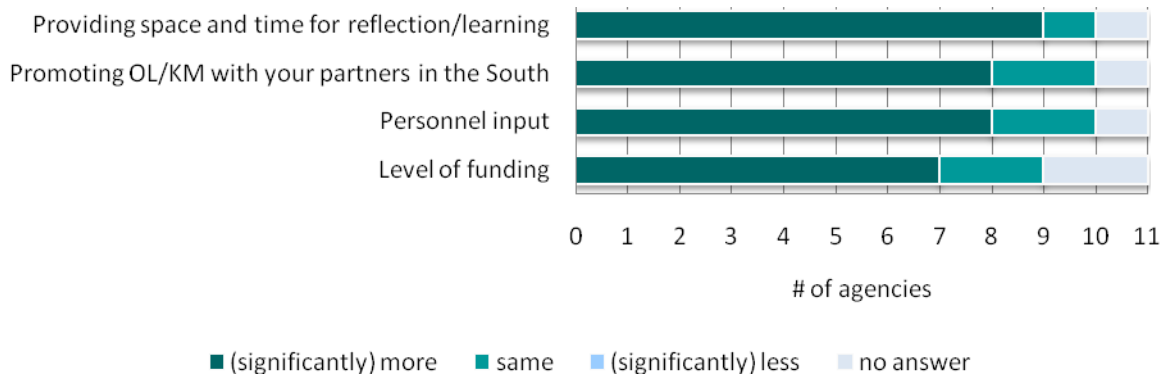

Figure 5: Plans for organisational learning / knowledge management in the years 2008-2013 (N=11, March 2008)

In their study on the NGO sector in Belgium, Molenaers et al. (2010) also find a strong interest amongst NGOs around these issues. One of the questions in the web survey (October 2008), which these authors launched, to all recognised Belgian development NGOs[30], involved the scoring of 5 different issues according to importance (networking with other NGOs, technical expertise, organisational learning, results based management, and monitoring and evaluation). Monitoring and evaluation was seen as the top priority for about 80% of the NGOs (score 'very important'). Organisational learning' was on the second place together with 'results based management' with about 60% of the NGOs scoring it as 'very important'.

Great intentions, but the gap with the actual practices could be very large. The respondents of my March 2008 survey were asked to position their agency on an OL/KM scale, ranging from 'novice' to 'expert'. Nine out of the 11 interviewees quoted their organisation as 'novice' (2) or 'advanced beginner' (7). Only three found it 'easy' to identify useful approaches and tools to support learning and knowledge. Less than half of the respondents perceived internal or external expertise as sufficiently available. The same number saw motivating staff for OL and KM activities as 'difficult' or 'very difficult'. Motivating partners in the South for learning was even trickier; only two

---

[30] Response rate of 36% (Molenaers et al., 2010)

respondents found it easy. Lack of time was regularly mentioned as the major obstacle for learning in their agencies.

The role of internal monitoring and evaluation as a supporting tool for learning was perceived only by one interviewee as helpful. Belief in the feasibility of applying the outcomes of external evaluations was somewhat higher, with four respondents declaring it as easy. In addition, actual OL and KM capacity was not abundant. Only one agency had a specific department or unit dealing with the topic. OL and KM coordination was most often located at the level of the management of the agency (3), or in the M&E unit/department (2), or in the human resources department (2).

Finally, there was limited interest in setting explicit targets for OL/KM, and even less in monitoring them systematically. Less than half of the development agencies claimed to have separate result areas around organisational learning and knowledge management at the project/programme level, slightly more at the head office level. Only one out of eleven agencies monitored OL/KM to 'a great extent', and eight did it 'somewhat'.

1.3 Learning policies and patterns

1.3.1 Sticking to 'the known'

The respondents were asked to evaluate the usefulness of 15 types of learning-oriented activities (figure 6). There was a positive stance towards most of the techniques. But four specific points need to be made: (1) There was a total consensus on the relevance of providing feedback to staff on their performance, and reflection and learning meetings (10 scores as 'useful', 1 as 'rather useful'); (2) Interactions with the field (contacts with clients, visiting projects) and participation in group processes were also highly appreciated; (3) coaching of staff, discussion groups, training were also appreciated, but the number of people scoring them as 'rather useful' was considerably higher than for the previous categories; (4) More 'alternative' approaches (action research, action learning, shadowing, communities of practice, virtual platforms) and participation in conferences received a considerably lower score. The remarkable presence of the 'no answer' category in the case of these less orthodox techniques suggests a serious lack of information on their content.
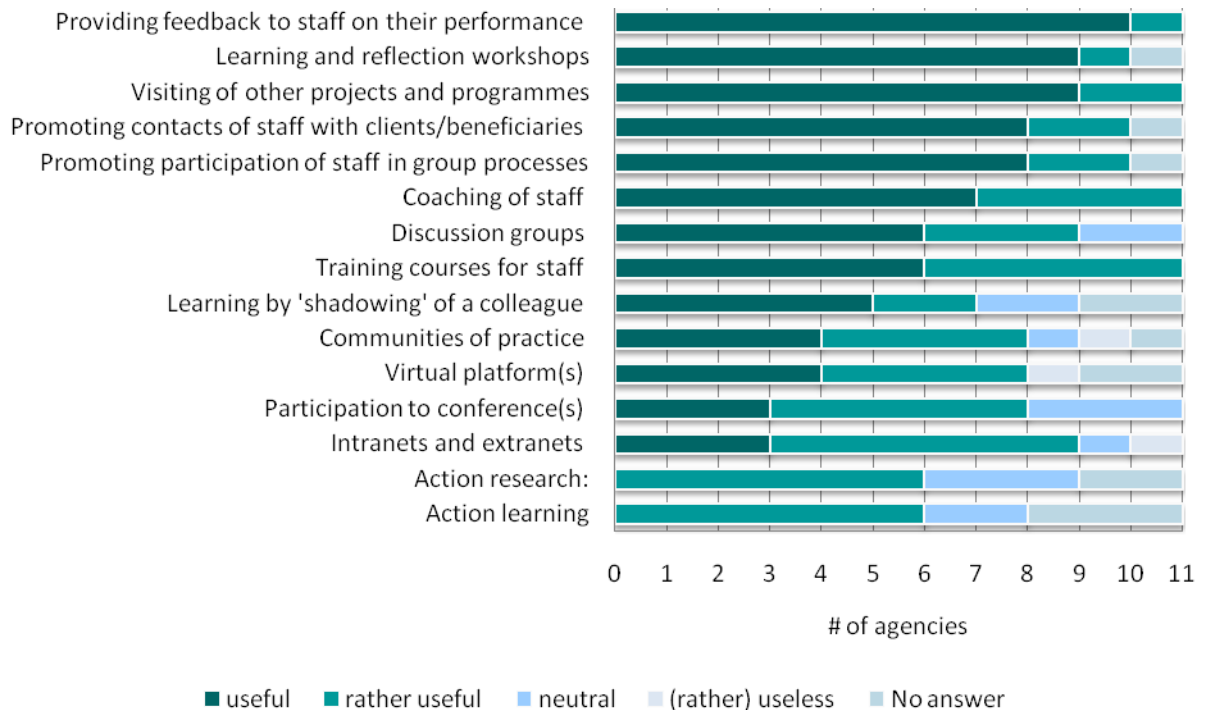
Figure 6: Appreciation of 15 types of learning-oriented activities (n=11, March 2008)

1.3.2 Future plans focus mostly on ICT-based solutions, formal training and coaching

Most agencies planned to invest more resources, personnel and time in OL and KM. Asked to operationalise these intentions (figure 7) respondents told that a large part of the investment would be on the improvement of the organisational memory (ICT-based solutions). That corresponds with what McGrath & King (2004) described as the *technological approach* and what Britton (2005) called the *first generation knowledge management approach*. Coaching and communities of practice, project visits, and training, will receive more investments from about half of the agencies. The other learning-oriented activities were less popular and only a minority planned to do more of them in the future. This is remarkable in view of the finding in the previous section. While performance appraisal/feedback, for example, was perceived as a very useful activity in support of learning (figure 6), only a minority planned to invest more in it in the future. This is worrying in combination with the findings of some studies that indicate that performance appraisal/feedback tend to be rather weak in many development agencies (Houghton et al., 2003, Reynaert, 2008).

Figure 7: Plans for the future with 15 learning-oriented activities

From the top 5 of activities which were perceived to be useful by the respondents in subsection 1.3.1 (group processes, contacts with clients/beneficiaries, project visits, learning and reflection workshops, and performance appraisal), only one (project visits) was planned to be organised more in the future by a majority of the agencies. This meant that additional investments in learning focus not necessarily on activities that were found to be most useful. This could confirm findings by Smit (2007) that there is often a discrepancy between what the head office staff perceives as effective learning strategies (both informal and formal learning activities) and how they perceive that learning should be promoted (writing down, storing and disseminating knowledge; and formal training).

1.4 Conclusion

In most agencies OL and KM were considered to be a priority area that needed more resources. But are the conditions for a successful change currently fulfilled? An earlier discussion of Britton's work (2005) learned that these conditions touch upon the necessary *means, opportunities* and *motivation*. The preceding findings suggest that they are only partially present in most of the 11 agencies.

Many agencies signalled difficulties in pooling the required expertise to support OL and KM. They also found it hard to draw lessons from M&E activities. They tended to increase their investment mainly in the codification of knowledge. Some informal techniques (group processes, contacts with beneficiaries, providing feedback) scored very high on the scale of relevancy, but clear attempts to increase these activities in the future remained rare, probably assuming that these are already happening sufficiently. While most agencies intended to provide more time for learning and reflection to increase the opportunities for learning, new investments were not going towards creating, for example, better conditions for informal learning and other important strategies for learning. And finally, about half of the agencies told that they had problems to motivate staff for learning.

The 2008 practice in Belgian agencies is very diverse. There is, however, the constant trend to see learning as an activity that does not require separate support structures. Only a few create specific positions and structures. This suggests that there is a large gap between the intentions of the agencies and the structural decisions they take. It is a reminder of Ramalingam's conclusion (2005) that learning is often implemented as a non-priority area: "… when the rhetoric is stripped away, knowledge and learning is simply another clamouring voice in the 'thought-world' of the organisations covered, with insufficient linkages to their core operations" (p. 29).

Section 2 The VVOB case

2.1 Scope

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the key developments in the organisational life cycle of VVOB. As mentioned there, the regional government of Flanders from 2005 on openly questioned the relevance of its relationship with the agency and decided to cut back core-funding progressively. A deep crisis emerged. In light of this development, the board of directors asked VVOB to review its vision and mission. At the same time, the main federal funding agency, which was now providing more than 90% of the funds, pushed VVOB towards working in accordance with the new aid paradigm. Consequently, the organisation was faced with the most trying period in its existence. The various waves of reorganisation in staffing and operating procedures lead to a significant and recurrent staff turn-over at the head office in the period 2005-2007. By 2007, one of the long standing programme officers moved into a management position and together with the new director steered the organisation in a new direction. A nine-

country evaluation in 2010 was largely positive about the performance of VVOB as an actor in development.

2.2 Composition of the team

It is useful to distinguish between three types of actors within VVOB (situation in the period 2005-2007). First, there was the head office in Belgium. Its staff numbered 11 to 12 people: the head of the organisation, 4 to 5 programme officers, a programme director (this position was removed in 2006 and re-introduced in 2008) and a staff member responsible for quality, evaluation, and policy (I was holding this position between July 2006 and October 2007, which, in practice, was merged with the post of programme director). Each programme country had a coordinator and an administrative assistant. The individual projects usually included one to a maximum of four expatriate development workers (field staff) and sometimes local staff in administrative or operational positions. Although budgets of VVOB increased slightly over time, the number of expatriate staff has gradually decreased from about 150 in 1997 to about 35 in 2007[31].

The organisational set-up of VVOB and the day-to-day operations resemble those of many development agencies with technical assistance personnel. During my research, each programme officer in the head office followed 2 to 3 countries.

2.3 VVOB as learning environment

The organisation did not have, until 2007, an explicit position dealing with human resources management or organisational learning. In the head office, these topics were one of the many responsibilities of the staff member for 'quality, evaluation and policy'. But in the absence of a clear vision and an apparatus, and given the multitude of other tasks, little capacity was available. At the country level, the job description of the coordinator did not mention, also until 2007, any responsibility in the field of learning.

Contacts between the agency and the project teams normally went via the country coordinators. Each coordinator was in charge of the portfolio of projects in his or her country. Basic internet and email facilities were provided systematically for all staff in the head office and in the field by the end of 1990s. This resulted in increasing communication flows. The intensity of communication and follow-up varied, however,

---

[31] This went hand in had with a gradual increase of national staff and a significant increase in operational budgets (workshops, infrastructure, ..) related to the introduction of a project-based approach.

significantly between the country coordinator and the head office level, depending on the individuals involved. The same applies with regard to the relations between the project teams and the country coordinators.

Section 3 ZimPATH: the HIV-AIDS prevention programme

3.1 Scope

The Zimbabwe Participatory Training Programme in Higher Education (ZimPATH) was an HIV-AIDS prevention project that started in 2003 from a small scale peer education programme in a teacher training college in a little provincial town. It evolved to become the biggest college-based prevention project in primary and secondary teacher training in Zimbabwe. While growing steadily, the project tried to preserve its specific small scale character, based on processes which are bottom-up, voluntary, participatory and organised by and for student teachers. By the end of 2007, the project was active in 15 teacher training colleges throughout the country, supporting local HIV-AIDS coordinators, college administrations and various groups of peer educator clubs in running comprehensive prevention programmes in their colleges. Also, starting from May 2006 ZimPATH was enlarged to include secondary schools. And it was asked by UNICEF to provide training workshops on HIV-AIDS prevention, gender and counselling to more than thousand teachers and school heads throughout the country.

3.2 Composition of the team

In my capacity as VVOB country coordinator, I was personally involved in the initial design of the project and it was one of the six projects in my portfolio up to 2006. A significant part of the field research for this thesis took, however, place after 2006 when I was working as staff member for VVOB in Belgium. At that time, the project had been active for 3,5 years and was coordinated by two project coordinators, one a Belgian and the other a Zimbabwean. They were supported by six Zimbabwean team members. The Belgian coordinator (ZC1) was the driving force behind much of the strategic thinking and the philosophy of the project. He had already four years' experience with VVOB in the education sector in Zimbabwe before he joined ZimPATH. The Zimbabwean coordinator (ZC2) was appointed approximately 1,5 years after the start of the project, but she had worked on a volunteering basis in a previous project of VVOB. She was the operational manager and played a leading role in negotiations and networking with the various stakeholders. Both were key actors in the programme.

3.3 Research relevance

The ZimPATH project was chosen as a case study because it demonstrated much stronger learning processes than some of the other VVOB projects. Examples of that were provided in the methodology section, but will also be explored in the coming chapters. There are strong indications that these learning processes went hand in hand with team effectiveness. When applying the indicators of Hackman (2002) for effective teams[32], ZimPATH can be called effective because:

1) *Stakeholders evaluated the outcomes positively.* Indications can be found in available secondary data. ZimPATH was evaluated twice by external experts and received positive assessments on its performance [33]. In addition, in 2005 the programme was chosen by an international NGO (Training and Research Support Centre - TARSC) as the testing site for new HIV-AIDS awareness materials for the African market (Auntie Stella, 2005). ZimPATH also received good scores from project beneficiaries for its workshops and other activities. Finally, the programme concept and approach were incorporated into the new three year programme of VVOB Zimbabwe (2008-2013).

2) The capability of the team increased considerably. The fast growth of ZimPATH resulted in capacity development activities in 15 teacher training centres and activities in hundreds of secondary schools. There was also a continuous introduction of new themes and methodological approaches. This was needed as the complexity of the theme and the influence of various socio-cultural factors forced the team to make regular changes to existing approaches.

3) *The individual team members' capabilities improved greatly.* At the start, most of the team members had only limited expertise in this specific field and had to learn while implementing the programme. The performance appraisals of the team members provided material, which documents the broad learning processes they were involved in.

3.4 A challenging external environment

ZimPATH showed serious resilience in an environment that can hardly be called conducive for institutional change. By the time I visited the project in May 2007 for the

---

[32] These are, as has been discussed in the literature review: (1) products acceptable to clients; (2) growing capability of the team; (3) Growing individual learning of team members.
[33] December 2004: Report Zimbabwe country programme evaluation; December 2005: Evaluation Report of ZimPATH project

field research, it had become clear that the problematic socio-economic and political situation in Zimbabwe presented the team with countless logistical and other challenges. Electricity and water cuts, irregular telephone connections, fuel shortages, shrinking school budgets and high staff turnover in the colleges were the order of the day. Sometimes very simple actions, such as contacting a college in another town, could take many hours. It all affected significantly the efficiency with which activities could be organised.

Another problem was the unpredictability in the support of the national education ministry and the ministry structures at the district level. The project worked mainly at the college level and, generally, received enough backing from the ministry to guarantee sufficient operating space. But permissions to hold workshops were sometimes cancelled last minute or half of the participants were called urgently away. The Zimbabwean project coordinator had to mobilise all her social skills when at the start of a series of important workshops the ministry officials created a crisis situation. ZimPATH had set-up a task team together with the ministry to develop a new training programme for secondary school teachers. At the tryout a ministry official blocked the process.

> ZC2: Some of the things we learn happens by accident, really. We have a situation that confronts us and we have to deal with it., .. Ministry people did agree with the (workshop) scenario when it was discussed in the preparation phase, but then the feedback they gave us during the actual training was shocking. They brought in issues which were totally divorced from what we were doing.

But she learned her way out and un-blocked the situation by using a culturally appropriate strategy.

> ZC2: Using an African 'technique' I was being very humble and actually asking for advice, even if I knew the answer was really obvious. I would go and ask him what he thought what we should actually do here. And that helped. Because when you give them respect, they are very supportive.

These issues would usually appear in an unpredictable way and the team had to be on stand-by to respond to them, often with last-minute programme changes.

In addition, at that time VVOB was not used to employ local staff or manage the demands of complex programmes[34]. Therefore, the project team had to deal also with a significant amount of red tape from the side of the Brussels-based staff.

3.5 A complex programme

The specific nature of the project theme (capacity building for HIV-AIDS prevention at college level) posed its own challenges. The presence of diverging views and opinions on the possible solutions for the HIV-AIDS pandemic meant that project strategies had to be continuously negotiated and re-negotiated with the stakeholders[35].

Many of the challenges ZimPATH had to tackle are specific for what L. Crawford & J. Pollack (2004) call 'soft projects':

- o *They have a limited goal clarity and tangibility.* The ambition of ZimPATH was clear, but the tangibility of the goals was low because of the ethical questions around the measurement of someone's HIV-AIDS status[36];
- o *They lack quantifiable indicators*: how to measure sustainable behaviour change at student-level and increased capacity at college level?;
- o *There are substantial external influences*. HIV-AIDS prevalence is closely linked to the socio-economic situation in the country;
- o *There is a broad range of alternative solutions*: what kind of changes of behaviour does the programme want to achieve and how?;
- o *High stakeholder participation is needed* for capacity development and behaviour change*;*
- o *Stakeholders have differing expectations of the process:* socio-cultural assumptions, norms and expectations differ largely with regards to HIV-AIDS in Zimbabwean society.

All these factors result in change processes that are unpredictable, non-linear and have a power-shifting dimension. Consequently, there is a high increase in the complexity of the tasks involved.

---

[34] The Belgian project coordinator had, for example, to buy with his own means two additional cars for the transport of project staff to workshops nationwide, because VVOB was reluctant to invest in project cars.

[35] Next to the widely varying views on the type of measures that should be promoted (contraception, abstinence,..), strong differing views abounded on what kind of awareness programmes could be provided to what age of school children.

[36] Statistics showed that 85% of the Zimbabweans who are HIV-positive, do not know their status (and often do not want to know it because of the lack of options in case a test would be positive).

As may be expected, it was impossible for ZimPATH to use a blue print approach to implement the project. The team had to explore different options and learning processes to evaluate what worked and what did not.

3.6 The workplace as a learning environment

The ZimPATH team was housed in a residential plot (with a main house and some side buildings) in a Harare suburb. Seven team members had their offices in a large open room in one of the side buildings, which allowed frequent informal exchange. The Belgian project coordinator had a small office in the main house, which also served as his residential house. Most of the time there was some activity on the plot, with project visitors and various stakeholders coming and going. The staff had access to internet and the office was equiped with a small but specialised library with text books, teaching materials and other relevant documentation. The coordinators indicated several times that it was rather difficult to motivate the busy staff to use the existing library for the preparation of activities.

In several interviews and contacts reference was made to the pressure from work in the ZimPATH team. The work environment was challenging. The fast growth of the project within a few years, and the high intensity of activities it had set itself to achieve also contributed to this situation [37]. To maintain the momentum in each of the participating colleges, the team members were often on the road (for about 60 to 70% of their time), organising capacity building workshops on a wide range of topics, such as peer education, HIV-AIDS prevention, facilitation skills, project management skills, mainstreaming gender. These activities were frequently organised over the weekend. With colleges spread out over the whole country travel was extensive,

> ZC2: … there is a tendency in being blinkered because you are so busy from going to one workshop to another.

Therefore, activities for reflection and learning were continuously in competition with other urgent tasks.

---

[37] In the period 2005-2007, the ZimPATH project managed to organise more than 70 participatory workshops annually, most of them prepared, implemented and followed-up with the actual target groups (students, lecturers), and often implicating large groups of students (75-300) in colleges across Zimbabwe.

Section 4 St2eep: The environmental education project

4.1 Scope

The Secondary Teacher Training Environmental Education project (St2eep) started in January 2003. It was a partnership with the local Department of Higher and Tertiary Education, three Secondary Teacher Training Colleges and VVOB. The project grew out of a maths and science teacher training project, in which the expatriate staff were involved as college lecturers. The St2eep project moved away from the substitution of lecturing staff. Its main ambition was now to build local capacity at the college and departmental level for the integration of environmental education (EE) principles in the curriculum. The hope was that such project would enhance sustainable utilisation of natural resources and life skills. Building the institutional capacity for EE was done through in-service training of lecturers, the facilitation of the syllabi review process, the development of EE learning resources and the support of college-based EE initiatives. Since 2007, the project was also active in secondary schools through training activities for teachers on the topic of sustainable development.

4.2 Composition of the team

As country coordinator I was involved in the project from 2003 until 2006. From 2004 on St2eep was the testing ground for my first research activities.

Interviewee SC1, the expatriate staff member, was part of the project from its inception. As lead facilitator he played a central role in the various stages of the project, supported by two additional expatriates whose work was, after three years, taken over by the Zimbabwean college-based coordination team. The Zimbabwean project coordinator SC2 was a fulltime lecturer in one of the colleges, but spent most of her free time in St2eep. Each of the participating colleges had a college EE coordinator and a support team with volunteering lecturers.

4.3 Research relevance

St2eep clearly stood out in the way it explicitly worked on the improvement of learning and reflection within the project team. Learning in St2eep also went hand in hand with team effectiveness. As for the ZimPATH project three indicators demonstrate this outcome:

1) Stakeholders evaluated the outcomes positively. St2eep was evaluated twice externally over the period 2004-2006[38]. Twice the assessment was positive. Several internal evaluations by beneficiaries had a similar result. External recognition was visible in the recurring funding of St2eep by the regional Southern African Development Community - Regional Environmental Education Programme (SADC-REEP). In 2007, UNICEF asked the team to implement outreach activities for secondary school teachers. The programme also played a significant role in lobbying and facilitating the decision making process that led to the national EE policy in Zimbabwe. Local lecturers who participated in the programme presented papers in local and regional conferences. Finally, M&E processes in St2eep were identified as a good practice in a recent OECD-DAC publication on aid effectiveness (OECD-DAC, 2009, p.85)

2) The capability of the team increased considerably. The project embarked on a systematic review and 'greening'[39] process of a large majority of secondary teacher training curricula in Zimbabwe (from woodwork to mathematics). The three expatriate members facilitated this process, but most of the work was done in multi-disciplinary teams, consisting mainly of volunteering lecturers. St2eep also went through a process of growing institutionalisation, which saw local volunteering lecturers successfully taking over the overall management of the programme in just a few years time.

3) The individual team members' capabilities grew significantly. VVOB performance appraisals confirmed that the three development workers made a successful switch from a lecturing job to the one of project facilitator. Two of them had also enrolled in a post-graduate training programme, which supported their work and offered opportunities to research their own professional practice. There is no detailed information on the progress of the Zimbabwean project coordinators as they were employed as college lecturers. But there are certainly enough elements (project management, EE and research skills) to state that they went through a process of personal growth.

Based on the seven parameters of L. Crawford (2005), the change processes that St2eep supported can be called complex and unpredictable, just as for ZimPATH.

---

[38] Evaluation of St2eep project (VVOB, June 2005); evaluation of country programme VVOB Zimbabwe (VVOB, 2005).
[39] Integration of elements of EE in the training curricula.

4.4 A complex programme, but with a lesser sense of urgency

St2eep tried to navigate in a rather unpredictable environment, with no clear-cut answers or blue print scenarios for the project team. Although the context was comparable with that of ZimPATH, the set-up of both projects differed significantly. The St2eep activities also involved considerable moving around for the key project coordinators (about 25-35% of the time), but not at the high level of intensity as in ZimPATH. This was mainly because of the smaller number of colleges in St2eep and, secondly, because of the bigger role the individual college coordinators played in the management of the project. This meant that there was less need for travelling around. In general terms, the interactions in the project were relatively relaxed, although sometimes more stressed around workshop events, but generally following the same patterns of normal college interactions.

The project had seen for many years a rather stable core team and a more loose group of lecturers moving in and out of the picture, depending on their time, interest and commitment. Creating long-term motivation, momentum and behaviour change on issues related to sustainable development and reaching out to lecturers outside the core-group has been a major challenge. This was witnessed during several workshop evaluations and other assessments exercises. Given the socio-economic crisis in the country, the needs and interests of the project beneficiaries were mainly short-term, rather than focused on the next generations. In an effort to ground the project sufficiently in the local context, significant time and resources were invested in defining the actual topic and the approach for EE. This process was set up together with the target groups of the project[40]. The same principle was followed for the EE integration process. Building local capacity was a central ambition. Hardly any project activities ended up being out-sourced. For example, EE manuals and materials were written mainly by stakeholders of the project (St2eep, 2006).

4.5 The workplace as a learning environment

Up to 2006, the three expatriate members had their office in one of the colleges. This location also served as EE resource centre and meeting room, with a large variety of EE related books and internet access. St2eep did not have local project staff on a contract with VVOB. The college based EE coordinators (Zimbabwean nationals) had a small office in the college with internet access. Communication in St2eep was regular and happened via email, telephone and informal exchanges within the colleges.

---

[40] This resulted in a publication, titled 'EE in secondary TT in Zimbabwe', (St2eep, 2004).

However, after a critical mid-term self-assessment in mid 2005, the team realised that the sustainability of the project's institutional set-up was very problematic. It was not owned by the participating colleges and the expatriate staff was positioned too centrally in the design. A radical review led to their gradual withdrawal from the colleges. By the end of 2006, the college based Zimbabwean EE coordinators were managing the project and the daily project reality was now very much intertwined with college life and rhythm.

This transformation was, however, not obvious at all because the project was now run by volunteering lecturers, who were still performing their normal lecturing duties. Also, college life had been heavily affected by the socio-economic crisis that hit the country from 2000. College budgets had run dry with hardly any funds for consumables. Salaries of lecturing staff were ridiculously low, and many students were dropping out because of a lack of funding. At the time of the field research (May 2007), the new project set-up with a much smaller role for the development workers had been operational for six months.

Chapter 5
Processes with learning as principal object

This chapter discusses activities in VVOB as an agency and in the two case study projects that have learning as the main objective. Studies of Eraut (2007) provided strong empirical evidence that less than 20% of learning of professionals happens through these kind of activities. Much more important is, according to the same author, implicit informal learning that is the product of another type of practices in a work setting. These are discussed separately in chapter 6.

All the activities which had learning as a key objective were sub-divided whether they were dominantly oriented towards formal learning or to informal learning. This distinction is not binary, but has to be seen as a continuum. Most learning activities will include some elements of both informal and formal dimensions, and this will in turn depend on the context and the way they are developed. Annex A presents a list of the main processes in VVOB which have learning as a principal object. This listing was used to develop table 6. It provides an overview of the learning activities with an appreciation of the degree of formality and informality.

Type of activity	Dominant learning-orientation								
	Formal←					→ (Deliberate) informal			
Formal learning-oriented									
Training and education	x	x							
Coaching		x	x						
Attending conferences		x	x				x	x	
Manuals		x	x	x					
Performance appraisal		x	x			x	x	x	
Induction programme			x	x			x	x	
Informal learning-oriented									
Mentoring					x	x	x		
Shadowing							x	x	
Action research					x	x	x		
Intranet /virtual community / project websites			x	x			x	x	
Monitoring and evaluation							x	x	x
External cooperation advisors						x	x	x	
Outreach activities with grass roots NGOs							x	x	
Annual seminars with country coordinators			x	x			x	x	x
Coordination meetings at country level				x			x	x	x
Team meetings or working groups							x	x	x
Quarterly capacity development newsletter							x	x	x

Table 6: Overview of degree of (in)formality of key learning processes in VVOB

Up to 2008, VVOB did not develop an overall policy on workplace learning. Specific plans on the support and the monitoring of learning were absent. The only formal procedures referring to workplace learning were brief guidelines for attending training and conferences (VVOB, 2000), for the management of the projects (VVOB, 2001, VVOB, 2003b), for external evaluation (VVOB, 2003a), and for performance appraisal (VVOB, 2004).

Chapter 5, covering the period 2000-2007, presents the formal and deliberate informal learning processes listed above, assesses their effectiveness and examines variables explaining their degree of performance. A distinction is made between practices at the project level (section 1) and the agency level (section 2). The empirical material discussing both levels has been grouped according to the initiating actor (head office, country office and project team). A final section contains a list of conclusions.

Section 1 Formal and deliberate informal learning at the project level

1.1 Formal learning

In chapter 2 formal learning has been defined as those situations which are characterised by a prescribed learning framework, and/or an organised learning event or package, and/or the presence of a designated teacher or trainer, and/or the award of a qualification or credit, and/or the external specifications of outcomes.

The findings in this section are based on data from a variety of sources. For the analysis of the agency practice an extensive but critical use has been made of existing material (monitoring and evaluation reports, procedures, studies, performance appraisal documents, notes from meetings and seminars) collected over the period 2000-2007. For the projects, data were assembled through individual interviews, contributions to newsletters, monitoring and evaluation reports and research papers. Finally, my own observations as participant and researcher during the period of study were also added where relevant.

1.1.1 Head office-driven
VVOB supported three types of formal learning. An induction programme was developed for newcomers. Some training manuals were produced. Thirdly, learning

needs of staff were to be identified, planned and followed-up through a performance appraisal framework.

Induction of new staff

The instructions for the initiation of new staff focused on training preceding departure. The content varied significantly over time. Since 2000 it consisted of general sessions about living and working abroad, project management, intercultural issues, and local languages. From 2002 on, this was complemented with a two-week attachment at the head office. There were no documents available that formally evaluated those activities. There was only an inventory for the period 1982-2002 (VVOB, 2002). However, my interviews with new staff members arriving in Zimbabwe and my observations of new field staff participating in training activities at the head office suggest that the whole process was not perceived as being very effective. Frustration was related to the almost exclusive focus on training and briefing sessions *before* the actual departure (which resulted in an overload of information on procedures and content) and, consequently, to the absence of structured guidance and support during the first months on the field.

Manuals

VVOB developed manuals to guide teams on project cycle management, external evaluation, performance appraisal, and gender mainstreaming. Very little evidence could be found of individuals, project teams or the agency as a whole using these manuals explicitly to improve their practice. No references were discovered in interviews, surveys, documents, or informal conversations with staff. This could be explained by the fact that most teams are action-oriented and do not have or take the time to go through manuals. Secondly, the content of this kind of publications was often too general to support the complex learning needs of members. A final explication could be that the manuals were developed by people at head office with not enough experience in the production of such publications for professionals.

Performance appraisal[41]

The performance appraisal system was based on a typical results-based management framework. It makes for each team member a distinction between objectives that are linked to the project and objectives that aim at individual professional development. Its implementation required significant resources and was introduced by consultants, who

---

[41] The performance appraisal system is discussed both under formal learning (the professional development goals) and informal learning (the performance appraisal interviews). Here we look at the formal learning component.

also provided a training session for the country coordinators and the head office staff. The templates of the performance appraisal system included a section listing individual professional development goals, to be monitored every 6-months. Starting from 2004, the system with individual goals was closely linked with the funding modality for formal training and participation in conferences. As indicated before, for this a short procedure was developed (VVOB, 2000), indicating a maximum annual budget that could be spent per field staff member.

About one year after the introduction of the performance appraisal system, a survey (VVOB, 2005) involving all staff members (69 respondents) revealed the limited effectiveness of the system. Almost 40% of the interviewees stated that the system with professional development objectives did not contribute to their individual learning. Another indication can be found in the discussions during the annual seminars with the country coordinators. Participants raised concerns with regard to the insufficient feedback and support for professional growth. The 2006 pre-conference workshop with three groups of VVOB field staff also made similar observations (see also section 1.2.1).

A broader interpretation of these challenges was made possible through an analysis of the individual professional development goals listed in 33 performance appraisal documents of field staff in four countries[42]. All identified activities (98 in total) were clustered in 11 groups, according to their nature (see table 7). About one third of the activities deal with required attitudinal changes or specific project tasks that did not have a clear professional development component. They are not included in the table. A large majority of the activities (75%) can be labelled as formal learning. The rest belongs to the category of informal learning activities. In addition, only a small fraction (9%) of the formal and informal learning activities included learning in group, for example via team work or via exchange with other projects.

---

[42] This covers about half of the staff complement at that time. The four countries (Zambia, Rwanda, Kenya, en Ecuador) were chosen at random.

Type of learning activity	Totals (%)	Activity	Sub-totals (%)
Dominantly formal	**75%**	Following courses	**49%**
		Reading	**19%**
		Attending a conference	**7%**
Dominantly informal	**25%**	Visit or exchange with other projects	**9%**
		Keeping log book	**6%**
		Contact with clients or stakeholders	**4%**
		Apply training	**3%**
		Action research	**1,5%**
		Publishing	**1,5%**

Table 7: Analysis of individual learning activities listed in professional progress plans (period 2005-2007)

These documents also showed that many learning activities tried to strengthen the knowledge in a technical area related to the project topic (hard capacities). A further review of the appraisal documents learned that most often no feedback sessions or follow-up activities were planned that would guarantee the application of the newly acquired skills after the learning event. Neither was reference made to changes that had to be made to organisational procedures or processes, so as to improve the likelihood of skills application. In about half of the cases no explicit link with capacity assessments at the project level or agency level existed. Thus, in the absence of a clear policy, staff development risked being disconnected from strategic needs at the project level, and organisational barriers to skills application were less likely to be mediated.

1.1.2 Zimbabwe country office-driven

At the country office level in Zimbabwe formal learning events were organised for the teams, such as training on workshop facilitation, on supporting capacity development of Zimbabwean partner organisations, and on project management. Evaluation by the participants shows that the topics on the agenda were perceived as very relevant for the daily project work (e.g. 18 of 20 participants gave the workshop on process facilitation an 8/10 or higher).

> Person8: They will assist me in planning and facilitating my St2eep project activities and also they enhance my skills as lecturer /facilitator.
>
> Person9: Methods are immediately applicable eg. ORID to prepare discussions in meetings.

Examples of the application of the trained skills can be found in monitoring reports. The training input remained, however, rather ad-hoc and the process approach was limited in time and scope. Importantly, the relative success may actually be explained by informal learning components that were added to the set-up: the staff participated in the identification of the topics, the training included the exchange of experiences and peer review and, finally, follow-up activities were organised in coordination meetings and via the Capacity Development Newsletter (see also section 1.2.2).

1.1.3 Project-driven

Offering opportunities for formal learning was an important feature in the two projects. Various types of training, both short term and long term, were organised. In addition, ZimPATH had an explicit approach for the initiation of new staff.

Induction of new staff

The initiation of new staff was carefully guided in ZimPATH, where it involved more than formal training through a mix of mentoring, participation in a range of ongoing activities, and basic training. It therefore combined formal and informal learning. The (implicit) policy became more comprehensive over time, based on the review and feedback from newcomers. A mentor was assigned to introduce the new members to policies and procedures. They were also asked to join other staff in ZimPATH workshops and to contribute where possible.

> ZC2: A lot of the learning (for the new employees) happens through the participation in workshops, preparing the workshops beforehand, travel together, doing things together, but without placing too much responsibility on the new member.

St2eep had no formal induction programme. Local lecturers who volunteered to become part of the team could do so by attending the monthly St2eep steering team meetings in their colleges.

Short term training

In St2eep, specific short term training courses and conferences for team members aimed at building local capacity. In total some 50 people attended such activities. It was, however, a learning process in itself to plan those activities in a more strategic way. Indeed, initially, things went wrong.

> During the first year of St2eep (2003) a considerable number of lecturers was given an opportunity to pursue the Environmental Education (EE) certificate at Speciss college. From this pool of trained lecturers, only a few are still actively

involved in St2eep activities. (contribution to Capacity Development Newsletter 3, 2004)

This experience led the team to rethink the approach and a process perspective was adopted.

> We also observed stronger implementation of acquired skills or attitudes when individual training is linked to a framework in which the acquired expertise or awareness can be of any use. In other words, it is important to see training as an initial step in a bigger process. (For example,) when we involve lecturers from a certain subject in a 5 day EE training/orientation workshop we see very little action after this 'rather expensive' activity. It is only after several follow up visits to the particular sections and continuous support throughout the year that things get moving and lecturers start to actively revise their syllabus. (contribution to Capacity Development Newsletter 3, 2004)

In ZimPATH, formal learning played an important and strategic role in the development of the content and the methodologies of the project, as is illustrated in these two quotes.

> ZimPATH has clearly benefited quite strongly from training (organised for) the team...., enhancing the chances for deepening our content in workshops and even choosing the most appropriate methodologies in given situations. (contribution to Capacity Development Newsletter, 3, 2004)

> The fruits of the ICA training and even the Margaret Sanger training in South Africa are manifesting clearly in the building up of our life skills programmes as for techniques and content. The training on Journey to Wholeness has given our life skills programmes an interesting edge in spirituality, which is quite crucial for behaviour change. As for facilitation, the team can easily adapt various techniques and approaches from different training programmes they received, blending them well in different situations for even better results. For instance, the use of the circle and the talking piece from The Art of Hosting at Kufunda is not only becoming popular in our workshops, but also proving to be useful for activities that need deep personal sharing to foster behaviour change. (Contribution in Capacity Development Newsletter 3, 2004)

This illustrates that in both projects informal learning components (follow-up visits, support, and trying out the new skills in project activities) were added to short term training.

Long term training

This type of training was seen, in ZimPATH, as an ad-hoc investment in the professional growth of team members, based on their individual demands. In St2eep,

on the other hand, long term training was planned in terms of the specific challenges of the project. Some ten college team members participated in courses that took between 3 months and one year. Two out of three expatriate field staff and one local team member participated in a regional two year post-graduate master programme. All of them were set up in such a way that the assignments and applied research activities were of direct use for the project .

1. 2   Deliberate informal learning

This subsection explores the presence and relevance of informal learning processes that are deliberate and intentional, such as monitoring and evaluation, communities of practice, virtual communities, performance appraisal, and mentoring. As indicated, these activities are located on a continuum between deliberate and implicit informal learning, depending on the context and the way they are set up. However, they all share a certain degree of learning intentionality.

The same editorial division as in the preceding section will be applied here.

1.2.1 Head office-driven

Here five techniques will be discussed: internal monitoring and evaluation (M&E), external evaluation, the support of external advisors, interviews during the performance appraisal, and project websites. Several of them were driven from a concern of accountability towards the back-donor.

Internal monitoring and evaluation

Internal M&E involved a 3- to 4-monthly reporting on the progress of the project and annually a more in-depth evaluation of its global status. VVOB developed reporting templates to document this process. Although the content and the lay-out changed over time, they generally contained a progress review of the key result areas (via indicators referring to, for example, improved teaching skills of teachers, a completed curriculum review, etc.), a space to explain the current progress, and a listing of the main activities done in the reporting period. An extensive survey (VVOB, 2005) found, rather surprisingly, that staff were rather positive about the relevance of M&E reporting in view of documenting what had happened in their project[43]. However, a more mixed

---

[43] Although the survey was anonymous, the questions were often formulated as statements which could have provoked socially desirable answers, and might therefore be expected to be biased in the positive direction. For example: "Q12. The analysis of the status of the project is done in a participatory way together with the project team".

picture emerged when looking at how M&E was perceived as a possible contribution to learning. Only 55% of the field staff perceived monitoring as playing a role in team learning processes. In the 2007 email survey and in the 2006 focus group discussions that I coordinated, a majority of the respondents also indicated that conflicts of interest existed between the accountability needs and the learning needs of M&E. In addition, mention was made of problems with sharing the learning within the team.

> E4 (2007 email survey):At the moment there is a weak balance between learning and accountability [with regard to M&E]. The focus is still on the reports (with a certain deadline), the process is still subordinate.

> M9 (2005 email survey): The development worker tries to involve the project steering committee members in the development of the Progress Monitoring Report, but there is hardly any feedback. Except for the learning experiences for the writer of the report, it would not be right to talk about an internal reflection process at project level.

In the same 2005 survey, about half of the field staff indicated that data collection in their project was not very systematic. In addition, there were problems with feedback on M&E reports. They were also cited in the 2006 focus group sessions: "…communication and feedback mechanisms are weak and not systematised". This is in line with earlier findings in research I did. In the survey of Belgian agencies I noted that, while formal M&E processes were seen by the head office staff to be very important for learning, a large majority acknowledged that it is difficult to learn systematically through M&E at the field level and at the agency level. Similar remarks are found in the literature (Guijt, 2008, Crawford, 2004, Gasper, 2001).

Interestingly, on some issues a clear difference existed between the perceptions of the country coordinators and those of the project staff, as is also reported in other agencies (see Mebrahtu (2003) in chapter 2). In the 2005 email survey, most of the country directors (7 out of 10) saw M&E being used as a real management instrument (including for learning), while only about a third of the staff argued that this was the case.

External evaluation

The introduction of systematic external evaluations in 2003 was announced by VVOB as an opportunity for learning, but the initial set-up had a strong focus on

accountability[44]. For example, initial procedures for the reporting phase of evaluations (VVOB, 2003) made it clear that findings were to be treated as an instrument for control and accountability. Learning from the evaluation was seen as a process whereby the head office provided instructions to the evaluated project on the basis of the report, which was exclusively sent to the head office. In an earlier research paper (Huyse, 2005b), I concluded that external evaluation in VVOB was set up following a *conventional external expert model* (Horton et al., 2003, Estrella and Gaventa, 1998). This is an approach,

> … where experts come from outside an organization and design and implement the evaluation relatively independently from the organization's staff and management. Staff, management, and stakeholders are consulted, the information from these consultations is incorporated into a review report, and the report and recommendations are presented to the organization's management. (Horton et al., 2003, p. 207)

This type of evaluation can be broadly characterised (Estrella and Gaventa, 1998) as

- focused on measurement;
- oriented to the needs of programme funders and policy makers, rather than participants or local people;
- striving for objectivity, and distance between evaluator and participants;
- conducted for the purpose of making judgements rather than empowerment.

During the 2005 seminar with the country coordinators, the external evaluation practices were reviewed critically. Two main issues emerged. Firstly, the participation of the field staff in the whole cycle of the evaluation process was perceived to be too limited.

> currently, [head office] is determing the whole exercise. There is a need for more input from the partners and the field in the preparation, implementation and feedback, …[and] a better integration in the programming cycle. (report 2005 seminar)

A lack of participatory approaches and espoused decision making on the basis of evaluation findings confirmed the power imbalances and created little confidence with local partners in seeing evaluation as a learning tool. This is also documented by Estrella and Gaventa (1998). Secondly, the experiences with the external expert model were also mixed because of the lack of skills of evaluators in evaluation methodology, as referred to in an internal memo (VVOB, 2006a), and in the 2005 seminar

---

[44] This can be seen in the light of the growing decentralisation of the management of activities and funds, for which evaluation was seen as a way to increase ex-post control.

> Some evaluation provide little added value. Not all evaluators are familiar in evaluation methodologies. The sending of a technical evaluator is often insufficient. (report 2005 seminar)

The actual evaluation practice changed gradually in the 2004-2005 period, relaxing debriefing and report review procedures, and allowing more participatory techniques. In other words, learning from external evaluation existed, but some hindering factors were still present.

External cooperation advisors

The support system with external cooperation advisors was introduced in the early 1990s to provide scientific back-up for the programmes. The assistance was largely based on informal learning processes because of the ad-hoc character and unstructured nature of the inputs (mostly email advice on specific topics, provision of resource material, and exchanging ideas during field visits). A SWOT analysis by the country coordinators (VVOB, 2005) and an email survey (VVOB, 2007) revealed that this form of technical backstopping was relevant in less than half of the projects. Part of the problem was related to the fact that the advisors participated on a volunteering basis. Time investments were not covered financially, leading to very variable commitments and availability. Some advisors took it very seriously and contributed significantly.

> The cooperation advisor (SWA) brings an incredible surplus value to the project. Working in the long term with the same SWA helps to deepen visions and bring in the necessary patience for educational innovations. (email survey, 2007)

Others steered projects strongly towards their own academic interests. A third group saw it simply as an interesting annual field trip. In addition, the underlying concept was based on fixed ideas about the transfer of knowledge from Northern centres of expertise to the South. In reality, many of the challenges the projects were confronted with could not be addressed by simply transferring best practices. This also created issues around ownership.

> The cooperation advisor does not match with the project. It is not the right man on the right place. There is local or regional expertise that we could attract.

> The cooperation advisors report to head office, who in turn than steers the projects… Is this still correct now that we are demanding a stronger focus on the ownership of the partner(s)? (report 2005 seminar with country coordinators)

The need for a deep engagement with the issues at stake and for an in-depth contextualisation of the models and approaches could not be realised through such short and short sighted interactions, except in those cases where there was a serious engagement.

Performance appraisal interviews

The six monthly performance interviews and the annual evaluation interviews were meant to become important moments for informal learning and feedback. This at first, was not realised. In the 2005 survey that was discussed earlier in this chapter some 40% of staff said that the performance appraisal interviews were not properly organised. Subsequent discussions during the annual seminars with the country coordinators underscored the need for a significant improvement of the implementation procedures.

> The work pressure is repeatedly stressed. According to the respondents new instruments are developed which increase the administrative burden of the field staff. (RCM survey, 2005)

> For some field staff, RCM equals the exchange of documents via email. (RCM survey, 2005)

That the system in its early stage failed was caused by a series of developments. The same 2005 survey revealed that almost 50% of the field staff members perceived their job description as not in line with their actual professional activities. The problem was that the system took the job description as an important reference. Some improvements to the system were introduced. But, in the absence of a HR-responsible person at the head office, country managers (who had to organise the interviews) received very little back-up support during its actual implementation. Consequently, they were poorly equipped to hold critical and, at the same time, motivating performance interviews.

> Some project coordinators are not trained in the skills for the interviews and the defining of SMART RGD/OGD's [professional development goals]. Therefore there is a large difference between the project on how RCM "works". (Report 2005 seminar)

> HO5 (action research workshop in head office): It was when we wanted to use the RCM reports [performance appraisal] to decide if [person x and y] could switch to a new programme that we realised that the whole RCM system did not work. It was rather useless.

Project websites

The head office encouraged the teams to set up project specific websites. A pilot study (Huyse, 2005a)[45] amongst five teams that had websites and three that were in the preparatory stages examined the strategies behind the websites. The links between the inputs (training, website design) and the expected outputs (information sharing) were visualised through 'concept mapping' (Venezky, 2001). Most of the projects presented a straightforward model.

The survey and the interviews showed that the programme logic of these websites was based on the wrong assumption that their presence and the provision of information would automatically result in beneficiaries and stakeholders downloading materials, and, at the same time, in improved information sharing with the general public. Consequently, the effects in terms of knowledge management and information sharing at the project level were rather limited. This finding has to be understood in the context of the unrealistic expectations regarding the internet at the time of the research (Britton, 2005). In addition, the involvement of beneficiaries and other stakeholders in the design process and content creation (appropriation) was very limited. Pryor and Ampiah (2003) found such participation to be critical for a meaningful ICT learning experience in developing countries.

1.2.2 Zimbabwe country office-driven

The informal learning activities driven by the country office consisted of peer review sessions, exchange via newsletters, and the VVOB virtual community. Because the main focus of the last activity was towards agency level learning, it is presented under section 2 of this chapter.

Quarterly coordination and reflection meetings at the country level

I introduced regular meetings with all staff on a 3-monthly basis. Next to more operational issues, these meetings also included a half or full day session to exchange project experiences, to do peer review sessions, or to discuss new developments. A small survey amongst the development workers in January 2004, indicated that 9 of 11 field staff members perceived these meetings as 'good', or 'very good'. Although it was not always obvious to motivate teams to take time for more reflective exercises, the documentation of the meetings showed that the quality of the exchanges improved

---

[45] An email survey in 8 projects in 3 countries (Kenya, Ecuador, Zimbabwe) and a case study with users (students and lecturers) and the website manager in St2eep.

significantly over time. For example, drawing lessons from the 2005 country evaluation was translated into three reflective sessions with all project teams, a full day session to reflect on the report and its consequences. The meetings showed at their best moments characteristics of a community of practice: (1) The group of teams had a clear identity ('the domain' as in Wenger, 2006) defined by a shared domain of interest and shared competencies, and commitment of the members. (2) We were engaging in joint activities and discussions, helping each other, and sharing information ('the community'). (3) And this also went hand in hand with the development of a shared practice ('the practice'), visible in the way the projects were implemented and followed-up.

Quarterly newsletter on experiences with capacity development (2004-2005)
Projects were asked to share their views in every Progress Monitoring Report on a central challenge around capacity development (e.g. 'What is the role of training in capacity development?'). These contributions took the form of reflective pieces of 1 or 2 pages and were compiled in a newsletter, sent around agency-wide, and discussed in subsequent meetings. This initiative worked very well to raise awareness and improve capacity on this topic within the teams, as could be witnessed by the growing variety in capacity development activities, and the quality of the contributions in the newsletter. It also steered up the debate in the head office to some extent, for example by lobbying for the inclusion of a half day session about capacity development in the annual seminars with the country coordinators (2005). After 1,5 years the working group that followed up this initiative was broadened as the 'Reflection and Learning Working Group'. This process was described by myself in one of the newsletters:

> It is now a bit more than a year that this workgroup has been active in Zimbabwe. The initiative to establish the capacity development workgroup was taken after being exposed to a one day introduction session about capacity development in March 2004. The general feeling was that capacity development was central to our work, that we all had many experiences with it, but that there was not enough shared understanding within the organisation about what CD actually is. .... With time the group started exploring also other issues that were still related with capacity development, but that could probably be better categorised under a different heading. ... This is why it was proposed to change the name of the workgroup to the Reflection and Learning Workgroup. (contribution to Capacity Development Newsletter 4, 2005)

While there were very positive individual responses to the Newsletter, and browsing through them one learns that the contributions dealt with issues that are still central to the current debate, there was hardly any systematic feedback or support from the head

office, or from other projects outside Zimbabwe. Somehow, the organisational culture in VVOB was not oriented to this type of horizontal knowledge sharing, while experience shows that the topic of capacity development is extremely important for VVOB and something the organisation keeps on struggling with up to now.

1.2.3 Project-driven

ZimPATH and St2eep made use of a broad range of deliberate informal learning activities.

Internal M&E and external evaluation

The experiences with internal M&E were quite different in the two projects. Formal M&E did not provide a platform for learning in ZimPATH. A learning opportunity existed for the Zimbabwean team member who wrote the actual reports, but not for the team as a whole. In addition, the head office most often did not provide feedback on these reports. As a result no reference was made by the project coordinators to internal M&E as a strong source of individual or team learning.

> ZC1 … they (the reports) are mainly descriptive, what has been done, and so on... Together with the sometimes slow change in the project, this gives the uncomfortable feeling to the person who is writing it that the same things are repeated quarter after quarter.

A number of smaller changes was eventually made. One was the use of forms where learning points from workshops could be incorporated into the M&E process. But the heavy agenda of workshop activities made it difficult to reflect and capture these points systematically, so that new insights remained almost invisible. All in all, formal M&E procedures seemed to be divorced from other learning processes.

However, the coordinators of ZimPATH noted a positive experience with one of the external evaluations.

> The visit for the evaluation of VVOB projects in Zimbabwe has proved to be very useful particularly to ZimPATH in helping us look and reflect on the work we do. (Contribution in Capacity Development Newsletter 4, 2005)

St2eep on the other hand invested significantly in improvements of the learning dimension of the internal M&E approach. For three years (2003-2005), progress monitoring and evaluation were guided by a logframe-based list of indicators, linked to the programme's main result areas. However, by the end of 2004, an in-depth and internal reflection exercise with the team and stakeholders, made it clear that the use of the logframe produced limitations and challenges for the specific context of St2eep.

This was researched in a joint case study for the International Development Research Centre, IDRC (Deprez et al., 2007):

- M&E became a practice of report writing by the staff to meet the official budgetary and reporting requirements from the head office. It did not address the learning needs of the project.

- The logframe did not question or address the project's theory of change and intervention paradigm (and therefore, did not address its sustainability).

- The logframe-based M&E process was divorced from the project because local partners did not have the opportunity to actively contribute their input and perspectives.

These experiences prompted the team, in cooperation with the country office, to explore the use of Outcome Mapping (OM), an alternative M&E framework[46] (Deprez et al., 2007). This approach is based on principles of (1) monitoring via self-assessment, (2) fostering feedback, reflection and learning, (3) promoting internal and external dialogue, and (4) following-up on unintended effects. Interviews with the team, a systematic analysis of monitoring reports for the period 2003-2007, and personal observations identified strong indications that OM made St2eep's M&E cycles more learning-oriented (Huyse and Van Ongevalle, 2008):

- OM helped to make the M&E process more actor-focused in its approach. This is a consequence of its underlying theory of change, which centres on the transformations that key partners have to go through. By involving these actors, ownership of St2eep's M&E system became more endogenous. This increased the motivation for learning via M&E.

  ST5: …It allows my college administration to see what I have achieved in EE which is one of my college duties.

  ST6: …There is strong peer assessment.… This resulted in strong improvement in one college and colleagues admitting embarrassment outside meeting.

- The application of OM stimulated the team to craft an M&E system that provided useful tools (learning means). Via journals, partners followed-up their own progress, and the team monitored its strategies. The results of these exercises were discussed and reviewed in learning-oriented meetings, followed each time by planning sessions. In this way, OM has offered specific

---

[46] OM focuses explicitly on the relationship between the project (the implementation team) and the key stakeholders, which are called boundary partners. In OM, the programme develops a variety of strategies to influence the boundary partners towards changes in behaviour (e.g. changed professional practices) in line with the vision and the mission of the programme.

learning spaces (opportunities for learning) for meaningful dialogue and reflection on the progress of the project.

> ST7: …exposing people's expectations against ground experiences – based on factual data instead of assumptions.

> ST2: using the Progress Monitoring Report (PMR) instruments brought focus to the exercise. Without the PMR instruments this was not done in any systematic way but more anecdotally…

> ST7: …Greater room during progress monitoring meeting to discuss, analyse, allowing informed planning during OMT meetings and developing factually loaded reports during NMT meetings…

- However, an analysis of the monitoring reports learned that the team was sometimes challenged by the multitude of progress markers to be observed. It faced difficulty bridging the gap between the reality of the day (activity-based) and the more long-term strategic thinking (overall progress). These observations posed a challenge for deeper learning about the long-term change processes that the project was trying to achieve (Huyse and Van Ongevalle, 2008).

In summary, it can be concluded that internal M&E processes were perceived as relevant for learning in St2eep, but less in ZimPATH. The situation in ZimPATH was more similar to the head office-initiated practice. On the other hand, even in the case of St2eep, the improved learning was limited to the direct stakeholders. It did not lead to a higher quality of interaction with the agency level.

Team meetings and working groups to reflect on way of working
Team meetings and temporary working groups were seen to perform well for learning in ZimPATH and St2eep when an opportunity was created to review a certain approach or a certain method that the project had used for some time, as illustrated in this quote from ZimPATH.

> R1: this is when we sit together and discuss the strengths and weaknesses, for example, of the life skills workshop scenario' Also the preparation for a new type of workshop, for example, around HIV-AIDS and stigma, is sometimes done through a thematic working group.

ZimPATH team members found, for example, that first year students asked much more technical questions about HIV-AIDS than 3 years before. This was attributed to the fact that taboos slowly diminished in number. Initially, the facilitators did not always have answers. Therefore further professional development of the staff was required.

In St2eep extensive use was made of this type of meetings, for example via 4-monthly monitoring meetings, and via team learning days on individual and collective challenges.

Applied research

St2eep has been the subject of a number of research activities. These were used to support programme implementation, a quite unique situation in VVOB. In the form of action research it involved learning about and acting on major challenges in the project, such as questions on the sustainability of the project approach, the relevance of monitoring and evaluation, capacity development strategies towards the St2eep volunteers, and the greening of the curriculum. More than 30 research papers for conferences, journals and internal use, were written by the field staff and the lecturers of the participating teacher training colleges. One of the VVOB cooperation advisors, a Belgian university professor, was involved in some of the research. This was perceived as very positive by the team:

> The project has benefited from this partnership through professional advise on .. [various topics]. Joint publications are also being worked on. (contribution to Capacity Development Newsletter 5, 2005)

These activities contributed to project level learning in four ways. First, the action-research process encouraged the team to review its monitoring and evaluation practices and make them more learning-oriented. St2eep, consequently, became one of the first development projects to apply and publish experiences with the Outcome Mapping methodology in the African public sector[47]. As indicated earlier, the project's experience was identified as good practice in a recent OECD-DAC publication on aid effectiveness (OECD-DAC, 2010). Secondly, participatory research on the project's institutional sustainability brought the necessary insight and support for a second-order review of the design. Thirdly, several college lecturers developed new research skills and had their papers discussed for the first time in international conferences. And finally, the research activities made the team conscious and articulate about how learning processes could be understood and supported. This was visible in the development of the learning-oriented M&E system, and the continuous attention for team-oriented learning activities during the implementation of the project's components. It could also be witnessed by the number of research papers which refer

---

[47] See the website (www.outcomemapping.ca) of the Outcome Mapping community (more than 2000 members in 2010). For some time, the St2eep papers were in the top 10 of the site's most downloaded publications.

specifically to learning processes in the team (Chimbodza, 2004, Van Ongevalle, 2008, Van Petegem, 2007).

Outreach activities

ZimPATH staff was encouraged to participate in outreach activities with grass roots organisations. Its management saw a need for the staff to build a more realistic understanding of daily challenges of disadvantaged people in Zimbabwe. These activities increased motivation and enriched the activities in various ways. M&E reports of ZimPATH provided clear illustrations of how this contributed to learning of individual team members:

> An opportunity arose for the team to work with a group of mothers of disabled children, Batsiranai, in Dzivarasekwa, preparing them to go for HIV testing and making a follow up support visit. This proved to be quite an invaluably useful experience for the support team, to compare with the generally modified and artificial college environments in which they are used to work. (Progress Monitoring Report, quarter 3, 2005)

Project website

St2eep set up a website in the course of 2003 and 2004, which I researched in 2005. A user test by lecturers and students, and an email survey and interviews with the website managers (Huyse, 2005a) identified its programme logic.

The team assumed that the creation of a website would promote the use of ICT by college lecturers and students and improve knowledge sharing inside the project and with the external world. The programme logic differed from a number of other VVOB websites as website maintenance teams were trained in the three participating colleges. They were responsible for the content management and maintenance of a number of web pages. The St2eep website coordinator noted, however: "The lecturers were very motivated to participate in the training, but they seem rather hesitant to contribute actively to the website content". He also stated that this was caused by a "… lack of confidence with ICT and lack of time". The website was revamped in 2006 and more incentives were provided to encourage college lecturers to contribute. This led to a temporary increase in website activity, but after some time the momentum disappeared again. With the exception of the expat member, other EE team members hardly contributed. The content did not change much. It is unlikely that the website played an important role in knowledge management within St2eep and among stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Mentoring and informal coaching

The coordinators in ZimPATH took up a mentoring and informal coaching role for the follow-up of the performance and professional growth of team members, as is illustrated by a quote of one of the coordinators:

> In the beginning, the VVOB lead facilitator needed to travel together with the less experienced facilitators to workshops for back-up support. This has long since changed, with the support team becoming more independent in both preparation and facilitation of workshops, meetings, events, etc.

Seen from a process perspective, his mentoring role also changed over time,

> .. the VVOB facilitator now comes in handy in challenging the normal ways of thinking, looking for new ideas and approaches and in reflection on important learning points. (Contribution in Capacity Development Newsletter 4, 2005)

This personalised follow-up and support had impressive results. In less than a year some of the young and inexperienced staff members developed the skills and the expertise to prepare, lead and follow-up complex workshops with 200 to 300 tertiary education students and with groups of teacher training lecturers and facilitate other highly participatory capacity development processes at college level.

Section 2 Formal and deliberate informal learning at the agency level

2.1 Formal learning

The annual seminars with country coordinators were the only activity that involved formal learning sessions at the level of the agency. During these meetings short training sessions on selected topics (gender mainstreaming, M&E, performance appraisal systems, capacity development, quality of education,..) were organised. They received, in average, high appreciation scores (around '4' on a scale of '1'-'5') by the participants for the content and for the accomplishment of participants' expectations, as is demonstrated in the evaluation reports for the period 2002-2006. The lowest score (3,4) came in 2005 when VVOB was in the middle of turbulence. The highest score (4,6) was for the seminar in December 2006 that took place right after the international 'VVOB Days' workshop (see section 3, chapter 7). Their effectiveness could be observed also in the dynamics they generated afterwards. New guidelines and procedures were developed and, sometimes, practices in the field were changed. Contributing to the success were, as the participants mentioned in their evaluation

reports, the hands-on nature of the training, the opportunity to exchange information with colleagues, the relevance of the themes and the quality of the resource persons facilitating the sessions.

> Very interesting to see the whole team together in action and exchange all sorts of info and ideas. ..I really have the feeling to go back home with more knowledge.

> Very practical approach, knowledge is largely present inside the organisation, so that we do not always have to rely on external experts. (Report 2004 seminar)

On the other hand, review and discussion reports suggest that some of the participants missed systematic follow-up and support in the implementation of the new skills.

2.2 Deliberate informal learning

2.2.1 Head office-driven

Drawing lessons from internal M&E
The extent to which internal M&E reports were read and analysed at the head office depended largely on the individual programme officers. This chapter already mentioned the complaints of teams on the lack of feedback on reports. Such lack was even recognised by the head office staff:

> The perception (and maybe the experience) of field staff is that VVOB head office is only interested in technocratic issues and not in the content side of the programmes. There is hardly any feedback by Brussels on reports from the field and the reporting is mainly one way. Therefore the expectations from the field are low towards support on content or mutual learning within VVOB. (report of workshop with programme officers, 2007)

No documented attempts existed to extract wider lessons from M&E reports. The gap between the aspirations and the practice of M&E in supporting agency-wide learning has been widely documented and discussed in the literature (see Ramalingam, 2005). However, even if the quality of reporting and feedback systems would improve significantly, the actual relevance of formalised M&E systems for learning at the agency level might be limited. The decentralised set-up of development agencies makes it very difficult to add informal learning components to written reporting systems. In addition, it has been proven that many of the learning experiences can not be

captured through documentation. Being informal means they are more tacit and unlikely to be codified for learning.

External evaluations

Systematically drawing lessons from external evaluations beyond the individual projects or programmes turned out to be troublesome for the agency (Country Evaluation Zimbabwe 2004, Country Evaluation Kenya, 2005, Back-donor follow-up visit, 2005). From 2005 on attempts were made to improve the situation, such as making a recurrent analysis of all the evaluation reports of a given year or by developing short fact sheets with the main learning points for each evaluation. But it was never specified how and when these findings had to feed into decision making.

VVOB intranet

An intranet system with a database function was developed in 2005. The organisation wanted to improve its organisational memory by storing more thoroughly internal procedures and documents and educational materials that were developed in the projects. The system never really worked[48]. Communication about new procedures still went via ad-hoc emails, not the intranet. Incentives from management to use the system were almost absent. Field staff did not contribute to the database, nor did they use it to look up information. After a few months the head office stopped referring to the initiative. Field staff increasingly saw the intranet as another demand for information and reporting with little relevance to the daily practice[49]. Britton (2005) documented how many NGOs went through a similar experience with their ICT-based learning initiatives. A central problem is the missing human factor in these systems.

Annual seminars with country coordinators

The annual seminars were a second technique to strengthen informal learning at the agency level. They gradually grew with the years into important opportunities to exchange experiences, introduce new developments in the organisation, correct outdated procedures, and discuss future strategies. The informal learning output for the participants was significant. Discussions during the meetings often influenced strategic choices in the respective country programmes, as is illustrated by this quote:

> Generally speaking the participants state that the seminar is aligning very well with the pre-occupations in the field. This can probably be interpreted as the consolidation of the change process in which we have been for several years

---

[48] Email survey and online discussion May 2007
[49] Evaluation of VVOB organisational learning tools, May 2007

> now and the significant impact these [annual seminars] have on our work. (evaluation report, 2004 seminar).

They also helped VVOB to develop a shared identity and vision at the agency level. Proof of this is the increased coherence of the various country programmes over time. However, as indicated earlier, they created only a temporary momentum. In addition, the seminars only targeted the country coordinators, and only indirectly other field staff (if they were briefed once the country coordinators were back at their station).

But a success they were. Evaluation reports and observations during the preparation and participation phases identified some factors of explanation: the strong involvement of the country offices in the preparation of the agenda, the hands-on nature of the sessions, and the mix of approaches (exchanges of good practices, short presentations of concept notes, review of discussion papers, and peer review of country strategies).

2.2.2 Zimbabwe country-driven

The *VVOB Virtual Community*, an ICT-based knowledge sharing initiative that was explicitly targeting the agency level, was launched in cooperation between the country office in Zimbabwe and a development worker in Kenya. This initiative grew out of the recognition that learning was hardly shared between projects in the same country, and even less with VVOB projects in other countries or within the overall agency. The plan was to create an online platform with as key components: a forum for staff to exchange ideas and experiences on a variety of topics related to their work; a database on which documents could be uploaded; and a blog tool to share stories from the field. The scheme was deliberately initiated and presented as coming from the field level and it had the ambition to be complementary to the head office intranet, which was set-up in the form of a static database. Both architects of the initiative were aware at that time that the head office was not flexible enough to develop and manage a virtual community in a spontaneous and open way, and that field staff had to take the lead in designing and managing their own social spaces[50]. So, they wrote a strategy paper outlining why this new initiative was important, how it differed from the intranet, and how it would be developed. The paper was presented to the head office and received green light during the June 2005 seminar with all country coordinators. The following step was to invite all field staff to participate in the website development and

---

[50] Many field staff tended to experience the organizational culture of VVOB as quite centralistic, low trust and control-oriented (evaluation reports, 3 workshops on organisational learning during VVOB Days in November 2006, own observations)

management. Six people stepped in and soon the website was up and running. A number of emails were sent around to promote the initiative.

In the first few months the initiative turned out to be a moderate success with several field staff contributing to the platform. But a small scale survey (September 2005) among the staff in Zimbabwe, one month after the start of the community, showed mixed results. Two-third of the people were enthusiastic, the other third was more sceptical and critical. Coincidentally, at the same time the Kenyan partner left the organisation. When later that year I returned to Belgium the initiative was not taken over by the head office or by field workers and the momentum disappeared.

The Virtual Community was an initiative to improve knowledge sharing at the level of the organisation. It failed, although it responded to a real need and was built bottom-up with active participation from the field. What went wrong with what seemed to be a promising initiative? Chapter 7 will return to that question and will present some specific elements in VVOB's learning support framework and pattern as part of the answer.

Section 3 Conclusions

3.1 At the project level

An analysis of the head office-driven practice shows that, generally speaking, staff development was largely reduced to *formal learning*, often translated in individual learning activities, with little links to organisational needs and insufficient attention for follow-up activities with regard to feedback, support and skills application. This was clearly visible in the way the performance appraisal system and the production of the manuals were made operational. A similar finding was made for the induction practice. It is no surprise that a significant number of staff members perceived these activities as having a limited effectiveness. As a group, the head office-driven activities either built on unrealistic ideas around knowledge transfer (cooperation advisors), codification of knowledge (M&E, project websites), or were implemented without the necessary resources or back-up support (performance appraisal). None of the activities was based on real group processes, such as team learning activities, or forms of participatory action research.

A different practice was developed by the Zimbabwe country office and by the two projects. Here, training and workshop meetings were strategically aimed at building capacity in the teams. A learning curve was visible and follow-up activities became more geared towards the use of new skills. But the most important feature was the upgrading of formal learning through the use of *deliberate informal* training and induction techniques (e.g. the exchange of experiences, peer review, mentoring). The more positive evaluation that was registered is very probably linked to these various aspects. Indeed, as country coordinator, I observed the growing insights within the teams into what kind of training would contribute under which kind of conditions. There were many discussions during ZimPATH and St2eep team meetings about the relevance of certain types of training, including reflections on past activities. It also became a returning topic during the coordination meetings with all staff in Zimbabwe. Other successful informal initiatives by the country office and the teams were based on collaborative learning: coordination and reflection meetings and documentation of experiences (newsletters) at the country level; applied research in teams and experiential learning and interactions with beneficiaries (e.g. outreach activities) at the project level. On the other hand, while the specific knowledge sharing techniques (e.g. a newsletter, a website) contributed to learning processes, they were limited in scope and were not picked up at the head office level.

3.2 At the agency level

The most relevant agency-oriented learning activity, organised by the head office, was the annual seminar with the country coordinators. My data analysis suggests that they were highly appreciated by the participants and that they generated change dynamics. In addition, through the combination of *formal and informal learning* techniques they helped the head office and the country coordinators to slowly build a shared identity and vision. Shortcomings were: insufficient follow-up and skills implementation support and the restricted reach of the results as field staff was not directly touched.

Secondly, internal M&E and external evaluations were perceived by the head office as important opportunities for *deliberate informal learning* at the agency level. My surveys, interviews and focus group sessions, however, did not find enough evidence to conclude that this became a reality. In several instances M&E was reduced to report writing and feedback was scarce. Initially external evaluation was not very participatory and rather control-oriented.

A third category of deliberate informal learning actions was ICT-based: the VVOB intranet (a head office initiative) and the VVOB Virtual Community (started by the country coordinator and based on knowledge sharing rather than storing documents). Both failed. The former was ignored after about 6 months and quickly became an information graveyard, while the latter never reached a critical mass of activity and support.

Chapter 6
Work activities with learning as a by-product

A large part of learning happens implicitly, that is during certain practices at work that are generally not associated with learning. As such it is rarely recognised and perceived as relevant by those involved. This poses a problem of a methodological nature: how to make that type of learning empirically observable? Section 3 of chapter 2 has presented, based on Eraut's research, an indirect way of observation: the study of work processes and the related concrete work activities that have the potential to induce implicit learning. Chapter 6 discusses the findings. The focus will be on the factors that, according to the theoretical options that were made in section 7 of chapter 2, foster or hinder the production of implicit learning.

Technically, the chapter makes a distinction between learning at the project and at the agency level.

Data were pulled together in several ways:
- Action research workshops with project teams and head office, where a specific (informal) learning process was re-constructed and analysed in group.
- Interviews with project team members.
- Observations during field work.
- Email surveys.
- Analysis of project documents and research papers.

Section 1 Implicit learning at the project level

As in the preceding chapter a distinction will be made according to the VVOB actor that is organising the work activities.

1.1 Head office- and country office- organised[51]

Section 7 of chapter 2 presented four sets of factors that might explain the frequency of implicit learning. Although it was beyond the scope of the thesis to examine implicit learning in all VVOB projects, relevant data were collected on one such set, namely the type of allocation and structuring of work.

Both offices could, in theory, involve existing field teams in the initial design of a project and its organisational set-up. This would create the type of work processes and activities in the field that typically induce implicit learning (working in a team on a new challenging project, consultations with stakeholders and beneficiaries, problem solving, ..). However, in preparation of the 2003-2007 programme, two thirds of the identifications (first phase of project design) of new projects were done by external consultants (17 on 24 projects)[52], and 13 out of 24 were outsourced for the formulation phase. In those cases, participation of the country coordinator and field teams was very limited. The head office found it inappropriate to involve staff from existing projects in the formulation of new ones for fear of conflicts of interest. In Zimbabwe a different course was followed. It was the country coordinator who led the project design process, with inputs from project staff, partner staff and outside consultants. This activity took several rounds of negotiations, fact finding, workshops and review of project reports and, consequently, created opportunities for joint learning. For example, the participatory planning workshops with various stakeholders and beneficiaries often turned out to be a real balancing act for the design team to satisfy the diverging interests, and at the same time arrive at a coherent, relevant and compelling project design, which was owned by all actors.

A second issue relates to the problematic structuring of work in the project implementation phase. The amount and type of *work pressure*[53] is a crucial element in the valorisation of learning opportunities. Lack of time, perceived or real, can produce pressure and stress that will hinder such learning. Over-ambitious goals and reporting loads play an important role too.

---

[51] In VVOB crucial decisions about the initial design of the project (objectives and strategies) and the organisational set-up (project structures) are in principle jointly taken by the head office, the local partners, the country coordinator and the staff of existing projects in the country concerned. However, in most cases the main role was played, first, by the country coordinator because of his/her pivotal position in between the head office and the local partners and, secondly, by the head office because of its control over funding. This is why this part is described as jointly 'head office- and country office-organised.

[52] The projects in Zimbabwe are not considered for this calculation (see further in this paragraph).

[53] The words in italic refer to factors that constitute a particular cluster.

E1 (2007 email survey): Lack of time and high workloads, due to lack of personnel, often puts learning activities in a less important ranking. They are often postponed, since not urgent… Postponing leads in many cases to omitting.

E4 (2007 email survey): Projects have a heavy activity and reporting load, leaving little time for systematic learning by project staff.

The report from the three focus group sessions (VVOB, 2006) also concluded that in general ' … time pressure pushes learning and reflection activities to the periphery'. Along similar lines, several evaluations in the period of the research referred to the overambitious goal setting which resulted in project teams chasing from one activity to another.

1.2 Project-driven

Once a project was up and running, the project coordinators took most of the organisation of work in hand. From the study of the project-initiated work activities a picture emerges that is different from the one that was documented in subsection 1.1 of this chapter. At first sight it looks as if factors were operating that were not conducive to implicit learning in ZimPATH and St2eep. But both teams succeeded in making the odds even. This conclusion is based on the effects of three of the four sets/clusters of factors that influence the frequency of implicit learning (the fourth cluster was discussed with the introduction of the cases in chapter 4).

1.2.1 Allocation and structuring of work

ZimPATH and St2eep have been confronted with significant *work pressure and stress*. This was, as mentioned in chapter 4, due to four developments:

- the aggravated socio-economic state of affairs in Zimbabwe;
- the *complex* social change the projects tried to facilitate;
- and, in the case of ZimPATH, the long and irregular working hours (including weekend work), often away from home.
- ZimPATH was also faced with many changes in the composition of the team, caused by the relatively high staff turn-over levels. Part of the explanation lies in the vast pressure for *personal professional growth*. For example, in mentoring or informal coaching sessions and during performance appraisal interviews, the management's expectations would be discussed and if there was limited progress over time, contracts risked being ended. Also, some team members

decided to resign, sometimes because they felt that the management style induced too strong a steering of work behaviour (*degree of autonomy*).

Such conditions should have affected in a negative way the output of learning in general, and of implicit learning in particular. The next paragraphs will deal with the question of how both teams succeeded to allocate and structure work in such a way that a positive implicit learning environment was created.

Given the many challenges the running of ZimPATH faced, it required a learning-oriented management approach to negotiate and test possible problem solving strategies. Although there was no master plan outlining how implicit learning would be nurtured, several practices in the team had that effect. The frequent work outside the office meant that the opportunities for exchange and coordination within the team were scarce. Nevertheless, project documentation shows that group events were planned well. The *structuring of work* guaranteed that tasks and responsibilities were clearly assigned (also in view of learning opportunities for the staff), and communication flows were intensive. The team was meeting regularly and in different set-ups. Other, more content related activities were discussed in smaller working groups with changing membership[54].

In addition the team saw frequent interaction with *beneficiaries and other stakeholder*s as productive for joint learning.

> ZC2: We had people from TASC[55] and their help for 'Auntie Stella', we had CDC[56] for the components of counselling. These interactions are important.

> ZC2: and another local NGO (EOS), we learned a lot from them when we were doing things around child abuse, then we could relate it to the real situations that are happening in the schools, instead of artificial examples from the newspapers.

In St2eep, team work was perceived as providing support to individual team members. It seemed to be an effective strategy to tackle the challenges the project was confronted with. This could take various shapes and forms, such as, task teams for special undertakings: handbook development, curriculum review, new training events.

---

[54] For the development of new workshop scenario's, the preparation of workshop materials, the planning of new activities, etc
[55] TASC: Training and Research Support Centre in Zimbabwe (NGO), who piloted their HIV-AIDS prevention module for school kids through ZimPATH.
[56] CDC: Centre for Disease Control, Washington

The participation in specific task teams was argued to be in various ways beneficial for the learning of team members:

> People who have been involved in the St2eep programme, have been able to participate in the different little steps that the programme has taken as it is dealing with environmental education processes. Through this participation, people... have been able to build up their professional capacity in different fields such as facilitation, planning, negotiation, writing, critiquing their own professional practices and experimenting with ideas of environmental education, research, team work, etc. (contribution to Capacity Development Newsletter 1, 2004)

> SC1: active st2eep members were drawn into a new task team, responsible for organising the UNICEF funded livelihoods training for teachers. These were strong learning moments for the members of this specific team, i.e. learning about specific content on sanitation, water, etc... but also on training approaches and logistics of setting up a big training programme.

> SC1: ..we organised the EEASA conference[57] in 2006, that has been an enormous learning process for our team in terms of project management skills, networking, and communication.

In an interview the expatriate staff member of St2eep gave a specific example of how he saw team learning happen in practice. The team had to start with a new phase in the project, supporting the implementation of the curricula they had 'greened' in the first phase, and it was not clear where and how to begin:

> SC1: …For example, the same happened for the support of the EE implementation process, we went to conferences, trainings, etc.. but honestly speaking, no one really had a clue how to do this.

But, by bringing a sub-team together ideas were pooled and slowly solutions started emerging.

> SC1:.. fortunately because of the work that happened in the past, there was a critical mass of people that were interested to tackle the problem, some money was then needed to bring people together to discuss the challenge a number of times, then go back to their stations [colleges] to do certain things, then present them in a new meeting, and so on.

St2eep also invested significant human resources to create conducive conditions for implicit learning. This was produced by reserving sufficient time for *developing a practice of formal and informal regular team meetings and opportunities for reflection.*

---

[57] EEASA-conference 2006: Regional conference of the Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa, which was organised in Harare, Zimbabwe, through the facilitation of the St2eep team.

In addition to the monthly and quarterly team meetings at the college and the national level, in average at least 4 different working groups operated in parallel on components of the programme. They met with a frequency between weekly to monthly.

In the context of action-research workshops ZimPATH and St2eep teams were asked to reconstruct, over a long period of time (6 to 9 months), the individual or group initiatives dealing with a difficult challenge their project was facing at that time. The listed activities were then reviewed in terms of learning effectiveness. The numerous initiatives all shared one or several of the following elements: they

- o were based on formal and informal group processes of planning, trial-and-error, reflection and review, and new tryouts;
- o contained important informal discussions between two or more team members that triggered learning;
- o included learning moments through interaction with outside stakeholders or beneficiaries.

Both teams also tried and most of the time succeeded to bring *variation* in the work through regular reviews of approach and strategies, changes in target groups, and the venturing into new themes or areas. In St2eep team members had a significant degree of *autonomy* in designing and implementing the programme, but had to comply with college procedures and habits.

1.2.2 Encounters and relationships with people at work

There were times that ZimPATH and St2eep were confronted with problems in the area of professional relations. This caused a significant negative condition for implicit learning.

An action-research workshop made it clear that ZimPATH experienced periods where *relationships within the team* were problematic.

> ZT3: For about a year the tension has been rising in the team. This has been very disturbing.. Strangely, it took more than 9 months before it was acknowledged openly in the team.

This is also described in one of the interviews with the Zimbabwean project coordinator. She illustrated how tensions started surfacing in the middle of the final preparations for an important project event, ending in verbal fighting in public. This specific workshop with secondary school teachers had been planned for some months.

It was also the first activity for a potentially important future donor, with a new target group (secondary school teachers), with a new ministry, and running simultaneously in multiple locations. But tension in the team had been piling-up and it all came together during the workshop:

> ZC2: And all this was now in the team. When we were preparing the (workshop) scenario, it became difficult because they really couldn't work together.. We would go over a part that a couple prepared and sort of critique and analyse it. The attacks were forceful and almost violent…

In addition, some of the coordinators in the colleges who looked critically at the younger and better paid facilitators of ZimPATH used the opportunity to settle scores.

> ZC2: This all played up in the preparations of the [new] workshop with team members critiquing each other. The [college] coordinators came to me and said 'sort out your team…'

The long preparations did finally pay-off and the activity was completed, but there was a sour after-taste.

> ZC2: … I managed to contain the workshop and then we sat together with x and y afterwards… But, you travel together and then at the end there was this disintegration which was painful, instead of 'hey we did it!.

All this created temporarily a rather tense *atmosphere between colleagues*.

In St2eep, the strong embedding of the project into college structures was an important achievement. It was remarkable since the socio-economic environment contained hardly any ingredients for successful volunteering work. This increased local ownership and sustainability significantly (see also chapter 4). At the same time, however, it also meant that the project was undergoing the typical slow pace of change in a college environment. In addition, the local core-team members had to balance continuously between their role as project implementers (and thus change agents) and that of lecturers (as equal colleagues). This was a difficult balancing act. They complained that peers in the colleges envied them for what was perceived as attractive professional development opportunities offered by St2eep. Similarly, the other lecturers often assumed incorrectly that the core-team was getting paid for its St2eep work. Therefore, they experienced forms of peer control and a continuous 'push down' towards social equity in the group (Maclaghan, 2005). These mechanisms might have made the core-team members reluctant to take strong positions towards other people in the project, even if they noticed that things were not really happening on the ground,

such as training not leading to the anticipated behaviour change, as indirectly referred to in the quote underneath:

> ST06: Sometimes we assume things are happening in the colleges, but actually nothing really has changed.

ZimPATH and St2eep were thus at times confronted with relationships problems that could be expected to seriously hamper the chances for implicit learning. But, as happened with the risks of high work pressure, the teams were able to counteract by creating more positive conditions in the category of professional relations.

First, the action-reseach workshop in ZimPATH demonstrated that the problems were acknowledged in the group, that *openness* existed to listen to everybody's views, and that geniune efforts were made to solve the difficulties (a range of participatory activities was launched over a period of 6 months).

Secondly, opportunities for *informal dialogue and exchange* were created. Team members were encouraged to sharpen their critical thinking and reflection skills
- by sharing in group reflections on relevant books or articles;
- by participating in outreach activities together with grassroots NGOs dealing with the poorest in Zimbabwean society;
- by trying out various methodologies in reflection workshops;
- and even by participating in Tai Chi exercises.

Some of these activities were the result of the project coordinators' views that the team was sometimes facing difficulty to engage in deeper forms of learning that it had to become more self-critical of its performance. During an action-research workshop in the context of the thesis several team members indicated that the group performed strongly in terms of action, reflection, and testing, but did not always manage to engage in 'conceptualisation', that is the step whereby reflection on various experiences is linked with new concepts or new ways of doing things.

In the case of St2eep in particular, team work was perceived as part of the solution. This conviction led to the organisation of *informal dialogue, formal consultation* and *networking inside and outside the organisation*. Team work was also seen as a source of a *'safe' learning environment (supportive relationships*) because it brought support to individual team members, but also because it allowed people to contribute freely at their own rhythm without fears of losing face.

> SC1: It is a reasonably safe process, however, team learning is messy.., just to say that the process of team dialogue is based on people who in turn will work on their own or in small groups, who will, maybe only 2 days before the next meeting, look into a book or check out internet, or look at an older course, or someone who is for example in Bulawayo will see the chance to use experience they held from participating in a previous project in the St2eep project.

In addition St2eep coordinators tried to strengthen *open dialogue in the team*, something that required sufficient time to develop, especially with the often strong power differentials in such projects.

> SC1: As VVOB person you need to pay double attention… if you want to broaden the learning in a team and you want to build the capacity in a team, then there is a need for dialogue and then everybody needs to be able to contribute, the ground needs to be prepared for that. That can only happen when you go with an open mind. .., but if you try to convince someone, then you are not doing team learning, then it is a behaviour issue, then you can better do a training in a team.

And the interviewee believed that at the end of the day this approach was very positive because the pooling of learning experiences provided more options to choose from than a single-sided focus on transferring knowledge from the North to the South.

> SC1:In this way opportunities come up that, as VVOB person, you, honestly speaking, don't know anything about. So when you arrive with your idea or your model maybe supported by a Belgian university and you bring this in as a bulldozer…, then you won't have a clue of all these other local opportunities.

1.2.3 Individual participation and performance expectations

In ZimPATH the strong individual motivation and engagement were visible through the intensity of the team work, the long hours, and the flexibility in adjusting professional and personal plans according to the needs of the project. This can be seen as one of the positive outcomes of the active mentoring and informal coaching by the ZimPATH management. This also helped to overcome the negative effects of some of the conditions that were discussed earlier.

The St2eep project team too invested time and energy in the creation of an encouraging work environment. It did so through the nurturing of a sustained motivation for the project theme and for learning about it among the various stakeholders. As indicated, after four years, St2eep became largely embedded in college structures. Therefore, project coordinators reflected consciously about the

possible (non-material) benefits for the volunteering project team members, when designing project activities. This was "… not achieved by offering fancy training opportunities" (SC1), or by exercising serious development pressure, but rather through a variety of activities, ranging from team work to various forms of informal and formal professional development activities.

Individual motivation was seen by the project coordinators as both a condition for learning to happen, but also as an important output coming from participation in the project activities and the learning opportunities this offered for the project.

> SC1:The issue of motivation is very important. There has to be a challenge and there has to be reason to tackle the challenge for people. There also has to be recognition professionally that you are doing something good, by colleagues and college administration, and you need to get the time and space to do it.

Section 2 At the agency-wide level

Organisational knowledge in VVOB is in principle the product of learning across projects (horizontal dimension) and between the various levels of the agency (vertical dimension). The discussion of such formal and deliberate learning (chapter 5) has already identified a number of hindering factors. Some of them apply to agency-wide implicit learning, others will be introduced here.

The regular field visits were considered by the head office staff as essential moments to assess progress in the projects, to clear out hanging issues, and to exchange ideas on the future planning. An action-research workshop at the head office (2007) came to the conclusion that the technique could and should also be seen as an important opportunity for agency-level learning in general and for implicit learning in particular. Serious limitations, however, hampered the translation of these views into reality. The large number of projects in the portfolio of programme officers made a detailed follow-up difficult. In addition the short visits were often packed with urgent operational issues and courtesy practices, with limited time left for reflection-oriented interactions.

In addition, the same workshop with the head office team found another demonstration of the lack of exchange in Brussels, namely between programme officers. These actors directed their attention almost exclusively on the projects in the countries that were allocated to them.

> HO4: While some of us are sitting in the same room, it seems it's very difficult to exchange experiences. It's as if everyone is overwhelmed with their own projects… Sometimes, it's also about not wanting others to intervene in your playgarden.

This problem of an island culture at the head office was discussed in several meetings, in the annual seminars, in evaluation reports, but was never resolved. The continuous action mode and the lack of incentives for knowledge sharing were often blamed. As mentioned in the literature review this is also an issue in other agencies (Smit, 2007; Ramalingam, 2005).

In various phases of the project life cycle no attempt was made to work jointly on agency-level problems (*allocation and structuring of work*). During the VVOB Days in November 2006[58], the focus groups concluded that '… learning is not integrated in the strategic goals and in the operational plans.' As a consequence, the logic at the field level was rather inward looking. There were thus very few incentives to reach beyond the project reality. The challenge to learn in support of the agency was somehow missing. There was, in other words, not enough organisational and relational proximity (Gertler, 2003) to make, in particular, implicit learning possible.

VVOB introduced internet and email for all its projects in the end of the 1990s. This brought some form of basic interaction between the field and head office. However, the opportunities for face-to-face interaction with colleagues from other projects or with the head office staff remained limited, especially beyond the national level. This meant that field staff members did not know each other, which complicated the possibility to build up *trust-based encounters and relationships at work*, typically resulting from a lack of relational proximity (Gertler, 2003).

> E1 (2007 email survey): There is no mentality of sharing. The step to work together or exchange of information is more difficult when you are not familiar with the people. Since we all work in a different country and in a rather isolated work environment, we tend to share less. Sharing information includes the risk of critiques, most people are not open to negative/constructive remarks or observations. The positive side effects of sharing, like increasing the quality of your process or product is often forgotten or not taken into account. Personal contact makes it easier to place the observations, critiques in the correct context, and to accept or not accept observations.

---

[58] This involved three consecutive focus groups of VVOB staff and staff from local partner institutions (about 80 people) looking at the learning practice of VVOB in the past under the central question: 'VVOB and organisational learning: is there a learning curve?'

A returning critique, also related to the lack of relational proximity, condemned the limited feedback and support from the head office towards the projects. It was referred to in the focus groups during the same VVOB days: '… communication and feedback mechanisms are weak and not systemized.' This was further complicated by the head office's initial tendency to focus the interaction with the projects on issues of accountability and administration, rather than on learning. This was visible in a number of instruments that were introduced, e.g. a fully fledged ICT-based financial monitoring system in 2001, and external audits in 2003-2004, on top of existing financial reporting systems.

> To be able to steer more the financial follow-up of the programmes, VVOB purchased a project management system (Navision). This will improve reporting. (VVOB annual report, 2001)

> In the framework of the decentralisation of the financial management, VVOB realised in 2004 for the first time at a wide scale local financial audits in the partner countries. Not less than 45 projects were audited. (VVOB annual report, 2004).

In project teams comments could be heard about the weak presence of open communication between the various levels in the organisation:

> E4 (2007 email survey): The language. On one side: "VVOB thinks…" ,"VVOB has decided…" ,"VVOB is satisfied…" towards the cooperants. This hasn't really simulated an identification process with the organisation. Language use is a wonderful instrument to analyze the institutional culture of VVOB.

> Report (3 focus groups, 2006): a system of centralised decision-making and hierarchy hampers effective communication and learning.

It was one of the reasons for the feeble identification of the field staff with the agency. External experts returning from missions regularly briefed the head office informally of the field staff's *lack of identification with the agency.* That also became a topic of discussions during several meetings with country representatives[59].

Section 3 Conclusions

With regard to *implicit learning* indications were found that the head office- and country office-organised work activities produced only meagre opportunities for the teams. The

---

[59] I personally witnessed the low identification of field staff and the frustrations about the relationship with the head office for a large majority of the project visits I made to projects of VVOB in Vietnam, China, Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Zambia.

design of new projects was largely outsourced, robbing the organisation from rich internal learning processes. Other factors were the centralised decision-making and the feeble presence of open communication between the various levels in the organisation. A different picture emerges from the two case study projects. At first sight it looks as if at least two factors were operating that were not conducive to implicit learning in ZimPATH and St2eep. Work pressure and stress were high and there were at times problems in the area of professional relations. But both teams succeeded in making the odds even. They created more positive conditions through a learning-stimulating organisation of team work, via frequent interaction with local stakeholders, through establishing channels for open communication and dialogue, and via investment in the development of individual motivation.

Finally, very few opportunities could be identified that contributed to agency-wide *implicit learning*, or that had the potential to do so.

Chapter 7
Learning support frameworks and learning patterns

The preceding two chapters have provided information on how VVOB, in its various units, developed ways to produce formal, deliberate and implicit informal learning. While the head office, the Zimbabwe country office and the two projects were actively making use of formal learning activities, one of the main findings relates to the large differences that existed in the conceptualisation and implementation of deliberate informal and implicit learning, and the way formal and informal learning were attuned with each other.

These chapters have dealt with the first general research question of this study: 'How to describe the variation in the learning practices inside VVOB?". The time has now come to start to tackle question number 2: "How to understand the reported variation in learning practices?" Therefore, two concepts that have been presented in section 7 of chapter 2 will now be mobilised.

The first is *learning pattern*, earlier defined as "… the more or less sustainable and crystallised configuration of learning practices for employees that perform similar work in an organisation". Chapter 5 and 6 delivered the ingredients through the identification of, first, the building blocks of a pattern and, secondly, the VVOB-relevant activities that are their concrete expression. The content and form of the patterns will now be defined by regrouping the diverse ingredients with the help of two categories of crucial parameters: three transversal sets of characteristics (content) and one form-oriented dimension (degree of durability). (Detailed information on these parameters can be found in section 7 of chapter 2.) This operation will be developed for the learning practices at the project and the agency-wide level. For the former a distinction will be made according to the VVOB actor that is 'driving' the pattern: the head office, the Zimbabwe country office and the project teams. The ambition is to typify each pattern using a label, in the form of a metaphor or of a dominant feature that captures the essence of its content.

Patterns describe certain configurations of the 'what' and the 'how' of learning. The *learning support framework* concept, also introduced in section 7 of chapter 2, will be used to put the reported patterns further in context. The support framework is, indeed, a most important driver of a given pattern (on the basis of the 'why' of learning). Its impact depends on its degree of imposition and the degree of compliance by the other actors. As has been announced in the same section 7 support frameworks will be presented with the use of the metaphor of a 'human body'.

Section 1 At the project level

The support framework of ZimPATH and St2eep, the source of their learning pattern, is the combined result of the visions, values, concepts …that are initiated, discussed and implemented by the head office, the country office and the management and team of both projects. The impact of each actor varies, depending on internal and external factors. Sub-sections 1.1 to 1.4 present and analyse the learning support frameworks and patterns, followed by a section that brings them all together.

1.1 Head office-driven

The head office-driven support framework was found to be largely implicit. It was documented only via short procedural notes on formal training (VVOB, 2000), on the performance appraisal system (VVOB, 2004) and on Planning, and M&E (VVOB, 2001, 2003). The description that follows is based on these texts, and on a few communication and policy documents, mainly from before 2006 (VVOB annual reports 1998-2005, internal memo's).

Section 1.2 of chapter 5 and section 2 of chapter 6 demonstrated that the *learning agenda* (head) was steered by concerns over effectiveness and accountability, in particular to be able to fulfil demands of the main donor. This rather instrumental approach was accompanied by the management's firm conviction that its employees' interests were best served by applying strong control, either through external evaluation and audit, or through self-assessment reporting procedures (M&E). Consequently, the introduction of new monitoring and evaluation procedures (as described earlier) should be understood partly as an attempt to get a grip on the decentralisation processes that had to be allowed when VVOB entered into a project approach (see chapter 1). At that time VVOB was run like a conventional public sector organisation. That was an explicit choice, partly because the management wanted the

organisation to become fully integrated in the newly established Flemish administrative structures[60].

> On the basis of its operational experience VVOB choose to orient itself on the [Flemish] Agency for International Cooperation. … VVOB will be integrated in the future Ministry of International Affairs… .., however, it can only take a definitive shape once the defederalisation of the Belgian development cooperation is a given fact. (VVOB annual report, 2001)

In that sense it was confronted with some of the obstacles to learning that were discussed in the literature review (Chapman, 2004), such as an aversion to failure, assumption that 'command and control' is the correct way to exercise power, lack of time to do anything else but to cope with events, and the dominance of turf wars between individuals.

The instrumental perspective was visible also in its (*implicit) values and principles* (spine). These were largely control- and command-oriented through external evaluation, audit, internal M&E, and performance appraisal (see for details the analysis in chapter 5 and 6).

The focus of *concepts, tools, and methods* (arms) was on formal training, codification and storage via the M&E system, and knowledge transfer via external technical advice.

As may be expected the *programme options* (legs) lacked explicit learning objectives, M&E of learning and a division of tasks regarding learning.

These various elements clearly suggest that the framework can be labelled as *'bureaucratic'*. It is somewhat similar to the 'rationalist approach', as described by Ferguson et al. (2010), leading to an 'engineering approach' for the implementation (legs). It has in common a focus on codified knowledge and formal learning with the 'atomised learning approach', as discussed by Eraut and Hirsh (2007).

The question arises to what extent this head office-driven support framework determined the learning pattern in the two projects. An answer was sought through checking the two intermediary variables that play a crucial role in the transfer of such policies and views to the level of field projects. First, guidance on and follow-up of the

---

[60] The VVOB management copied for the same reasons, even at the operational level, from the Flemish administration existing regulation and procedures with regards to salary structure, results based management, etc.

field staff's individual learning (through the performance appraisal system) and team learning (except for M&E reporting) was weak. In other words, the degree of imposition was low. ZimPATH and St2eep had the freedom and space to eventually design their own learning environment. In addition, as section 2 of chapter 6 mentioned, the identification of both teams with the agency and its head office was quite limited, as was their compliance with the office's learning support framework.

Consequently, a further discussion of the *learning pattern* that the Brussels-based head office team, through its vision on project learning, was favouring does not look relevant. The exercise might, on the other hand, throw some light on the learning patterns in other VVOB projects, especially where the teams were less eager than in ZimPATH and St2eep to design their own learning spaces.

The essence of that head office-induced learning pattern is its '*top-down' orientation*. Chapters 5 and 6 have demonstrated that learning was, generally speaking, organised as a sort of knowledge product and commodity that:

- can be codified and stored at the Brussels office (this is the more or less explicit goal of internal M&E reporting, and external evaluation, and the intranet);
- is delivered by remote experts (cooperation advisors, external evaluation, and project design by external consultants) or by the head office staff;
- is the outcome of a formal and engineered individual learning (through manuals, training, and the skewed implementation of the performance appraisal system);
- places learning as an add-on to other, perceived as more important, tasks of the organisation; this last aspect is illustrated by the presence of discouraging situations such as lack of time, over-ambitious project designs, limited access to expertise and resources and the island culture at the head office.

1.2 Zimbabwe country office

The country office had a limited mandate and few resources in the area of learning. This suggests, at first sight, that the potential influence of the office on the projects was low. But, the pivotal position of the country officer let enough room to develop a certain learning policy, enough to be able to speak of a support framework.

The learning *agenda* was driven by concerns over effectiveness. At the same time it also included the ambition to build social capital within the teams in Zimbabwe (via

reflection meetings, virtual community), and to develop capacity to deal with the complexity of the programmes (introduction of Outcome Mapping methodology, research on learning of development agencies). Motivation also came from the professional growth opportunities the learning activities and the research offered.

Learning was therefore seen (*spine*) to have an intrinsic value, which could be done by sharing practices, and could be strengthened by and also result in team building. The policies on learning were partly explicit and developed in a participatory way. For example, professional growth needs were analysed in group and the activities were linked with strategic learning needs of the teams (capacity development, process facilitation, monitoring and evaluation).

The '*arms'* were broader than in the head office-driven policy and contained both formal and informal learning activities. But more importantly, most initiatives were oriented towards exchange of practices and peer review.

The '*legs'* were partly developed: learning objectives were made explicit in some areas (e.g. the internal knowledge building on capacity development strategies, and on the facilitation of processes); the coordination and reflection meetings were used to discuss learning across the projects (M&E of learning); and there were reflections about how the work of the learning group impacted on other organisational issues (re-designing projects in view of new insights).

The support framework is labelled '*intrinsic'*, because learning was seen as having a value on its own.

What was the impact of this support framework on learning in the two projects? The Zimbabwe country office intruded rather mildly in the life of the projects. Sure, the teams were expected to attend learning-oriented meetings and were asked to share their insights in newsletters. There were, however, often several months in between the events and no direct implications if the engagement of field staff was weak. In sum, the framework was not very tangible in the daily practice of the projects. It was rather present in the background. Secondly, the learning opportunities were recognised and positively accepted by both ZimPATH and St2eep, because they were in tune with theirs.

1.3 ZimPATH

The analysis in the chapters 5 and 6 indicates that, in the management's support framework, the *learning agenda* was to see the team evolving in the right direction, so that the staff would share the project's values and principles and reflect them in its professional practice. In other words, professional growth had to be in line with the wider aims the project contributed to. The Belgian project leader made this central component of the learning agenda operational in the content, the vision and the overall management of the programme. Team members were expected to develop their competencies in a continuous way, so as to be able to deal with complexity and with changing context and demands. This was also part and parcel of the induction of new team members. Another point on the agenda was that learning was seen as a way to achieve transformational change, both within the team and among the project's stakeholders.

The agenda filtered down in the management's implicit *values and principles* (spine). For the management learning had an intrinsic worth. This and other values can be derived from the language used in the daily running of the project. The team continuously, in meetings and in the preparation and evaluation of workshops, referred to qualities that underpinned or had to underpin its activities, such as 'working participatory', 'bottom-up', 'working closely with'. A contribution in Capacity Development Newsletter 4 (2005) is a demonstration of this tendency:

> The support team works closely with HIV coordinators, …The team takes the group through the participatory process of building up programmes together step by step in task team meetings,..

The *concepts, tools and methods* employed varied. There were no documented guidelines on how formal and informal learning activities had to be set up, but the practice developed over time, based on evolving insights. Although, for example, the specific terminology of 'informal learning' or 'tacit knowledge' was not used in the first few years, work activities were systematically developed in such a way that the team could build on team learning processes and that conditions for informal learning were actively taken care of. The importance of on-the-job learning, or learning together with the stakeholders, is apparent from the use of terms such as 'a good learning experience', 'thinking critically about what we do', 'working towards behaviour change', 'assigning mentors' , all used in a day-to-day language:

> The major highlight in the quarter was building the 2005 plans together with institutions and peer educators… The process was a good learning

> experience not only for the team, who facilitated the whole exercise, but also to the peer educators and members of the steering teams for the institutions. (Contribution in Capacity Development Newsletter 2, 2004)

> The programme creates space for those that have received training to practise the knowledge and skills acquired in their actual work, with moments of reflection and practical learning. (Contribution in Capacity Development Newsletter 5, 2005)

The ambition to learn together with the project stakeholders was based on the hope that it would lead to forms of joint practice development, instead of knowledge transfer. Importantly, training and other types of professional development considered both hard (management, technical skills) and soft capacities (spiritual issues, team work, critical thinking skills, trust, ..).

The managements' strong influence and inspiration in the learning process justifies the labelling of the framework as '*visionary*'. This qualification is also demonstrated in the way the learning was followed-up via mentoring and informal coaching, in the links with allocation and planning of work, and in the division of tasks (*legs*).

The management's learning policy was rather obligatory, with significant pressure on and follow-up of professional growth. In addition, the degree of compliance was high. In various situations (in reports, in team meetings, in the preparation of workshops), team members referred to 'in-house' basic values and concepts underpinning learning in the team, as illustrated by one of team members' reporting on a workshop:

> ZT1 Institutions appreciate, especially peer educators, strongly the approach we use – involving them in every step in developing content of the programme through the series of participatory task team meetings. … we continue to insist that the approach is not to come to institutions to deliver, but to sit together to prepare and build up the programme… (ZimPATH M&E report, Dec 2005)

Indeed, the policy was firmly present in the daily reality of the project and it was, so to say, part of its DNA. On the other hand, the learning interests of other team members towards learning varied considerably. ZimPATH offered the local staff opportunities for professional growth, be it in a labour market that had only very few openings for young experts. This, together with the insecurity around the renewal of the one year contracts, and the high expectations of management around professional development, meant that competition for learning between team members was real. While professional development as such was important to them, knowledge and expertise could also be

seen as a strategic commodity, which guaranteed their position in the team. This resulted at times in problems with compliance with the management's learning support framework and was one of the sources of unproductive working relationships and of the rather high staff turnover, as discussed in chapter 6.

With regard to the resulting learning pattern, from the analysis in chapters 5 and 6 it appears that knowledge was treated more as a process than as a commodity. Although the team was making use of some expert inputs to feed into the learning processes, the average challenge was dealt with by pooling the knowledge of team members and of other 'field knowledge' sources. Rather than implementing best practices via knowledge transfer, the activities were geared towards the construction of new ones in collaboration with stakeholders and beneficiaries (joint practice development). Learning was generally not an add-on to other activities. The project's learning was affected by a challenging external working environment, a complex project theme, and a very fast growth of the project scope and structures. This environment forced the team to develop supportive learning practices during normal work activities (team work and interacting with stakeholders), complemented with deliberate informal learning activities (mentoring and informal coaching). The allocation of work, and the time and space for reflection were conducive for implicit learning.

The learning pattern was productive in view of its ability to deal with the challenges described above. The learning-oriented management style most likely contributed to this. Also the setting of high standards for the performance of the employees, also with regard to learning and professional growth, played a role. At the same time, there were periods with signs of stress in the team and the quality of relationships varied. This was partly due to tensions between those who did not meet up to the required standards, or who had views that differed from those of the project coordinators.

It looks justified to call the ZimPATH pattern '*situated learning*'[61], as it was not built on top-down forms of knowledge transfer; secondly, the team produced large parts of its knowledge in an in-house way through consultation and interaction within and outside the team; thirdly, there was an input from a variety of (local) resource persons, such as other NGOs and beneficiaries. In sum, learning took place in the same context in which it was applied. Added to this was the outspoken emphasis, driven by the project

---

[61] Situated learning is a strand amongst the range of learning theories which "implies that knowledge is co-constructed in a specific context and embedded within a particular social and physical environment" (Ferguson et al., 2010)

coordinator, on deliberate informal learning (mainly through mentoring and interaction with grassroots organisations). All in all, the learning practices clearly bore the stamp of his personality. The individual support and guidance strategy was appropriate and probably essential in view of the young age and limited experience of many team members.

The pattern remained constant during the life of the project. Although it had a temporary organisational structure, the main components survived the many internal and external changes of the project. Firstly, except for a core group of about 3 to 4 people, the team underwent many changes in the course of its life. Secondly, with staff working out of office for the majority of the time, only few opportunities existed to maintain the social relationships and trust that are needed to learn from and with each other. Nevertheless, the main characteristics of ZimPATH's learning practices (knowledge as process, learning during work) survived all of these situations, although certain specific activities evolved in line with emerging insights.

1.4 St2eep

St2eep's support framework shared with ZimPATH elements of the *agenda*. It used learning to deal with the complex challenges the project was facing. But other interests differed. Here, learning was a means and a goal in itself, particularly in view of 'producing' motivated volunteering college lecturers. This was perceived by the management to be best served by participatory learning techniques as these create ownership and involvement. This focus was also seen to be in line with Environmental Education learning theories, which the project was promoting. The management presented the opportunities for 'professional growth' as an incentive. In addition, the non-stop references to team work as a direct way to motivation suggest that 'maintaining social relations' was an important point on the agenda.

The *values and principles* (spine) followed the logic of the learning agenda. Although policies were only partly explicit they can be detected in various documents. For example, a concept note was developed on a more process-oriented approach to staff development, based on the 'spiral model' (Du Toit and Sguazzin, 2000). This model connected individual training moments and provided preparation and follow-up support. Similar concept notes existed on learning-oriented M&E through Outcome Mapping (Deprez et al., 2005). The language used in many reports and studies referred to 'learning together with the stakeholders' and to learning as a way to find solutions for

sustainable development problems. This idea was, for example, a central element in the organisation of a number of self-assessment exercises in 2004,

> On 1 and 2 December 2004, St2eep held a self-assessment workshop to evaluate its programme and the EE integration process. …The self-assessment workshop took the participants on a two-day journey of reflection and learning on St2eep and the EE integration process. (Contribution to Capacity Development Newsletter 2, 2004)

> For the development process of this training organiseSt2eep has chosen for a participatory approach. Lecturers - the target group of the training organise– will be heavily involved and co-ordinate the preparation and the development process. (Workshop report, 2003)

The *concepts and tools* (arms) employed were, in general, similar as in ZimPATH in the sense that they also built on group processes of learning, on both formal and informal learning activities, and on the creation of conducive relationships with stakeholders. But, especially the role of internal M&E and the use of applied research differed, as described in chapter 5.

The *programme options* (legs) included learning objectives at the team level through the framework for 'organisational practices' in Outcome Mapping, which focus on following-up the learning of the project team itself. Other spaces where learning was discussed are: the team meetings and, as a topic, the research activities of team members.

To call this framework '*intrinsic*' is based on its strong focus on learning-as-an-end.

This policy was not explicitly imposed, but there was the expectation (in the form of implicit social pressure) that the principle of learning in group would be respected. This was echoed in statements such as,

> SC2: In St2eep we solve problems as a group.

> ST3: In the beginning we had very broad ideas, but when we were now interacting as a team, that's when we did learn a lot.

The learning opportunities that St2eep's support framework offered were well known by all team members, volunteers included, and were accepted as an important component of the programme. Its impact can be considered as considerable. On the other hand, part of the learning interests of the St2eep volunteers differed from those of the project

coordinators, with some implications for the compliance with the management's support framework. Their interests towards learning look not so much related 'to maintain their status in the project team' as in ZimPATH, since they did not receive as many material benefits, as compared to those on a VVOB contract. Team members saw themselves as lecturers first, and only in second order as people organising a project. ZimPATH had all the dynamics of a typical busy NGO, working with many different partners, St2eep, on the other hand, had more the character of a diffused college-based programme. The engagement of its team members was not really free of obligation, but there was definitely less at stake than in ZimPATH, where under-performance risked the loss of a well-paid job. As a consequence, it is likely that team members were now and then restrained from drawing firm lessons from learning-oriented activities, especially if this risked putting pressure on the day-to-day relationships with other team members/colleague lecturers.

A main characteristic of the resulting learning pattern was, as in ZimPATH, that knowledge was looked at from a process perspective. This was demonstrated by building, each time a new challenge arrived, the required knowledge from scratch, step by step with the local stakeholders, as described in chapter 5 and 6. Rather than inviting external experts to design the integration of environmental education into the teacher training curriculum, in-house capacity was developed to plan and coordinate the whole process with the St2eep volunteers. The same happened in the production of manuals and handbooks. The focus was thus on knowledge construction and exchange on the field.

Learning was now and then organised as an add-on to the usual work (formal training). However, most of the learning activities were partly integrated in work activities (action-research and M&E), or happened during normal work (team work and working groups). This last group of activities was made possible by carefully reflecting about the allocation of time and space for learning.

The pattern was marked by a healthy integration of formal and informal learning activities. It also provided a tested approach to deal with the complexity of the work at hand without having to rely on expensive outside expertise. Support, intrinsic motivation, recognition, a safe environment for the volunteering members, and a project culture based on open dialogue were developed by what is so typical for St2eep, namely its emphasis on team work. This is exactly what gives the learning pattern its social character. But, this quality also created its own specific challenges. As

described earlier, the St2eep paradigm based on cooperation, motivation and dialogue was confronted with its own limits, partly due to the micro-political context of teacher training colleges in Zimbabwe.

The overall picture that emerges is, like in ZimPATH, that of *situated learning* - but coloured with an unambiguous preference for social ingredients.

The project was confronted with continuous transformation (a total review of the project design and of roles and responsibilities, the non-stop changing composition of the broader college teams). The social character of learning, nevertheless, remained constant.

1.5 Listing the learning support frameworks

Learning in ZimPATH and St2eep was found to be driven by at least[62] three different competing support frameworks, respectively at the head office, the country office, and the project management level. Table 8 provides an overview of the main characteristics of each support framework.

The main differences exist between the bureaucratic head office driven support framework and those initiated at the field level. They do not only relate to the concepts and tools used (arms) and the way learning was integrated (legs), but also to the learning agenda driving learning initiatives (head) and the underpinning values and principles (spine)[63].

---

[62] There are indications that there was even a fourth support framework at work. For example in St2eep the views on learning of the Zimbabwean college partners also influenced to some extent the configuration of learning. While a more extended analysis would warrant for/justify its explicit inclusion, for reasons of simplification I did not treat them separately. This choice can be defended from the finding that a number of the partner's interests and views were accommodated indirectly through the participatory and social learning orientation of ZimPATH's and St2eep's support frameworks.

[63] A detailed description of each component was done in previous sub-sections.

	Head office-driven *'bureaucratic'*	Zimbabwe country office-driven *'intrinsic'*	ZimPATH *'visionary'*	St2eep *'intrinsic'*
Head *Learning agenda: why supporting learning at the project level?*	▪ Effectiveness ▪ Accountability towards agency and back-donor	▪ Building social capital ▪ Professional growth ▪ Dealing with complexity ▪ Effectiveness	▪ Professional growth in line with project's vision ▪ Transformational change ▪ Dealing with complexity ▪ Effectiveness	▪ Motivating volunteers ▪ Dealing with complexity ▪ Professional growth ▪ Maintaining social relationships ▪ Effectiveness
Spine *Key values and principles of learning policy and practice*	(Implicit policies) ▪ Instrumental ▪ Control and command ▪ Expert knowledge	(Partly explicit policies) ▪ Intrinsic value of learning ▪ Sharing good practices	(Implicit policies) ▪ Intrinsic value of learning ▪ Working and learning bottom-up and participatory ▪ Local knowledge	(Partly explicit policies) ▪ Intrinsic value of learning ▪ Social learning ▪ Local knowledge
Arms *Concepts, methods, tools*	▪ Ad-hoc training ▪ External technical advice ▪ ICT-based systems ▪ M&E reporting ▪ No attention for implicit learning conditions	▪ Pre & post trajectory for training ▪ Peer review & exchange ▪ ICT-based systems ▪ Newsletter ▪ Attention for implicit learning conditions	▪ Pre & post trajectory for training ▪ Team work/learning ▪ Mentoring ▪ Outreach activities with beneficiaries ▪ Attention for implicit learning conditions	▪ Pre & post trajectory for training ▪ Team work/learning ▪ Action-research ▪ Internal M&E ▪ Attention for implicit learning conditions
Legs *Objectives for learning*	▪ For individual learning via performance appraisal.	▪ Setting of objectives in reflection and learning (R&L) working group	▪ Personal development goals	▪ At team level via 'organisational practices' in Outcome Mapping (OM)
M&E of learning	▪ For individual learning via performance appraisal.	▪ Follow-up of learning in R&L working group ▪ Peer review sessions ▪ Research activities	▪ Review and feedback in team meetings ▪ Mentoring and informal coaching	▪ Organisational practices in OM ▪ Research activities ▪ Team meetings
Links with other org. policies	▪ No links with structuring of work or HRM	▪ Partly, through re-design of projects on basis of R&L insights	▪ Full integration	▪ Partly integrated, especially for allocation of work
Task division	▪ No clear division of tasks	▪ Via R&L working group	▪ Via team meetings and mentoring system	▪ Via St2eep national team and college EE teams

Table 8: Overview of the learning support frameworks at the project level

The various support frameworks (see table 8) were rather *implicit* and not documented at the time of the research, except for some parts of the perspectives in St2eep and the country office. A strong formalisation is probably not realistic and wanted. But Morgan (2008) warns that managing projects solely on the basis of *tacit mental models* holds a number of risks in the long term:

> They could become deeply entrenched and selfserving. They could lose contact with a rapidly change context. They could evolve into assumptions so pervasive that people lost track of their influence and presence. And they could effectively block changes that challenged its principles.. (Morgan, 2008, p. 102)

So, even for teams that find effective learning patterns there are arguments to work towards shared and explicit mental models on learning.

It is time now to bring together the previous analysis of the support frameworks at each level and their respective influence on the final pattern of ZimPATH and St2eep. The visual representation of the interaction of the various support frameworks (LSF) helps us to catch the full picture (figure 8). The width of each arrow relates to the relative influence of each support framework on the pattern. From the analysis the following issues emerge:

- The final support frameworks of ZimPATH and St2eep showed little similarity with the head office driven one. This was attributed to the low imposition of the head office framework (especially in the area of implicit learning) and its limited compliance by both project teams. The latter related to the perceived lack of relevance of the head office's views on knowledge and learning, and the limited identification with the overall agency.

- The vision on learning of the country office was more compatible with those of the project's management, which resulted in the support frameworks at these levels reinforcing each other rather than competing. The LSF of the project's management was the main driver of learning at the project level as it was imposed moderately (St2eep) and strongly (ZimPATH), and the compliance was high in both cases.

- The resulting 'situated' learning pattern in ZimPATH and St2eep served the learning needs of both projects well in the face of the complexity of work, but also in view of other critical learning needs and interests. This explains the fact that it stayed stable over time.

- Finally, the findings conclude that up to 2006-2007 the lack of structural changes in the head office driven LSF up to 2006-2007 was linked with the specific views on learning and knowledge of the management, re-enforced by external pressure for accountability.
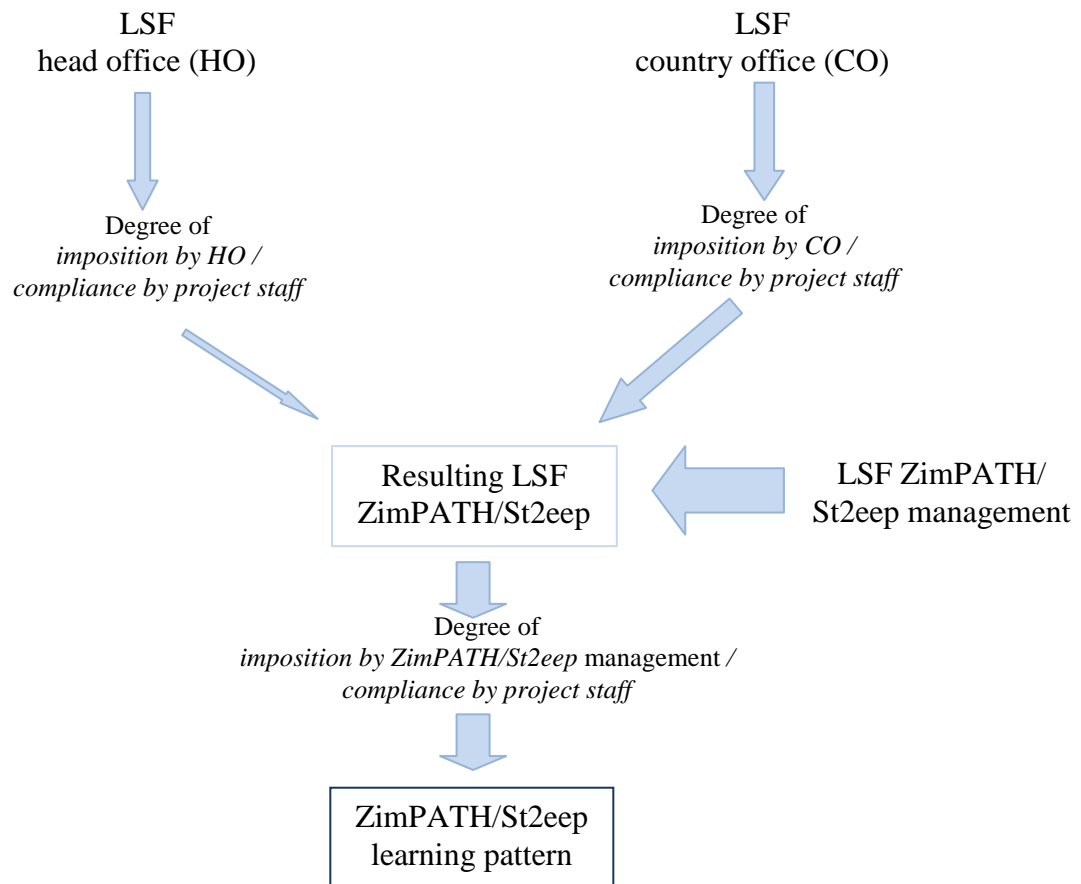
LSF
head office (HO)

LSF
country office (CO)

Degree of
imposition by HO /
compliance by project staff

Degree of
imposition by CO /
compliance by project staff

Resulting LSF
ZimPATH/St2eep

LSF ZimPATH/
St2eep management

Degree of
imposition by ZimPATH/St2eep management /
compliance by project staff

ZimPATH/St2eep
learning pattern

Figure 8: Three learning support frameworks (LSF) and their interaction with the learning pattern of ZimPATH/St2eep

Section 2 At the agency-wide level

The support framework that operates inside the organisation as a whole should, applying the same reasoning as for ZimPATH and St2eep, be the combined outcome of the visions, values, concepts ... in the head office, in the country offices and in the various projects. The preceding chapters have, however, indicated that for many years the upward flow of knowledge and critical feedback to the head office was largely lacking. This does not mean that the head office framework did not face the competition of alternative views on organisational learning from the field. These alternative views could, however, not surface beyond the project level and only popped up by showing a limited compliance with the head office framework. An exception is the VVOB Virtual Community, the ICT-based knowledge sharing initiative launched by the field which failed after a few months. True, the initiating actors had underestimated the time needed for and the complexity of their plan. But there was at the same time

clearly no interest and support from the head office staff. This sent an indirect signal to other staff that it was not a priority to contribute to the platform. However, more structurally, there was also no organisational 'culture of exchange' in the relations between projects. The explanation lies in the low identification of field staff with the agency, as discussed in chapter 6.

Consequently, the discussion here will be limited to the vision of the head office on agency wide learning. Section 2.1 qualified the support policy this office envisaged for the project level as '*bureaucratic*', based on a traditional public sector perspective. This characteristic is also valid for the learning support framework of the agency as a whole. It was driven by an *agenda* of efficiency and effectiveness, and by a concern over loss of organisational memory. M&E in its conventional form was pushed through as a tool for agency learning but, more importantly, it was perceived as serving the interests of the head office and the main donor.

The other dimensions of the support framework show the same traits. The learning was supposed to happen in the head office on the basis of 'codified' inputs from the field. This went hand in hand with limited efforts in policy development, time and other resources. Activities oriented towards horizontal and upward bound knowledge sharing were largely absent. All this resulted in a rather instrumental set of values, principles and underlying concepts.

The support framework was not strongly imposed, except for the annual seminars with country coordinators and external evaluation. Participation to the intranet and the virtual community was not followed-up. In terms of compliance, the framework was regularly questioned throughout the organisation. The November 2006 focus groups with field staff demonstrated the presence of diverging views between the head office and field staff. This did, however, not lead to sustainable field-initiated alternatives. Throughout the research, very little evidence could be found of real interest or support at the head office for organisational learning processes in the agency. This was visible in the lack of investments, the missing capacity for HRM and quality control, no reward culture for good organisational learning practices, the limited efforts to set up reflection and evaluation exercises at the agency-level, and so on.

The analysis of the <u>learning pattern</u> here differs from the discussion in subsection 2.1. A third transversal content parameter, specific for organisational learning, has been added.

Organisational knowledge was, generally speaking, treated as a commodity. Several activities were geared in a one-way traffic sense towards codification, storage, and knowledge transfer (as demonstrated by the design of VVOB intranet, of internal M&E, and of external evaluations). The underlying vertical logic was to collect, at the level of the head office, knowledge coming from the field. However, these data-collection activities were hardly feeding into sense-making and decision making activities at the organisational level. The only exception were the annual seminars with the country coordinators. Although faced with certain restrictions, these meetings developed over time into important learning opportunities at the agency level.

With the exception of the annual seminars most learning activities, formal and informal, were organised as an add-on. This was partly due to the absence of spatial, relational and organisational proximity. The de-centralised spatial location is a given fact in the world of development agencies. Relational and organisational proximity could not be developed because of the already reported absence of horizontal interaction, and because of the bureaucratic management practices. But definitively the main reason was that organisational learning activities were low on the priority list of the head office, both in terms of resources and time. There was, in addition, the firm pressure to focus on 'core' activities and results.

The third transversal characteristic of an agency-level pattern relates to the underlying views on how organisations learn. The way several learning activities were organised was seemingly based on the assumption that the agency was a closed system that can learn via long and bureaucratic vertical learning loops without interference from external factors. This it had in common with older neuro-scientific representations of the functioning of the brain. It was a view of the head office (the brain) as a centralised decision-making and learning unit, which could learn based on inputs from the field (the sensors). The pattern for learning can therefore be labelled as '*biological*'. The activities focused on vertical rather than on horizontal learning, and had a central role for the head office to collect, store and distribute knowledge.

This pattern turned out to be, over many years, quite problematic. The flow of knowledge across the organisation was very low. Field staff members often felt left on

their own to deal with very challenging projects. There is a range of indications that suggest that, due to the unproductive learning pattern, VVOB insufficiently responded to changes in its environment, and as a consequence it entered a deep institutional and organisational crisis, as will be discussed in section 3 of this chapter.

Section 3 Epilogue: glimpses of double loop learning (2006-2010)

3.1 Learning during turbulent years (2006-2007)

In the years 2005 and 2006 VVOB was confronted with an avalanche of problems. The government of the Flemish region announced a gradual decrease of its funding. About one quarter of the head office staff was transferred to the newly established Flemish administration for development cooperation. Some more staff resigned soon after. In addition, the Belgian Federal Development Agency demanded a drastic change in the way the new multi-annual programme 2008-2013 would be constructed. Time was running out, as that programme had to be finalised in 2007. In the light of this institutional crisis the Board of Directors asked VVOB to carry out a radical review of its vision and mission.

In the summer of 2006, the agency finally responded to the emergency situation. A process was started that can be described as double loop learning (Argyris and Schon, 1974). I rejoined the head office in August 2006 as the staff member for 'quality, evaluation, and policy'. Two new programme officers were engaged. This move complemented the skeleton staff that had been running the whole office for six months. Confronted with the various challenges ahead, this group decided to use the momentum of a vision and mission review and of an upcoming international conference (with a large representation of field staff) to start an organisation-wide reflection process and to fundamentally rethink the way of working of VVOB. An action plan to guide this process was developed. A survey questionnaire was sent to all project teams. They were invited to deliver inputs for the agenda of a 2-day reflection workshop in November 2006 that was to be open for all project staff. On the basis of their suggestions five themes were selected and the head office prepared a 'provocative' discussion document for each topic, outlining how the new vision and mission and the new programme approach would be impacting on the way VVOB was working. In addition, a 'Knowledge Fair' would provide opportunities to present project materials, posters, and to exchange ideas on project approaches. In parallel, an

external perception survey was sent out to some hundred organisations[64] that VVOB was working with in Belgium and in the partner countries. Feedback was asked about its performance as an organisation. Outcomes of that survey were used for a head office workshop that prepared a draft vision and mission statement and new strategic objectives. This draft was then reviewed during the already mentioned 2-day meeting. Some 120 project staff members, coming from all the partner countries participated. The revised draft version went back to a working group with members of the Board of Directors and was finalised in the beginning of 2007.

This process, covering several months of dialogue with the field staff and with external partners, was an entirely new event in the agency. There was a general feeling of excitement amongst the field staff.

> CC2: the VVOB-team has taken a new start (a positive experience!)

> CC4: I experienced very positive dynamics in the head office, and a transparency that everything was open for discussion.

> PS10: I hope that the results of the VVOB days will be taken into account by the VVOB HQ. This was a nice start of an open communication between VVOB HQ and the field workers. Continue this!

The events had a serious impact on its work. First of all, it made the organisation look critically at its past. Secondly, it was an opportunity to reflect on how to address the upcoming problems and to carve out the basic ideas for a future role in line with its changing external environment. Thirdly, it provided a clear signal to the Board of Directors and the external stakeholders that VVOB was not fading out, but actively responded to the latest challenges. Finally, and most importantly, the organisation grew more confident in a role that was very demanding. In that way, it did not only react to what was threatening its existence from the outside world, but also started to transform itself in a more performing organisational structure. In early 2007 the agency could look back at an intense period of double loop learning. In 2008 the new multi-annual programme was approved by the Belgian Federal Development Agency after only minor changes were requested.

An important result of this development was that *organisational learning* was now perceived as a strategic objective. This led to a greater awareness of its importance by

---

[64] There was a response rate of about 50% with 49 organisations providing feedback.

the head office staff and the country coordinators. There was, however, no broad consensus on how to integrate that type of learning into the organisation and on the weight it had to be given vis-à-vis other core-processes. Some of the country coordinators, for example, were reluctant to write support for learning into the new multi-annual programme. The main counterargument was that team learning and organisational learning had to be done on a daily basis and did not require separate budget lines.

Looking back at this turbulent period a picture emerges that a window of opportunity existed to give learning a more central place in the future of the organisation. At the same time, it was unclear how to make use of it. In addition, management support remained restricted. All in all, in early 2007 the interest in learning remained fragile, still weakening its institutional sustainability.

3.2 A new head office team… with a new vision on learning? (2007-2010)

In 2009-2010 VVOB was the subject of a broad evaluation exercise. (Stoop et al., 2010) At that time more than two years had passed since I left the agency and since the multi-annual programme 2008-2013 had been submitted. The fact that I was an external partner in the evaluation team gave me the opportunity to collect information on learning in the most recent period in the life of VVOB.

The agency now looked different in many ways. It was, especially at the head office, a total make-over. The director-general and 8 out of 12 head office staff were new. In addition, a human resources officer and a communication officer finally joined the team. The Board of Directors had been reorganised.

The changes were significant at the field level too. Individual projects were abandoned and/or integrated in a wider programme approach, as was announced in the multi-annual programme 2008-2013. This complex transformation was found to be successful in most partner countries. The number of expat project staff was further reduced and the country coordinators (now called programme managers) worked in close cooperation with the rest of the project's staff, and were most often based at the same location.

But, did these changes have an impact on the way learning was supported and organised at the field and the agency level?

3.2.1 At the field level

VVOB's learning support framework, directed at the project level, got more 'head', 'spine', 'arms' and 'legs'. Field level learning became a wider concern in the head office than just its output in terms of effectiveness and accountability. Professional growth was now seen as a way of dealing with the rapidly changing working environment, and in any case as a must for an organisation that promotes learning among its partners in the South (VVOB professional development policy, January 2009). The new management increased internal and external communication in an intensive way. In addition to the regular newsletters and the continuously updated website, the director-general communicated personally to the staff on a regular basis. He also encouraged them to contribute to the newsletters and the intranet and to share their learning experiences. Field level knowledge is now valued. This change in the communication culture went hand in hand with the development of a range of new measures on human resources development. Recruitment procedures were completely reviewed. The policy on staff professional growth now includes very relevant activities on formal and on deliberate and implicit informal learning[65]. Interestingly, formal training is now only encouraged if combined with informal learning activities. The annual budget for professional development increased by 30%[66]. The performance appraisal system was reviewed and an attractive guide was developed to explain in detail the steps in the process. With regard to tools and methods, the external advisor system was left out of the 2008-2013 programme. Also, several country programmes innovated with M&E and five out of the nine countries received a positive evaluation for the reported changes. Finally, the 'arms' of the support framework were strengthened through improved guidance in the design and follow-up of professional development activities, and a better integration with other organisational processes. Most of the country programmes now saw organisational learning as a special objective at their level. The evaluation report, however, concluded that some confusion about the use of these funds existed. All in all, the new learning support framework was clearly more strategic in the promotion of an effective learning practice at the project level.

The 2009-2010 evaluation looked at all the VVOB programmes in the complete set of partner countries. It did, though, not systematically screen all the components of the

---

[65] Included are activities at the workplace (team meetings, intervision, coaching, mentoring), self-study, e-learning, exchanges inside and outside VVOB, learning networks, blended learning, courses and training, research.

[66] While there were many new opportunities for staff development, only about half of the budget was used by field staff in 2009-2010. It was unclear whether this was a consequence of time constraints, or of other issues.

learning patterns at the field level. But the report nevertheless brought some interesting indications. Positive developments in the area of M&E were visible. Similarly, in six of the nine countries regular team meetings and extensive formal and informal exchanges happened (*'encounters and relationships with people at work'*). This includes knowledge sharing with external experts, stakeholders and beneficiaries. The report applauded the staff's commitment and professionalism (*'individual participation and performance expectations'*), although it indicated that several programmes were quite ambitious, with a heavy workload for the field staff as a consequence *('allocation and structuring of work').*

But the overall picture was positive. Four out of nine programmes were described as 'excellent'. Of the others the evaluation report said that they were 'strong programmes, with some specific weaknesses and challenges'. The head office-driven learning pattern at the field level evolved from 'top-down' to more 'balanced', with attention to both horizontal and vertical learning activities, codification and sharing knowledge, coordination and support.

3.2.2 At the agency level

Learning at the agency-wide level now also receives more attention than in the past, but the results are mixed. It was incorporated as a strategic goal during the vision and mission review in 2006-2007. This was, however, never translated into a policy or guidance document (Stoop et al., 2010). The underlying agenda and the principles probably lost their 'instrumental' orientation, but there is still an ICT- and codification bias. Although the intranet significantly improved, became more user-friendly and is systematically used by the head office, it remains very difficult to make field staff contribute on a regular basis (April 2010 workshop). Another example of a codification initiative, the publication of a' yellow guide' (a directory of expertise of all VVOB staff), was abandoned because it was felt that staff did not keep it up-to-date. The annual seminars with country coordinators are a tradition. Although not mainstream practice yet, the head office now also encourages exchange between programmes and uses in-house expertise from one country to support others. There are, however, counter-indications: opportunities for horizontal sharing were limited with the follow-up of the November 2006 international workshop and conference being postponed until April 2010. According to the management, the many changes in the head office have pushed organisational learning somehow on the back-burner.

Indeed, the learning support framework at the agency level evolved somewhat. But, while the 'head' and the 'spine' lost part of their instrumental and top-down orientation, measures in the area of the 'toolbox' and of the implementation of learning activities did not lead to significant changes.

The 2009-2010 evaluation concluded that the learning practices at the agency-wide level were not sufficient. The learning pattern was not satisfying many of the learning needs. This was also recognised by the head office and the problem was explicitly tabled as the main topic of one of the eight working groups in the April 2010 international workshop with the field staff. On the positive side, learning is no longer seen as in the biological metaphor, field level knowledge is respected and attempts are made to nurture it internally. These efforts were, however, not sufficient to bridge the gaps in spatial, organisational, and relational proximity between the various programme teams and the head office.

The description of the recent developments in VVOB provokes two questions: what triggered the exciting and multi-faceted change in the agency and, secondly, why was the impact of the general organisational transformation so small in the area of agency-wide learning? These issues, together with an overal review of the empirical material, are discussed in chapter 8.

Chapter 8
Bringing the research to a close

Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. (Mandela, 1994)

What started in 2004 as a vague interest in understanding more about the limitations of external evaluation developed over the years into doctoral research on the learning practice of project teams and the complex interaction with the development agency that is employing them. While keeping in mind the broader picture of the continuously changing development aid architecture, a prominent role has been given here to teams in the field and to their learning needs. This deliberate choice was based on a strong belief in the power of small groups of people working together towards a more sustainable world.

Section 1 contains a round-up of the key findings for the general research questions that were presented in section 4 of chapter 1. Section 2 evaluates, from the perspective of its theoretical relevance, the conceptual framework on which the analysis was based. It also presents ideas for a future research agenda.

Section 1 The findings on the balance

Section 1 contains a round-up of the key findings for the general research questions that were presented in section 4 of chapter 1.

Question 1: How to describe the variation in the learning practices inside VVOB?

Recent insights into workplace learning were used to extend the analysis from activities that have learning as a principal object to those that, deliberately and/or implicitly, have learning as a by-product.

Learning at the project level

An analysis of the head office-driven practice shows that, generally speaking, professional development and team learning were largely reduced to *formal learning*, often translated in individual learning activities, built on reductionist views on codification and transfer of knowledge, with little links to organisational needs and

insufficient attention for follow-up activities with regard to feedback, support and skills application. A different practice was developed by the Zimbabwe country office and by the two case study projects. Here, training and workshop meetings were strategically aimed at building capacity in the teams. A learning curve was visible and follow-up activities became more geared towards the use of new skills. A social dimension was added to learning by the active use of knowledge sharing activities inside and outside the team. But the most important feature was the upgrading of formal learning through the use of *deliberate informal learning* and induction techniques (e.g. the exchange of experiences, peer review, mentoring), and by integrating it with learning during work.

With regard to *implicit learning* indications were found that the head office-organised work activities produced only meagre opportunities for the teams. The design of new projects was largely outsourced, robbing the organisation from rich internal learning processes, and during project implementation many teams were so overwhelmed by their work agenda that learning often ended-up in the periphery. A different picture emerges from ZimPATH and St2eep. Work pressure and stress were high and there were at times micro-political problems in the area of professional relations. But both teams succeeded in making the odds even. They created more positive conditions through an implicit learning-stimulating organisation of team work, via frequent interaction with local stakeholders, through establishing channels for open communication and dialogue, and via investment in the development of individual learning motivation.

Learning at the agency-wide level

The annual seminars with country coordinators were the only activity that involved *formal learning* sessions, complemented with important knowledge exchange sessions and reviews of the way of working, directed at the organisation. However, they created just a temporary momentum. In addition, the seminars only targeted the country coordinators, not the field staff.

The head office perceived internal M&E and external evaluations as important opportunities for *deliberate informal learning* at the agency level. My surveys, interviews and focus group sessions, though, did not find enough evidence to conclude that this became a reality. Other actions in this category were ICT-based: the VVOB intranet and the VVOB Virtual Community. Both failed.

Finally, very few opportunities could be identified that contributed to agency-wide *implicit learning*, or that had the potential to do so. This important source of learning was going under the radar in the head office.

Variation in the patterns of learning

A simple listing of the miscellaneous characteristics of learning practices is not sufficient to catch the essence of their variation. This problem was dealt with through the introduction of the pattern concept.

The core of the head office-favoured learning pattern at the project level was its top-down orientation. Our analysis has demonstrated that learning was perceived as a sort of knowledge commodity that can be codified and stored at the Brussels office; that is delivered by remote experts; that is an add-on to other, perceived as more important, tasks of the organisation. An identical logic appears in the agency-wide learning pattern. Activities were set-up with a strong vertical orientation and presented as an add-on with the exception of the annual seminars with the country directors. These configurations remained constant over a long period of time.

The learning patterns of ZimPATH and St2eep were very different from the head office's one. Both projects shared a view of knowledge as a process. This was demonstrated by building, each time a new challenge arrived, the required knowledge from scratch, step by step, and with the local stakeholders. Both integrated learning in their daily practice via the extensive use of social learning practices through various types of team work, the reflection on the allocation of work, the development of supportive relationships, and the interaction with outside stakeholders. It looks justified to call this configuration of practices as situated learning, a type of learning in which knowledge is "…co-constructed in a specific context and embedded within a particular social and physical environment" (Ferguson et al., 2010). ZimPATH and St2eep differed, however, in the type of activities they organised and in the conditions for informal learning they created. In addition, in St2eep the practice was more coloured with an unambiguous preference for social ingredients. This double disparity is related to differences in their local environment. The situated learning pattern was remarkably stable during the two project's life.

Question 2: How to understand the reported variation in the learning patterns?

The conceptual design for this research, as presented in section 7 of chapter 2, defines a learning pattern as the product of the configuration of learning visions, values, and objectives of an organisation and its subunits. In other words, the variation in the learning patterns inside VVOB depends to a large degree on the effects of the various reported learning support frameworks, as will now be further discussed.

The support configuration that was developed in the VVOB head office, with regard to learning at both the project and the agency-wide level, was marked as bureaucratic. Justification of this label lies in the dominance of a traditional public sector perspective: a learning agenda steered by instrumental concerns such as effectiveness and accountability; organisational principles of learning that were control- and command-oriented and made operational through the head office-oriented codification and storage of information.

One may expect that the resulting learning pattern of such commanding support framework would be replicated in the other areas of VVOB. However, this is not the case. The learning practices in ZimPATH and St2eep followed a remarkably different course. The answer lies in the nature of the two so-called intermediary factors that play a crucial role in the transfer of support frameworks to the other sectors in the organisation. The degree of imposition of the head office's learning agenda and values was low, except for monitoring and evaluation activities. The country director, ZimPATH and St2eep thus had the freedom and space to design to a large degree their own learning spaces. In addition, the identification of both teams with the agency and its head office was quite limited. Consequently, their compliance with the office's learning support policy was weak or of a purely symbolic nature. In other words, the head office met fierce competition from alternative sets of learning visions, values, principles, and objectives.

Competition existed at the level of the Zimbabwe country coordinator, a pivotal position in the transfer of the head office's policy to the projects. The main components of the 'intrinsic' learning support framework at this level were: a concern over effectiveness, the will to build social capital within the teams, and a preference for horizontal learning strategies with both formal and informal learning dimensions. Pressure from the country office's learning interests on the project teams existed, but remained in the

background. The field staff generally appreciated the learning opportunities that were offered.

Central in ZimPATH's support framework was the management's strong belief that learning should lead to sharing the values of the project, to reflecting them in the professional practice, and to creating transformational change within the team and among the project's stakeholders. Consequently, this configuration of learning opportunities was labelled visionary. There was significant professional development pressure and compliance was high.

St2eep's agenda had a clear-cut focus on learning as an end-in-itself. Learning had to generate ownership, involvement and motivation inside the team, and particularly among the group of volunteering college lecturers. Social pressure to conform was, in contrast with the situation in ZimPATH, rather implicit. But compliance was more or less spontaneous. Another difference with the sister project was the marked influence of the Zimbabwean team members on the construction of the support framework.

In both cases, the support agenda and the underlying values and principles were, so to say, part of the project's DNA.

Thus, the learning agenda of the two projects was the product of a combination of learning agendas, values and objectives that circulated in the agency, as was visualised in chapter 7, section 3. Although the literature stresses the many barriers against learning, these two cases also demonstrate that development projects can be turned into powerful learning environments. Another finding points at the crucial role that country coordinators and particularly the project coordinators have in facilitating learning. ZimPATH and St2eep would have followed a very different course if they would have been headed by a project coordinator without skills to facilitate learning.

Question 3: How to explain the obstacles to change in VVOB?

The obstacles in VVOB are found at the supply-side of learning support frameworks (the head office management) and the receiving-side (field staff). At the supply side, this was linked with the vision of the management on how development and learning should happen. It was a view, which had grown historically, of the organisation as an administration that required command and control as governing principles. This vision

was also re-enforced by growing external demands for accountability. Its persistence was, in addition, the result of micro-political dynamics, arising from personal professional concerns of key people in the head office. Attempts to introduce changes that went against these basic interests most often failed. Finally, after some time a learning pattern tends to become an autonomous source of obstruction. Such mechanisms were not completely absent at the receiving side, but the continuous confrontation with new challenges and an intrinsic interest in learning made the management opt for a learning-oriented management style.

A severe institutional emergency over the period 2005-2006 finally set in motion a number of internal change processes. By 2010 VVOB was transformed into an organisation that shaped many more opportunities for learning at the project level.

What triggered the exciting and multi-faceted transformation in the agency? There are, certainly, internal sources of change. Top personnel in the head office retired, others left out of demotivation. Something similar happened in the Board of Directors. At both levels, specific views had dominated the thinking about how VVOB should function, blocking to some extent many routes leading to transformation. A total make-over became possible, including the appointment of staff for new, change-oriented functions (human resources, communication). These are factors of a micro-political nature. In addition, critical voices in some of the projects had grown louder. But, as important was the impact of external factors. Political reforms at the regional and federal development agencies plunged VVOB into a serious and unexpected institutional crisis. Survival meant drastic change. Additional pressure was coming from new paradigms in the global aid and development sector, and from strategic partners in the South. Some of these factors are VVOB-specific, others are of a more generic nature, an issue that will be discussed under research question 4.

But VVOB's broad change did have much less positive effect on the problematic agency-wide learning. Why was the impact of the general organisational transformation so small in that area? One explanation is linked with the complex and ambitious change agenda. New head office staff had to tackle, almost simultaneously, a broad variety of challenges. It looks as if agency-wide learning was a victim in terms of insufficient attention. There is, however, another more generic explanation emerging from the empirical material. This has to be seen in view of the returning finding that many development agencies face serious problems with learning at this level. Learning as an organisation supposes, in the case of an agency with multi-stakeholder

programmes spread out geographically, the blending of the head office learning support framework with many different support frameworks at the field level. This is challenging since the latter are not only the product of individual or team preferences and interests, which can ultimately be negotiated between the various actors, but also the product of the institutional setting in which the programmes happen. The lack of institutional proximity, or the "shared norms, conventions, values, expectations and routines, arising *from* commonly experienced frameworks of institutions" (Gertler, 2003), may well be another indication of the wide range of conditions that have to be fulfilled to lower the barriers for agency-wide learning.

Question 4. How can development agencies better support field level and agency level learning?

This issue raises the question of how valid an extrapolation from these research findings is. The scope of the empirical analysis is limited. Some of the reported actors and factors of influence are VVOB-specific. This calls for adequate reserve in the wording of the recommendations. The thesis has, on the other hand, identified situations that have a generic character. A first one relates to the multiple effects of a number of micro-political, social, economic and cultural developments inside and outside an agency. The VVOB management was for quite some time deaf and blind for what was happening. This attitude provoked a major crisis that risked becoming lethal. The common sense, but often forgotten, lesson is that development agencies must learn to react pro-actively to inside and outside signs of threats. In the case of VVOB the crisis turned into a catalyst for change. A school in the organisational change literature advocates, when an organisation is resistant to transformation, inducing a crisis situation. But this is a high risk operation.

The previous paragraph deals with the exceptional situation of a major emergency. But how can development agencies upgrade learning opportunities and activities under more 'normal' conditions? Such recurrent exercise involves three stages.

Step 1 *Raising awareness about the crucial role of learning patterns and support frameworks.* The empirical analysis of a geographically dispersed organisation like VVOB, which is active in multi-stakeholder programmes, shows that learning visions, values, principles, and objectives tend to differ and to be highly competitive. If awareness of the many facets of such agency-specific configuration is absent the next steps in the upgrading exercise will run into vast difficulties.

Step 2 *Mapping patterns and support frameworks before designing measures for improvement.* This mapping will clarify how groups in the organisation are currently looking at knowledge, at learning, and at how agencies function. A SWOT analysis of that existing learning practice is also a part of this phase in the exercise, as is charting the relative weight of the learning support frameworks of all relevant actors in the organisation.

Step 3 *Exploring alternative learning strategies.* Pockets of innovation can be identified and scaled-up and new practices can be explored. It will require taking into account that each intervention might require changes in the spine, head, arms and/or legs of the 'learning man' at the various management levels. This is why a reality check is needed.

The next paragraphs further explore step 3, but with a focus on project level learning. Several observations will be made on the basis of findings on VVOB.

First, the analysis has pointed out that project coordinators and country directors are important facilitators of learning in the teams. It is important to select persons that have the capacity or at least the potential to play that role, and to give them the resources needed to allocate and organise work so that it provides opportunities for informal learning, and for building supportive and trust-based relations inside the team and with the stakeholders.

Secondly, my research findings suggest that there is no one-size-fits-all support framework for team learning. One category of tools alone will not achieve more and better learning. Such mixture will have to be innovative, because of the uniqueness of each project. A blending of different types of learning processes, activities and techniques is probably the most effective strategy. The focus should at least fall on the upgrading of formal learning through the amplified use of deliberate and implicit informal learning, also giving firm attention to team learning techniques and personalised support (e.g. the exchange of experiences, peer review, mentoring). Respect for the distinctiveness of a project also lies in an explicit interest in its local embedding. This means, firstly, the recognition of the immediate outside environment in which a project is operating and the challenges, opportunities and drivers this provides for learning. It also involves the strengthening of accountability linkages with the local beneficiaries and stakeholders. This can bring learning opportunities for the

project staff, and it has proven to act as a stronger extrinsic motivator than upward-oriented accountability. A more practical suggestion is to integrate culturally appropriate (often existing) ways of observation and sense-making in monitoring that can be incorporated in normal work activities.

Improving project team learning is a complex challenge. The good news is that it is possible, perhaps not perfectly, but effectively. That is the message from the analysis of ZimPATH and St2eep.

With regard to agency level learning experiencing the gap between a current learning situation and the ideal type that is portrayed in the learning organisation literature can be very disempowering. The implementation of changes requires significant resources and expertise in a multitude of fields. VVOB demonstrated some sort of coping behaviour and picked out one or two elements from the puzzle. It provoked the disillusionment of the staff and of the outside partners. This strategy or, even less attractive in the long run, resorting back to business as usual are no productive options.

The more customised 3-step framework described above still faces the challenge of dealing with institutional proximity. This is complex because it means learning across different institutional logics, values and norms. The development sector could find inspiration in other sectors. Expansive learning (Engeström, 2001) has been tested successfully in the social welfare sector in the UK to improve multi-agency collaboration. In chapter 2 it was indicated that the notion builds on third generation activity theory to support 'cross-boundary learning'. It has a focus on working with groups of actors around specific critical cases, and on reflecting and learning what these cases mean for the practice and the underlying working principles of these actors. It thus builds in essence on implicit learning ideas. It could be an interesting extension of the analysis made in the 3-step framework.

Section 2   Touching base

This thesis was born out of my frustrating experiences as a practitioner with the lack of learning in the development agency I was since 1997 working for. I noticed pockets of good practice in the organisation, but they were contained at the project level and attempts to support agency level learning largely failed. What I perceived initially as a

specific problem of VVOB which could be solved by a simple technical intervention (e.g. better external evaluation), turned out to be a structural issue with multiple dimensions, of which several are very probably symptomatic for many development agencies. Out of a long list of such issues I highlight two. Firstly, it was fascinating to find confirmation of my practitioner's observations about the great importance of informal deliberate and implicit learning during work, and of my perception that this was linked with specific work processes and activities. At the same time I had to adjust my pre-conceptions that formal learning could only play a minor role in workplace learning. Secondly, it took a long time to find satisfying answers for the persistence of learning practices. The first step towards understanding came with the introduction of the pattern concept and its emphasis on the crystallisation of learning behaviour. The next step was to link patterns with what can be considered as their main source, namely the learning support frameworks that competed inside VVOB. It was a major insight to learn that the outcome of that struggle was connected to a variety of internal and external decisions and situations that make the complex puzzle fit together.

2.1 Relevance in terms of theory

In view of possible cross-fertilisation this research has brought together concepts from different academic sectors. When these building blocks for paradigms were not fully appropriate for the thesis context, adjustments were made. This also applies to the conceptual tools that were borrowed from Eraut and Sterck, the two authors that have brought essential inspiration to my research. Based on the fact that the studies of both discuss learning in milieus that are dissimilar from the development sector, critical remarks were already worded in the literature overview (chapter 2). Eraut's findings deal with professional settings that are highly structured and operate mostly outside political environments which make them very different from organisations like VVOB. This has been addressed in the thesis by taking micro- and macro-political factors into account. Sterck's clustering of learning practices focuses on the dominant component. This is a too simple solution. Patterns vary in a number of important ways. Further exploration by linking it with the configurational approach (Meyer et al., 1993) (partly) filled the gap, and introduced the hypothesis that there is a limit to the number of different learning patterns. Three transversal characteristics of a configuration of learning opportunities were identified and treated as continuums. In addition, Sterck, in establishing the source of a pattern, pools all players together in the learning arena and, consequently, risks underexposing the role of the management and the team at the head office, at the country level and in the projects. Therefore, a competition dimension has been added to the analysis of the origin of patterns. This was made

possible by leaving the traditional focus on formal learning policies and by opting instead for a broader concept (support framework) that includes the 'why', the 'what' and the 'how' of learning. This allowed addressing the difficult challenge of re-constructing a largely implicit learning practice. For its description use has been made of an adjusted version of INTRAC's metaphor of a framework as a 'human body'.

Amendments were needed to make Eraut's and Sterck's concepts more operational and strategically apt. But a major part of their original content is still valid. This is, in the case of Eraut, the distinction between deliberate and implicit informal learning, and the identification of work processes that enable the production of implicit learning. I owe to Sterck the basic notion of pattern and the discussion of the sources of persistence of patterns.

A number of other concepts and perspectives have been introduced with the hope to create an innovative and more satisfying analysis of learning in development organisations such as VVOB.

The dimension of competing support frameworks, each linked with the different management and team levels in the agency, was brought in to clarify the relationship between a pattern and its drivers. To identify what determines the result of that competition and thus the relative weight and the impact of each actor two intermediary variables (degree of imposition and of compliance) have been added to the analysis, as was already discussed in section 1 of this chapter.

Finally, building blocks of an alternative approach to analyse, mediate and raise awareness about ineffective learning patterns have been developed. In addition, the notions of spatial, relational and institutional proximity (Gertler, 2003) are integrated. Another is the proposed application of an open systems view. Too often learning practices are seen as almost integrally developed inside a development agency. In the real world they are also the product of external forces that originate in the social, political and economic dimensions of the organisation's environment.

2.2 **Four proposals for a future research agenda**

The plea for an open-systems perspective needs more conceptual and empirical grounding. An essential extension should be the more explicit analysis of the role of the Southern partners, and particularly of the learning agendas, values, visions and objectives they are operating from.

More thorough scrutiny is necessary to understand how, in the context of development agencies, the lack of the four dimensions of proximity hinders agency-wide learning and, especially, how it complicates dealing with the persistence of unproductive learning patterns. Action-research could be used to study the evolution in institutional proximity during the implementation of tools such as expansive learning.

Implicit learning as a by-product of specific work activities is still a largely unexplored field in the development sector. A number of the concepts that were presented and employed in this thesis have the potential to serve as instruments for a next step to gain a deeper understanding of how implicit learning can be strengthened in this context. But much more theoretical and empirical work is required.

With regards to the research process, chapters 1 and 3 touched the question of how the role of professional doctoral students is complicated by their status of being both insider an(EES, 2007)d outsider, and how this creates intricate methodological challenges. I personally believe that there is room for exploring more actively the relevance of various methodologies for this type of research, as suggested also by Drake and Heath (2008) with the aim of developing an adjusted set of research tools and principles.

References

ANCONA, D. & BRESMAN, H. (2007) *X-teams: How to Build Teams that Lead, Innovate, and Succeed,* Boston, Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.

ANDERSSON, K. (2009) Motivational Dilemmas in Collaborative Learning Activities: the Case of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). *Public Administration and Development,* 29*,* 5**,** p. 341-351.

ARGYRIS, C. & SCHON, D. (1974) *Theory into Practice, Increasing Professional Effectiveness,* San Francisco, Jossey Bass.

BANERJEE, A. V. (2007) *Making Aid Work,* Cambridge, MIT Press.

BARNARD, G. (2003) Knowledge Sharing in Development Agencies: Knowledge Sharing or Knowledge Pool? *EADI/IMWG Conference.* Dublin, Ireland.

BASER, H. & MORGAN, P. (2008) Capacity, Change and Performance: Study Report. Maastricht, ECDPM.

BASSEY, M. (1999) *Case Study Research in Educational Settings,* Buckingham, Open University Press.

BEBBINGTON, A., HICKEY, S. & MITLIN, D. (2008) *Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives,* London, ZED Books.

BIGGS, S. & SMITH, S. (2003) A Paradox of Learning in Project Cycle Management and the Role of Organisational Culture. *World Development,* 31*,* 10**,** p. 1743-1757.

BLAGESCU, M., DE LAS CASAS, L. & LLOYD, R. (2005) Pathways to Accountability: a Short Guide to the GAP Framework. London, One World Trust.

BRITTON, B. (2005) Organisational Learning in NGOs: Creating the Motive, Means, and Opportunity. *Praxis Paper No 3*, INTRAC.

BRYMAN, A. (2004) *Social Research Methods,* Oxford, UK, Oxford University Press.

CARLSSON, J. & WOHLGEMUTH, L. (Eds.) (2000) *Learning in Development Co-operation,* Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell International.

CHAMBERS, R. (1983) *Rural Development: Putting the Last First,* Harlow, Essex, Prentice Hall.

CHAMBERS, R. (1997) *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last,* Brighton, Institute of Development Studies.

CHAMBERS, R. (2004) Ideas for Development: Reflecting Forwards. *Working Paper 238,* Brighton, IDS.

CHAPMAN, J. (2004) *Systems Failure: Why Governments Must Learn to Think Differently,* London, DEMOS.

CHIMBODZA, I., VAN ONGEVALLE, J. & MADONDO, M. (2004) Environmental Education in Action in Secondary Teacher Training in Zimbabwe. *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education,* 21*,* 3**,** p. 108-119.

COFFIELD, F. (2000) The Necessity of Informal Learning. *The Policy Press,* Bristol, Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

COLLEY, H., HODKINSON, P. & MALCOLM, J. (2002) Non-formal Learning: Mapping the Conceptual Terrain. *A Consultation Report,* Leeds, University of Leeds, Lifelong Learning Institute.

COPROGRAM (2008) NGO Openboek. Coprogram, http://www.ngo-openboek.be/.

CRAWFORD, L. & POLLACK, J. (2004) Hard and Soft Projects: a Framework for Analysis. *International Journal of Project Management,* 22*,* 8**,** p. 645-653.

CRAWFORD, P. (2004) Aiding Aid: a Monitoring & Evaluation Framework to Enhance International Aid Effectiveness, PhD. *Institute for Sustainable Futures.* Sydney, University of Technology.

DAVID, R. & MANCINI, A. (2004) Going Against the Flow: the Struggle to Make Organisational Systems Part of the Solution Rather than Part of the Problem.

The Case of ActionAid's Accountability, Learning and Planning System. *Lessons for Change,* Sussex, Institute for Development Studies (IDS).

DAVIES, R. (1998) Order and Diversity: Representing and Assisting Organisational Learning in Non-Governmental Aid Organisations. *CDS Swansea.* University of Wales - Swansea.

DECUYPER, S., DOCHY, F. & VAN DEN BOSSCHE, P. (2010) Grasping the dynamic complexity of team learning: An integrative model for effective team learning in organisations. *Educational Research Review,* In Press, Corrected Proof.

DEPREZ, S., VAN ONGEVALLE, J. & HUYSE, H. (2005) St2eep Outcome Mapping Workshop, Part II: The Role of VVOB. Harare, VVOB Zimbabwe.

DEPREZ, S., VAN ONGEVALLE, J., HUYSE, H. & AMBROSE, K. (2007) Learning the Way Forward: Adapting St2eep's Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Process Through Outcome Mapping. *Outcome Mapping Case Study,* Ottawa, International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

DICK, B. (1997) Action Learning and Action Research. http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/actlearn.html, Last Accessed on 29 January 2010.

DRAKE, P. & HEATH, L. (2008) Insider Researchers in Schools and Universities: the Case of the Professional Doctorate. IN PAT SIKES AND TONY POTTS, ED (Ed.) *Researching Education from the Inside: Investigating Institutions From Within.* Routledge.

DRUCKER, P. F. (2003) *The new realities,* NJ, Transaction Books.

DU TOIT, D. & SGUAZZIN, T. (2000) The Spiral Model: New Options for Supporting Professional Development of Implementers of Outcomes-based Education. Pretoria, Department of Education.

EARLE, L. (2003) Lost in the Matrix: the Logframe and the Local Picture. *INTRAC's 5th Evaluation Conference: Measurement, Management, and Accountability.* The Netherlands.

EASTERBY-SMITH, M. & LYLES, M. (2003) Introduction: Watersheds of Organisational Learning and Knowledge Management. IN M., EASTERBY-SMITH M.; LYLES (Ed.) *The Blackwell Handbook of Organisational Learning and Knowledge Management.* Oxford, Blackwell Publishing.

EDMONDSON, A. (1999) Psychological Safety and Learning Behaviour in Work Teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly,* 44*,* 2**,** p. 350-383.

EES (2007) The Importance of a Methodologically Diverse Approach to Impact Evaluation - Specifically with Respect to Development Aid and Development Interventions. *EES Statement*, European Evaluation Society.

ENGEL, P. G. H. (2005) Learning to Respond: European Development Organisations in a Changing Global Policy Context. *ACADA Seminar.* Barcelona, ECDPM.

ENGESTRÖM, Y. (2001) Expansive Learning at Work: Towards an Activity Theoretical Reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work,* 14*,* 1**,** p. 133-156.

ERAUT, M. (2000) Non-Formal Learning and Tacit Knowledge in Professional Work. *British Journal of Educational Psychology,* 70*,* 1**,** p. 113-136.

ERAUT, M. (2005) Learning During the First Three Years of Postgraduate Employment - The LiNEA Project. *Padua Conference.*

ERAUT, M. (2007) Learning From Other People in the Workplace. *Oxford Review of Education,* 33*,* 4**,** p. 403-422.

ERAUT, M. & HIRSH, W. (2007) The Significance of Workplace Learning for Individuals, Groups, and Organisations. *ESRC Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance*, OXFORD & CARDIFF UNIVERSITIES (SKOPE).

ESTRELLA, M. & GAVENTA, J. (1998) Who Counts Reality? Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation: A Literature Review. *IDS working paper 70,* Sussex, Institute of Development Studies.

FERGUSON, J., HUYSMAN, M. & SOEKIJAD, M. (2010) Knowledge Management in Practice: Pitfalls and Potentials for Development. *World Development,* doi:10.1016/j.worlddev2010.05.004.

FLYVBJERG, B. (2001) *Making Social Science Matter,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

GARVIN, D. A., EDMONDSON, A. & GINO, F. (2008) Is Yours a Learning Organization. *Harvard Business Review,* March 2008**,** p. 109-116.

GASPER, D. (1997) 'Logical Frameworks': A Critical Assessment. Managerial Theory, Pluralistic Practice. *Working Paper Series No. 264,* The Hague, Institute of Social Studies.

GERTLER, M. S. (2003) Tacit Knowledge and the Economic Geography of Context, or The Undefinable Tacitness of Being (There). *Journal of Economic Geography,* 3*,* 1**,** p. 75-99.

GOLDSPINK, C. (2005) What Works in Reforming Education? The Argument for a Complex and Loosely Coupled Systems Approach. *11th Annual ANZSYS Conference.*

GUIJT, I. (2008) Seeking Surprise: Rethinking Monitoring for Collective Learning in Rural Resource Management, PhD. Wageningen, Wageningen University.

HAAS, M. R. (2006) Knowledge Gathering, Team Capabilities, and Project Performance in Challenging Work Environments. *Management Science,* 52*,* 8**,** p. 1170-1184.

HACKMAN, J. R. (2002) *Leading Teams: Setting the Stage for Great Performances,* Boston, Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.

HAGER, P. (2004) The Conceptualisation and Measurement of Learning at Work. IN RAINBIRD, H., FULLER, A. AND MUNRO, A. (Ed.) *Workplace Learning in Context.* London & New York, Routledge.

HOLMAN, D., PAVLICA, K. & THORPE, R. (1997) Rethinking Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning in Management Education: The Contribution of Social Constructionism and Activity Theory. *Management Learning,* 28*,* 2**,** p. 135-148.

HONEY, P. & MUMFORD, A. (1992) The Manual of Learning Styles. Maidenhead, Peter Honey Publications.

HORTON, D., ALEXAKI, A., BENNETT-LARTEY, S. & BRICE, K. (2003) *Evaluating Capacity Development: Experiences from Research and Development Organizations Around the World,* Ottawa, Canada, ISNAR, IDRC, CTA.

HOUGHTON, R., BECK, T., WILES, P. & FOSTER, B. (2003) ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action in 2003: Field Level Learning. *ALNAP,* London, Overseas Development Institute.

HUYSE, H. (2005a) VVOB Websites for Educational Projects in Developing Countries: More than pr?: A Pilot Research Project on the Practice and the Perceptions about Educational Project Websites. Sussex University, UK, unpublished.

HUYSE, H. (2005b) Who is Learning During Evaluations? Evaluating Capacity Development Programmes in the Formal Education Sector in Zimbabwe. Sussex University, UK , unpublished.

HUYSE, H. (2006a) Project Management Systems for Educational Development Programmes: Searching for the Holy Grail of Causality, or for the Key to Transformative Learning. University of Sussex, UK, unpublished.

HUYSE, H. & DEPREZ, S. (2006) Is There Life After the Logframe? An Account of an Outcome Mapping Experience in Education. *Easy-Eco Conference 2006.* Saarbrucken.

HUYSE, H., PHLIX, G., MOLENAERS, N., BOSSUYT, J., FONTENEAU, B., GREGA, P., DHAENE, C., BARTHOLOMEUSSEN, S., POTTER, L. D. & NIJS, L. (2010) Evaluation of NGO Partnerships Aimed at Capacity Development. Brussels, Special Evaluation Unit Development Cooperation, FPS Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation.

HUYSE, H. & VAN ONGEVALLE, J. (2008) Fulfilling the Expectations? The Experiences with the M&E-side of Outcome Mapping in an Education for Sustainability Project in Zimbabwe. *Easy-Eco Conference.* Vienna.

JACKSON, T. (2003) Cross-Cultural Management and NGO-Capacity Building: How Can Capacity Be Built Through Cross-Cultural Management. *PraxisNote 2*, INTRAC.

KEYSTONE (2005) *Building the Keystone Method,* London, Keystone.

KOLB, D. (1984) *Experiential Learning,* NY, Prentice Hall.

KORTEN, D. (1990) *Getting to the 21st Century - Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*, Kumarian Press.

LEE, T., FULLER, A., ASHTON, D., BUTLER, P., FELSTEAD, A., UNWIN, L. & WALTERS, S. (2004) Learning as Work: Teaching and Learning Processes in the Contemporary Work Organisation. *Learning as Work Research Paper, Nr 2*, Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester, Teaching and Learning Research Programme, Economic & Social Research Council.

LIPSON, B. & HUNT, M. (2007) *Capacity Building Framework: a Values-based Programming Guide*, INTRAC.

MCGRATH, S. & KING, K. (2004) Knowledge-based Aid: a Four Agency Comparative Study. *International Journal of Educational Development,* 24*,* 2*,* p. 167-181.

MEYER, A. D., TSUI, A. S. & HININGS, C. R. (1993) Configurational Approaches to Organizational Analysis. *Academy of Management Journal,* 36*,* 6*,* p. 1175-1195.

MOLENAERS, N., NIJS, L. & HUYSE, H. (2010) The Belgian NGO Landscape and the Challenges of the New Aid approach: Dealing with Fragmentation and Emerging Complexities. *Discussion Paper/2011.02,* Antwerp, Institute of Development Policy & Management.

MORGAN, P. (2005) The Idea and Practice of Systems Thinking and Their Relevance for Capacity Development. *Capacity, Change and Performance*, European Centre for Development Policy Management.

MURIITHI, N. & CRAWFORD, L. (2003) Approaches to Project Management in Africa: Implications for International Development Projects. *International Journal of Project Management,* 21*,* 5*,* p. 309-319.

MUSYOKI, S. (2003) Can Bilateral Programmes Become Learning Organisations? Experiences From Institutionalising Participation in Keiyo Marakwet in Kenya. *Development and the Learning Organisation.* Oxfam GB and Institute of Development Studies (IDS).

OECD-DAC (2005) Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. OECD-DAC.

OECD-DAC (2006) Rising to the Challenge of Capacity Development: Learning Lessons and Moving Forward. OECD-DAC.

OECD-DAC (2008a) 2008 Survey on Monitoring the Paris Declaration: Making Aid More Effective by 2010. OECD-DAC.

OECD-DAC (2008b) Accra Agenda for Action. Accra, OECD-DAC.

OECD-DAC (2009) Civil Society and Aid Effectiveness: Findings, Recommendations and Good Practice. *Better Aid.*

OLSON, E. & EOYANG, G. (2001) *Facilitating Organisational Change: Lessons from Complexity Science,* San Francisco, Jossey-BAS/Pfeiffer.

PASTEUR, K., PETTIT, J. & SCHAGEN, B. V. (2006) Knowledge Management and Organisational Learning for Development. *KM4Dev Workshop 2006 Background Paper,* Sussex, IDS.

PATTON, M. (1997) *Utilization-Focused Evaluation: The New Century Text,* NY, Sage Publications Inc.

PATTON, M. (2008) Keynote: Utilization-Focused Evaluation: Approaches and Learning for Sustainable Development. *Easy-Eco conference.* Vienna.

POLLET, I. (2010) Survey About the Public Support for Development Cooperation Amongst the Belgian Population. *Synthesis report,* Leuven, HIVA.

PRINCE, S. & WRIGLEY, R. (2007) Organisational Learning in Civil Society: Influences of Culture, Relational Dynamics. *Praxis Paper 17*, INTRAC.

PROWSE, M. (2007) Aid Effectiveness: the Role of Qualitative Research in Impact Evaluation. *Background Note.* London, Overseas Development Institute (ODI), http://www.odi.org.uk/publications/background-notes/0712-randomised-control-trials.pdf.

PRYOR, J. (2005) Lecture Notes Doctoral Class Summer 2005. University of Sussex, UK.

PRYOR, J. & AMPIAH, J. G. (2003) Understandings of Education in an African Village: the Impact of Information and Communication Technologies. *Report on DFID Research Project Ed2000-88,* London, DFID.

RAMALINGAM, B. (2005) Implementing Knowledge Strategies: Lessons from International Development Agencies. *Working Paper 244,* London, Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

REES, S. & RODLEY, G. (1995) *The Human Costs of Managerialism,* Sydney, Pluto Press Australia Ltd.

REYNAERT, J. (2008) Screening of the 2008-2010 funding applications of NGOs. Brussels, Coprogram.

RIDDELL, R. C. (2007) *Does Foreign Aid Really Work?,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

ROPER, L. & PETIT, J. (2003) Development and the Learning Organisation: an Introduction. *Development and the Learning Organisation.* Oxfam GB and Institute of Development Studies (IDS).

SALAS, E., DICKINSON, T. L., CONVERSE, S. A. & TANNENBAUM, S. I. (1992) *Towards an Understanding of Team Performance and Training,* Norwood, NJ, Ablex.

SAVEDOFF, W. D., LEVINE, R. & BIRDSALL, N. (2006) When Will We Ever Learn? Improving Lives Through Impact Evaluation. *Report of the Evaluation Gap Working Group.* Washington DC, Center for Global Development, http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/7973.

SAVELSBERGH, C., VAN DER HEIJDEN, B. & POELL, R. (2009) The Development and Empirical Validation of a Multidimensional Measurement Instrument for Team Learning Behaviours. *Small Group Research,* 40*,* 5**,** p. 578-607.

SAWADOGO, G. (1995) Training for the African Mind. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 19*,* 2**,** p. 281-293.

SCHURINK, W., SCHURINK, E. & POGGENPOEL, D. (1998) *Focus Group Interviewing and Audio-Visual Methodology in Qualitative Research,* Pretoria, J.L. Van Schaik.

SHORT, J., PAYNE, T. & KETCHEN, D. (2008) Research on Organizational Configurations: Past Accomplishments and Future Challenges. *Journal of Management,* 34*,* 6**,** p. 1053-1079.

SIMISTER, N. (2009) Developing M&E Systems for Complex Organisations: A Methodology. *M&E paper*, INTRAC.

SMILIE, I. (1995) *The Alms Bazaar: Altruism Under Fire - Non-Profit Organizations and International Development,* London, Practical Action.

SMIT, M. (2007) We're Too Much in 'To Do' Mode: Action Research into Supporting International NGOs to Learn. *Praxis paper 16*, INTRAC.

SNOWDEN, D. J. & BOONE, M. E. (2007) A Leader's Framework for Decision Making. *Harvard Business Review,* November 2007**,** p. 69-76.

STAKE, R. E. (1995) *The Art of Case Study Research,* California, SAGE.

STEADMAN, S. (2005) Early Career Learning at Work (LiNEA) Project: Methodology and Theoretical Frameworks. *Symposium on Early Career Professional Learning, AERA Conference.* Montreal.

STOOP, P., NICAISE, I., HUYSE, H., TALLON, M., BONTOUX, V. & WATERKEYN, M. S. (2010) Evaluation of VVOB Education Programmes: Integrated Report. Brussels, VVOB (unpublished).

SUTCLIFFE, K. M. & WEBER, K. (2003) The High Cost of Accurate Knowledge. *Engineering Management Review, IEEE,* 31*,* 3**,** p. 1-11.

VAN ONGEVALLE, J., HUYSE, H., DEPREZ, S., VAN PETEGEM, P., CHIMBODZA, I. (2008) Promoting Stakeholder Participation in a Learning-Based Monitoring and Evaluation Framework. IN H., LOTZ-SISITKA (Ed.) *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education, Vol 25.* Grahamstown, Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa.

VAN PETEGEM, P., BLIECK, A., VAN ONGEVALLE, J. (2007) Conceptions and Awareness Concerning Environmental Education: A Zimbabwean Case-Study in Secondary Teacher Training. *Environmental Education Research,* 13*,* 3**,** p. 287-306.

VENEZKY, R. (2001) Procedures for Evaluating the Impact of Complex Educational Interventions. *Journal of Science Education and Technology,* 10*,* 1**,** p. 17-30.

VVOB (2000) Guidelines for the Use of Funds for Professional Development. Brussels, VVOB (unpublished, internal document).

VVOB (2001) Manual for Project Cycle Management (PCM). Brussels, VVOB (unpublished, internal document).

VVOB (2002) Memo Concerning the Training of VVOB Development Workers. Brussels, VVOB (unpublished, internal document).

VVOB (2003a) Guidelines for Internal Evaluation in VVOB. Brussels, VVOB (unpublished, internal document).

VVOB (2003b) Manual for Project Cycle Management (PCM): second edition. Brussels, VVOB (unpublished, internal document).

VVOB (2004) Results-based Performance Appraisal (RCM). Brussels, VVOB (unpublished, internal document).

VVOB (2005) Monitoring & Evaluation Survey, 2005. Brussels, VVOB (unpublished, internal document).

VVOB (2006a) Concept note: Selection of External Evaluators. Brussels, VVOB (unpublished, internal document).

VVOB (2006b) Resultaten Bevraging Externe Partners VVOB: Samenvattende Synthese en Analyse van de Antwoorden. Brussels, VVOB (unpublished, internal document).

WILLIAMS, B. (2008) Keynote: Systems Concepts in Evaluation: an Expert Anthology. *Easy-Eco Conference.* Vienna.

Appendix A: Abbreviations

3IE:	Impact Evaluation Entity
ALNAP:	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
BTC:	Belgian Technical Cooperation
CD:	Capacity Development
CGD:	Centre for Global Development
CO:	Country office
CPD:	Continuous Professional Development
DGOS	Directorate General Development Cooperation (DG-D)
EE:	Environmental Education
EEASA:	Environmental Education Association Southern Africa
EES:	European Evaluation Society
Expat:	Expatriate development worker
HIVA:	Research Institute for Labour and Society
HO:	Head office
ICT:	Information and Communication Technology
IDRC:	International Development Research Centre
INTRAC:	International NGO Training and Research Centre
KM:	Knowledge Management
Logframe:	Logical Framework
LSF:	Learning Support Framework
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MIT:	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
NGO:	Non-governmental Organisation
NMT:	National Management Team
NONIE:	Network of Networks on Impact Evaluation
OECD-DAC:	Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
OL:	Organisational Learning
OM:	Outcome Mapping
OMT:	Operational Management Team
PCM:	Project Cycle Management
PRM:	Progress Monitoring Report
RBM:	Results Based Management
RCM:	Results-based Performance Appraisal
RCT:	Randomised Control Trials
R&L:	Reflection and Learning
SIDA:	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
St2eep:	Secondary Teacher Training Environmental Education Programme
SWA:	Cooperation Advisor
SWOT:	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats
TASC:	Training and Research Support Centre
VVOB:	Flemish Office for Development Cooperation and Technical Assistance
WPL:	Workplace Learning
ZimPATH:	Zimbabwe Participatory Training Programme in Higher Education

Appendix B: Overview of activities in VVOB with learning as a principal object

Where the formal component is dominant:

- *Training (and education)*

  "An instructor-led and content-based intervention leading to desired changes in behaviour."(CIPD, 2010) Used widely in VVOB, both for short term and long term training and long term educational courses.

- *Coaching*

  A non-directive form of development which focuses on improving performance and developing individuals' skills. Personal issues may be discussed but the emphasis is on performance at work (organisational and individual goals). It usually lasts for a short period and focuses on specific skills and goals, and is facilitated by someone from outside (or within) the organisation. (CIPD, 2010) In VVOB coaching is not used in a formal sense, but sometimes in a more informal way (overlapping with mentoring).

- *Attending conferences*

  Attending and/or presenting during scientific or practitioner-oriented conferences. During the actual presentations formal learning is central, but informal learning can be important during breaks and networking moments. About 5% of the professional development activities in VVOB involved conferences (see further).

- *Manuals*

  VVOB developed a number of self-study manuals and short guides related to project cycle management (PCM), gender, and environmental issues.

- *Performance appraisal*

  A method by which the job performance of an employee is evaluated (generally in terms of quality, quantity, cost, and time), typically by the corresponding manager or supervisor. In VVOB, the performance interviews involve forms of informal learning, while the professional development goals system, attached to performance appraisal, focused mainly on formal learning strategies.

- *Induction programme for new team members*

  These are activities that are initiated to absorb new members in the teams. Field staff went through formal learning events organised by the head office, while at the project level it was left to the country coordinators and project coordinators to decide how to organise the induction for international and local staff.

Where the informal component is dominant:

- *Mentoring*

  A technique for allowing the transmission of knowledge, skills and experience in a supportive and challenging environment. Mentoring relationships typically differ from coaching in terms of duration (more long term) and by the fact that they are often

facilitated by someone from within the organisation. This was not officially part of the toolbox of VVOB, but was informally applied in some projects.

- *Job shadowing*

  A period of time during which a new employee follows current employees as they perform their jobs. Following and observing a senior expert involves mainly types of informal learning. This was not used in VVOB in a planned or structured way, but did happen sometimes as part of an induction programme.

- *Action research*

  Iterative process of action and research by the project team. Can involve some formal learning, but is generally more informal. Used within some VVOB projects as a learning method.

- *Running an intranet / virtual community / project websites*

  Storing documents of projects, assuming other projects will find good practices, and also share their learning. This involves formal learning for the access to training manuals, but rather informal learning when project documentation or M&E reports are accessed. The virtual community had knowledge sharing objectives around certain themes and objectives linked to community building. The online discussion forum was mainly builton informal learning processes.

- *Monitoring and evaluation (M&E)*

  While agency manuals abound with definitions indicating the difference between *monitoring* and *evaluation*, authors like Crawford (2004) and Earl et al. (2001) have shown that it is difficult to make an absolute distinction. In VVOB, monitoring is seen as the ongoing follow-up of the execution of a project, both in terms of content and finances. Evaluations are defined as external evaluative exercises, executed by independent experts. Since teams also perform annual self-evaluations, a distinction will be made between internal M&E (initiated and executed by the project team) on the one hand and external evaluation (coordinated or facilitated by outside experts) on the other.

- *External cooperation advisors*

  Volunteering professors from Belgian universities and inspectors of the ministry of education, providing technical and methodological support to the projects. About 2/3 of them had access to such an advisor in the period of the research.

- *Outreach activities with grass roots NGOs*

  Participation in activities with grass roots NGOs to become more familiar with the challenges of disadvantaged members in society. This type of interaction exposed field staff to the constraints and opportunities of their target groups, and involved mainly informal learning.

- *Annual seminars with country coordinators*

  Annual seminars with country coordinators that, next to practical meetings and knowledge sharing, often also involved short training sessions on selected topics.

- *Coordination meetings at the country level*
  Quarterly meetings with all staff in Zimbabwe on a 3-monthly basis for coordination issues, exchange of experiences, peer review, or to discuss new developments.
- *Team meetings or working groups to review or improve the practice*
  These meetings at the level deal with the past or the current practice and are set up in varying degrees of formality. These activities were used extensively.
- *Quarterly capacity development newsletter*
  Projects were asked to share their views in every Progress Monitoring Report on a central challenge around capacity development (e.g. 'What is the role of training in capacity development?'). These contributions were discussed in coordination meetings, compiled in a newsletter and then sent around to all VVOB projects.

Appendix C: Research instruments

Action research workshops with project teams: learning history[67]

This research activity was used to explore the learning processes in project teams on the basis of a specific challenge that the project team was confronted with. The central part of the activity consists of the creation of a 'learning history graph', analysing in detail how the project team was trying to deal with the challenge (for example, setting up a new type of training), and identifying those team activities that were perceived to be creating strong team learning dynamics and those that were not productive for team learning. The results of this learning history were then analysed in group and linked with concepts of Experiential learning through the Kolb learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), and individual learning styles through the Learning Style Inventory (Honey and Mumford, 1992).

I adjusted the 'learning history' approach, developed by Smit (2007), to fit to the context of the research. Before the start of each workshop the project team was asked to reflect on a relevant challenge or problem that they had been dealing with over the last few months. A timeline was developed in group, marking the main activities and events that the team went through when trying to deal with the issue. Then, the various events were scored individually in view of their contribution to the learning of the team. All the scores were brought together and tagged on a wall paper and the results were discussed and analysed, also using insights from Kolb's learning cycle (step 4).

The group processes leading to the production of the timeline were time intensive, but relevant because they brought out much more than individual interviews could have delivered. Individual in-depth interviewing might have had the advantage over action research workshops in getting a real personal account of the experiences, uncensored from group standards (Schurink et al., 1998). A group set-up had, however, a number of considerable benefits: the productive outcomes the group dynamics, the modest cost and time, and the fact that it is less intimidating for the respondents. In the beginning of the action research workshop, the participants could not easily remember the sequence and the range of informal and formal events that they went through. But, by focused probing of the group and encouraging the participants to reflect on the events that gave them important insights into the issue, people started contributing small parts of the puzzle and refreshing their own understanding of the situation. So doing, the whole picture of team learning-in-action slowly emerged.

The project teams were contacted a few weeks before the workshop and were asked to identify a topic they wanted to discuss in the workshop. They were given some guidelines on how to select a relevant topic for this exercise.

---

[67] Adapted from Smit (2007)

Programme
Duration: 3 to 4 hours

Start of the workshop
Introduction by researcher/facilitator

Completing individually the learning style questionnaire (80 questions) on learning styles (20 min)

Step 1 Making a timeline of the learning experience (60 minutes)

Step 2 Scoring satisfaction with the learning process (25 minutes)

Step 3 Joint reflection (30 minutes)

Step 4 Introduction to Kolb's learning cycle (10 minutes)

Step 5 Feedback on learning style questionnaire and review of timeline in view of Kolb's learning cycle (30 minutes)

Step 6 Scoring: what was an important phase for you personally? (15 minutes)

Step 7 Looking at the future in pairs (15 minutes)

Step 8 Inventory of recommendations, conclusion (20 minutes)

Step 9 Evaluation (10 minutes)

Learning Style Inventory (Honey and Mumford, 1992)

During the workshops, the Honey and Mumford learning style inventory (LSI) was used in step 5 as an instrument to trigger discussions about individual learning styles and how these interact at the team level. (Honey and Mumford, 1992) The LSI is based on Kolb's theory (1984) on experiential learning. The success of this test and the uncritical application in various context attracted significant criticisms for being inadequate to portray the full reality of learning: 'Honey & Mumford's LSQ is not a psychometric instrument, but a checklist about how people learn.' (Coffield, 2004). Here, however, the test was not used to measure learning styles in absolute terms. As already mentioned, it served as a trigger for a discussion on learning styles and on their relevance in teams. Steps 6 to 8 of the workshop consisted of a reflection on the impact of the previous analysis for the individual and team learning processes, and a planning exercise to identify activities to start addressing some of the weaknesses in the current learning practice.

This questionnaire with 80 statements (see example in Table 9) uses the Kolb learning cycle to rank people's preferences with regards to four different learning styles (activist, reflector, theorist, and pragmatist). I started the workshop with a statement as follows:

> "I use the learning style inventory only to trigger a debate about learning styles, not as an attempt to scientifically measure individual learning styles. It has been proven that both the Kolb learning style inventory (LSI) and the Honey and Mumford LSI don't have strong predictive validity and should not be used for purposes of selection, placement, job assignment, or selective treatment."

Learning Styles Questionnaire: please put a cross for every statement in one of the two columns

I agree	I don't agree		
			Name:
		1	I have strong beliefs about what is right and wrong, good and bad
		2	I often act without considering the possible consequences
		3	I tend to solve problems using a step by step approach
		4	I believe that formal procedures and policies restrict people.
		5	………………

Table 9: Extract from 80 statements of LSI

Template for semi-structured interviews

The project team coordinators of the case study projects were interviewed on the basis of a semi-structured interview guide.

Opening remarks
Thank you for participating to this email interview. With the interview we hope to learn more about your experiences with learning in VVOB, both within your own project and with VVOB as a whole (organisation wide).

Team learning activities

1. What are your preferred team learning activities in your project (for project staff) / country programme (for country reps and programme officers)? What seems to work well with regards to learning and what doesn't, and why? and examples
2. What factors hinder learning 'building up the knowledge base) within your project / country programme?
3. What would you consider as the most important sources of information/knowledge for learning (or in other words: to build up the knowledge base) of your project, and **why?** Please indicate your top 3 and specify as much as possible with examples.
4. How did you experience the role of VVOB-structures in supporting learning in your project / country programme? What could be done to improve that support?
5. Monitoring and evaluation: How did you experience the role of monitoring and evaluation processes in supporting learning in your project / country programme? What could be done to improve the relevance of M&E in support of learning?
6. Does your project have specific views/policies on workplace learning/continuous professional development? Can you give examples?
7. How do you take new project staff on board of the project? Please explain with examples.

Workplace learning: personal experiences

8. To what extent does your work situation provide you with challenging tasks?
9. Please think about 2 or 3 challenging tasks you were asked to do within your project recently. Can you explain them shortly.
10. What factors hindered or supported you in completing these tasks? Please give examples
11. What does it mean for your current practice? What are you doing differently now?
12. To what extend did you feel confident in performing these tasks? Why? Please explain.
13. To what extend did you feel supported by your direct working environment to tackle these challenges? Please explain. Did you receive feedback on how you performed and in what form?
14. To what extend did you feel supported **by VVOB** to tackle these challenges? Please explain. What else do you need to support your learning processes?
15. What do you personally consider important moments/events/activities for learning? Why?

Organisation wide learning in VVOB

16. What are your experiences with organisational learning in VVOB? What are strong points? What are weak points?
17. More in general, what factors hinder organisation-wide learning within VVOB?
18. How can an organisation like VVOB support these processes?

Any other remarks?

19. Any other remarks with regards to learning in your project? Did I forget anything that is important?

Web survey amongst Belgian development agencies, March 2008

Belgian development agencies responded in the period March-April 2008 to the web survey underneath.

Welcome page

Thank you for participating to this survey about organisational learning and knowledge management in Belgian development agencies.

Some practical information before you start:
- The survey should take you about 20 minutes maximum to complete. It has to be completed in one time.
- Comments can be written in English, Dutch or French.
- The survey should preferably be completed by someone in the organisation who is familiar with its overall functioning.

Please feel free to contact us if you have any questions or remarks about the research.

Thank you,

Huib Huyse
Research Manager development cooperation
HIVA/KULeuven
huib.huyse@hiva.kuleuven.be

Underneath you can find a status bar that indicates how far you are in the survey (in percentage):

Default Section

Some information about your organisation:

1. Please enter the following information about your organisation:

Your position in the organisation:

Name of development agency:

Email Address:

2. What type of organisation is your development agency?

Other (please specify)

3. Number of staff in your organisation in December 2007 (approximately)?

	in head office	in the South (abroad)
Number:		

Remarks:

4. How many people left the organisation in 2007 (approximately)?
(for any reason: end of project, end of contract, resignation,..)

	in head office	in the South (abroad)
Number:		

Remarks:

5. Who is coordinating organisational learning / knowledge management efforts in your organisation?
(multiple answers allowed)

☐ ¡no central coordination

☐ ¡responsibility of all staff

☐ ¡management of agency

☐ ¡ICT unit / departement

☐ ¡M&E unit / departement

☐ ¡human resources departement

☐ ¡country/regional directors

☐ ¡specific OL - KM unit / departement

Other (please specify)

[_____]

6. How many staff are responsible for the coordination/support of organisational learning and knowledge management?

[_____ ▼]

Remark:

[_____]

7. The main focus of organisational learning (OL) and knowledge management (KM) strategies of your organisation is on:
(multiple answers allowed)

	strongly agree	agree	undecided	disagree	strongly disagree
improving OL and KM of the overall organisation	○	○	○	○	○
improving OL and KM of the projects and programmes	○	○	○	○	○
improving OL and KM of the partners in the South	○	○	○	○	○

8. Does your organisation have seperate result areas for organisational learning and knowledge management:

	yes	no
at project or programme level?	○	○
at head office level?	○	○

Remarks:

[_____]

9. Are you monitoring or evaluating your organisational learning and knowledge management activities?

[_____ ▼]

Remarks:

[_____]

10. How difficult is it to find the following things to support organisational learning and knowledge management in your organisation:

	very easy	easy	undecided	difficult	very difficult	not applicable
usefull approaches and tools?	○	○	○	○	○	○
internal and external expertise?	○	○	○	○	○	○

Remarks:

11. How would you describe the overall level of use of organisational learning and knowledge management in your organisation?

○ expert   ○ competent performer   ○ advanced beginner   ○ novice   ○ not applicable

12. What are the plans for the future (2008-2013) for organisational learning (OL) and knowledge management (KM) in your organisation?

	significantly more	more	same	less	significantly less	don't know
level of funding?	○	○	○	○	○	○
personnel input?	○	○	○	○	○	○
providing space and time for reflection/learning?	○	○	○	○	○	○
promoting OL / KM with your partners in the South?	○	○	○	○	○	○

Remarks:

13. How did your funding source (for example: DGOS) react to funding requests for organisational learning and knowledge management activities?

○ positive   ○ rather positive   ○ undecided   ○ rather negative   ○ negative

Remark:

14. How difficult is it to motivate staff to participate and contribute to organisational learning and knowledge management activities?

	very easy	easy	undecided	difficult	very difficult	not applicable
motivate own staff of the organisation?	○	○	○	○	○	○
motivate partners in the South?	○	○	○	○	○	○

Remarks:

15. How difficult is it for your organisation to systematically apply lessons from

	very easy	easy	undecided	difficult	very difficult
monitoring activities of project and programmes?	○	○	○	○	○
external evaluations of projects and programmes?	○	○	○	○	○

Remarks:

You have done more than half of the survey by now..

In the following section we would like to ask your perception about specific approaches and tools.

What are the experiences of your organisation with the following organisational learning and knowledge management approaches and tools:

16. Continuous professional development / staff development / formal learning?

	Frequency of use:	Used at what level in the organisation?	How useful is this approach/tool for your organisation?	Will the organisation use it in the coming 2008-2013 period?
Training courses for staff	▼	▼	▼	▼
Coaching of staff	▼	▼	▼	▼
Participation to conference(s)	▼	▼	▼	▼
Learning by 'shadowing' of a colleague	▼	▼	▼	▼
Visiting of other projects and programmes (other working environment)	▼	▼	▼	▼

Feel free to add comments (in English, Dutch or French):

What are the experiences of your organisation with the following organisational learning and knowledge management approaches and tools:

17. ICT-based organisational learning and knowledge management activities?

	Use in your organisation?	Used at what level in the organisation?	Usefulness of approach/tool for organisation?	Will the organisation use it in the coming 2008-2013 period?
intranets and extranets (document management systems, etc.)	▼	▼	▼	▼
virtual platform(s) to exchange information, experiences, socialise,..	▼	▼	▼	▼

Feel free to add comments on ICT-based learning activities (in English, Dutch or French):

What are the experiences of your organisation with the following organisational learning and knowledge management approaches and tools:

18. Communities of Practice (COP)?
(groups of people in organizations that form to share what they know, to learn from one another regarding some aspects of their work and to provide a social context for that work)

	Frequency of use in your organisation:	Used at what level in the organisation?	How useful is this approach/tool for your organisation?	Will the organisation use it in the coming 2008-2013 period?
Communities of practice	▢ ▾	▢ ▾	▢ ▾	▢ ▾

Feel free to add comments (in English, Dutch or French):

19. Discussion groups?

	Frequency of use in your organisation:	Used at what level in the organisation?	How useful is this approach/tool for your organisation?	Will the organisation use it in the coming 2008-2013 period?
Discussion groups	▢ ▾	▢ ▾	▢ ▾	▢ ▾

Feel free to add comments about discussion groups (in English, Dutch or French):

20. Action learning and action research?

	Frequency of use in your organisation:	Used at what level in the organisation?	How useful is this approach/tool for your organisation?	Will the organisation use it in the coming 2008-2013 period?
action learning:	▢ ▾	▢ ▾	▢ ▾	▢ ▾
action research:	▢ ▾	▢ ▾	▢ ▾	▢ ▾

Feel free to add comments (in English, Dutch or French):

What are the experiences of your organisation with the following organisational learning and knowledge management approaches and tools:

21. learning and reflection workshops/days?
(to systematize learning and/or reflect on the way of working)

	Frequency of use in your organisation:	Used at what level in the organisation?	How useful is this approach/tool for your organisation?	Will the organisation use it in the coming 2008-2013 period?
Learning and reflection workshops/days	▢ ▾	▢ ▾	▢ ▾	▢ ▾

Feel free to add comments about reflection days (in English, Dutch or French):

22. learning during work activities?
(work activities that do not have learning as a principal object)

	Frequency of use in your organisation:	Used at what level in the organisation?	how useful is this approach/tool for your organisation?	Will the organisation use it in the coming 2008-2013 period?
promoting participation of staff in group processes (eg. team work / working groups)	[▼]	[▼]	[▼]	[▼]
promoting regular contacts of staff with clients/beneficiaries	[▼]	[▼]	[▼]	[▼]
providing feedback to staff on their performance	[▼]	[▼]	[▼]	[▼]

Feel free to add comments about learning during work activities (in English, Dutch or French):

[   ]

Other useful organizational learning or knowledge management tools or approaches?

23. Please share with us:

What other organisational learning / knowledge management tools or approaches proved to be useful in your organisation?

[   ]

24. You have almost reached the end of the survey.

We have two more practical questions regarding the use of your answers:

	yes	no
Can we mention that your organisation participated in the research?	◯	◯
Can we use the name of your organisation when referring to your answers and ideas in the survey?	◯	◯

Remarks:

[   ]

Thank you for participating to our survey!

Huib Huyse
HIVA/KULeuven
huib.huyse@hiva.kuleuven.be

Focus group sessions with field staff analysing learning in VVOB, November 2006

In November 2006, VVOB field staff and representatives from key partners came to Leuven for an international conference organised by VVOB. In preparation of that conference, during 2 days working group sessions were organised in various themes. One of the working groups looked at organisational learning in VVOB. Three subsequent groups of about 15-20 persons discussed organisational learning in VVOB based on the framework of Britton (2005) and Senge (1990).
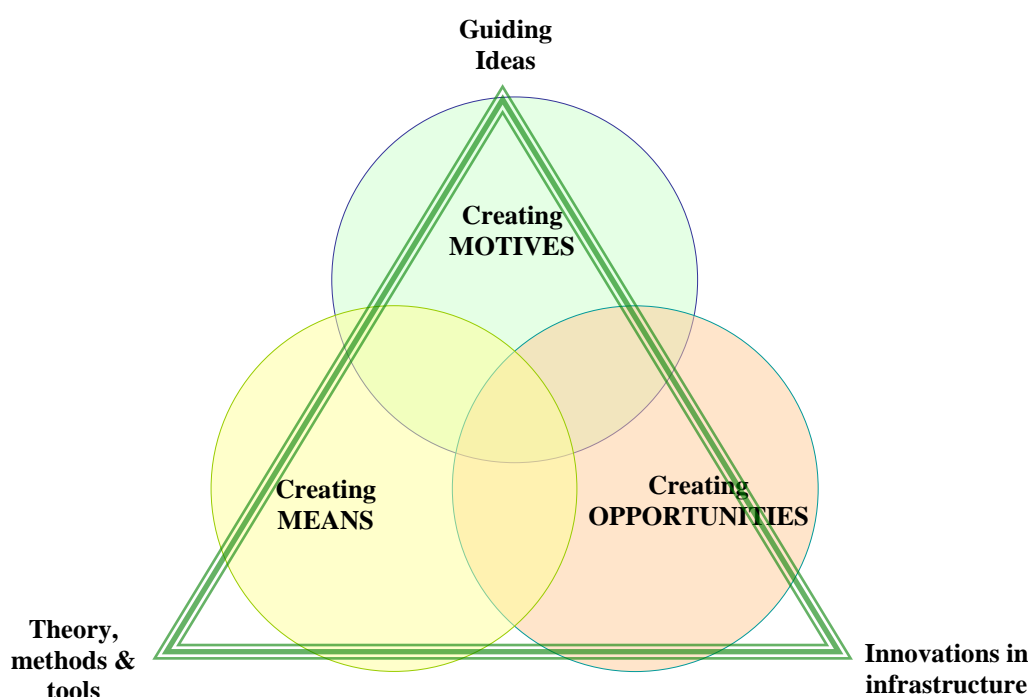
CREATING MOTIVES *Guiding Ideas*	CREATING MEANS *Theory, methods & tools*	CREATING OPPORTUNITIES *Innovations in infrastructure*
1. Support from leadership 2. Develop culture of learning	1. Individual learning competences 2. Guiding conceptual models 3. Methods and tools 4. Specialist support 5. Adequate financial resources	1. OL as a strategic goal 2. Integrating learning into PM&E 3. Knowledge Management Infrastructure 4. Building relationships of trust

Figure 9: Frame for analysis of working groups based on Britton (2005) and Senge (1990)

Creating the Motive: Understanding learning and why it is important
1. How does VVOB and its development programmes perform in creating the motive for organisational learning (methods, tools, etc)?
2. What could be done to motivate the various structures within to focus more organisational learning?
3. What should be the priority areas for 2007-2008?

Creating the Means: Models, Methods, Competences and Support
4.   How does VVOB and its development programmes perform in creating the means for organisational learning (methods, tools, etc)?
5.   What could be done to improve the availability of means within the organisation?
6.   What should be the priority areas for 2007-2008?

Creating the Opportunity: Opening a 'Space' for Learning
7.   How does VVOB and its development programmes perform in providing opportunities for learning (opening a space for learning)?
8.   What could be done to improve the opportunities for learning in VVOB?
9.   What should be the priority areas for 2007-2008?

Email survey and focus groups, May 2007

This survey was answered by 11 field staff (9 development workers and 2 country representatives) in May 2007 that had shown interest to participate in a working group on organisational learning in VVOB.

Opening remarks
Thank you for participating to this email interview. With the email interview we hope to learn more about your experiences with learning in VVOB, both within your own project and with VVOB as a whole (organisation wide). The information will be used for a planning workshop in VVOB on the 25th of May, where we hope to also have online participation with some of the available cooperants and country reps. The planning workshop will be the first step towards the development of an action plan for VVOB on organisational learning.
This questionnaire is sent out to the group of people that showed interest in participating to the working group on organisational learning, to the country representatives, and to the programme officers in Brussels.

Existing organisational learning initiatives

1.   VVOB intranet (www.vvob.be):   What have been your experiences with the VVOB intranet up to now? What are the main reasons for the limited use of the platform? What could be done to improve the relevance of the platform?
2.   VVOB virtual community (www.vvobvirtualcommunity.net):   What have been your experiences with the VVOB virtual community up to now? What are the main reasons for the limited use of the platform? What could be done to improve the relevance of the platform?
3.   VVOB-Days 2006:   How do you look back at the event right now? What is the role of events like this in the organisational learning strategy of VVOB?
4.   VVOB-Conference 2006:   How do you look back at the event right now? What is the role of events like this in the organisational learning strategy of VVOB?
5.   What factors hinder organisation-wide learning within VVOB?
6.   What areas/topics should we focus on for organisational learning in VVOB?

Team learning activities

7.   What are your preferred team learning activities in your project (for project staff) / country programme (for country reps and programme officers)? What seems to work well with regards to learning and what doesn't, and why?
8.   What factors hinder learning within your project / country programme?
9.   How did you experience the role of VVOB in supporting learning in your project / country programme? What could be done to improve that support?
10. Monitoring and evaluation: How did you experience the role of monitoring and evaluation processes in supporting learning in your project / country programme? What could be done to improve the relevance of M&E in support of learning?

Any other remarks?

11. Any other remarks with regards to organisational learning within VVOB?

External perception survey, October 2006

Thank you for taking your time for this survey. We have tried to keep the survey as brief as possible to avoid taking too much of your time. Your contribution will definitely assist us in gaining relevant insights on how the work of VVOB is perceived by our external partners. The outcomes of the survey will be used in our discussions about the further professionalisation and future role of VVOB.

How do you know VVOB?

1. In which way are you familiar with VVOB's activities?

What do you think about us?

2. What are strong points in VVOB's approach?
3. What are weaknesses in VVOB's approach?
4.   What is the added value of VVOB with regard to the activities of your own organisation?

What about quality?

Please put an X in the relevant field, indicating your score in the range of 1 to 5 [1=very poor; 2=poor; 3=average; 4=good; 5=very good] or 'no opinion'	No opini on	1	2	3	4	5
5. How do you assess VVOB's capacity with regard to						
a. developing programmes that are in line with national educational plans of a partner country?						
b. developing programmes that are in line with the relevant Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) of the United Nations?						
c. achieving the objectives of its interventions with regard to products and services (eg. educational materials, curriculum reviews, technical support,..)?						
d. achieving the objectives of its interventions with regard to the capacity development of its local cooperating partners?						
e. developing successful partnerships with its cooperating partners?						
f. developing a supportive network with other relevant actors in the development community?						
g. building ownership in its programmes?						
h. dealing with sustainability in its programmes?						
6. How would you rate VVOB in comparison with other similar development agencies operating in the field of education and training?						
Remarks on question 5 and 6:						

The way forward.

7. Ideally, which role would you envisage for an organisation like VVOB in relation to the group of actors operating in the field of education and training in developing countries?
8. What changes would you recommend VVOB to make in its policies to increase the effectiveness of its programmes?
9. What changes would you recommend VVOB to make in its operational activities to increase the effectiveness of its programmes?

Additional considerations?

10. Do you have any other remarks or suggestions?

Appendix D: Research Ethics Annex

University of Sussex
Sussex Institute

Standards and Guidelines on Research Ethics Annex: Checklist for proposed research

Standards 1 & 3: Safeguard the interests and rights of those involved or affected by the research. Establish informed consent.

		Yes	No
1.1	Have you considered the well-being of those involved or affected? Have measures been taken to protect their interests (e.g. by clarifying use to be made of outcomes)	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
1.2	Has written and signed consent been obtained without coercion? Have participants been informed of their right to refuse or to withdraw at any time?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
1.3	Have the purposes and processes of the research been fully explained, using alternative forms of communication where necessary and making reference to any implications for participants of time, cost and the possible influence of the outcomes?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
1.4	Where covert research is proposed, has a case been made and brought to the attention of the relevant committees and approval sought from the relevant external professional ethical committee?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
1.5	Does the proposal include procedures to verify data with respondents and offer feedback on findings?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
1.6	Will the participants be involved in the design, data collection or reporting where feasible?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
1.7	Has conditional anonymity and confidentiality been offered?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
1.8	Has the appropriate person (e.g. head teacher, manager of residential home, head of service) been identified to whom disclosures that involve danger to the participant or others, must be reported?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
Standard 2: Ensure legislative requirements on human rights and data protection have been met.			
2.1	Have the implications of at least, the four pieces of legislation listed in this document been considered?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
2.2	Where any particular implications arise from legislation or uncertainties exist, has contact been made with the named university person?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
Standard 4: Develop the highest possible standards of research practices including in research design, data collection, storage, analysis, interpretation and reporting			
4.1	Has existing literature and ongoing research been identified and considered?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
4.2	Have methods been selected to be fit for purpose?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
4.3	Where appropriate to the research design, will all data collection proposed be used to address the question?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
4.4	Have methods for verifying data (e.g. audit trails, triangulation, etc.) been built into the research design?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
4.5	Where research is externally funded, has agreement with sponsors been reached on reporting and intellectual property rights?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐

4.6	Have plans been made that will enable the archiving of data (e.g. through consulting the guidance available from the UK Data Archive)?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
Standard 5: Consider the consequences of your work or its misuse for those you study and other interested parties			
5.1	Have the short and long term consequences of the research been considered from the different perspectives of participants, researchers, policy-makers and where relevant, funders?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
5.2	Have the costs of the research to participants or their institutions/services and any possible compensation been considered?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
5.3	Has information about support services (e.g. mentoring, counseling) that might be needed as a consequence of any possible unsettling effects of the research itself been identified?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
5.4	Are the plans flexible enough to ensure that time can be spent discussing any issues that arise from the effects of the research on the individuals or institutions/services?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
Standard 6: Ensure appropriate external professional ethical committee approval is granted where relevant			
6.1	Have colleagues/supervisors been invited to comment on your research proposal?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
6.2	Have any sensitive ethical issues been raised with the School Committee and comments sought?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
6.3	If relevant, which includes all health and social care research, has the external professional ethical committee been identified?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
6.4	Have the guidelines from that professional committee been used to check the proposed research?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐
6.5	Do plans include seeking clearance from this committee (e.g. time to obtain approval may need building into the proposal)?	**Yes** X	**No** ☐

Huib Huyse, 30 November 2010 [68]

---

[68] The ethics approval process was in place from the initiation of the thesis.