KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING STRATEGY 2015 – 2019

Photo: RFullan

Contents

June 2015

1. Introduction

Our organisational strategy for 2013-2017, 'Together for a Better World', emphasizes knowledge and learning as fundamental dimensions of our work, and points to the importance of innovation and quality management in ensuring its effectiveness. Our approaches to the three cross-cutting priorities of the current strategy (Gender and Social Equity, Capacity Development and Knowledge and Learning) complement each other through their recognition of the importance of:

- An inclusive approach to our work, internally, with partners and with primary stakeholders

- The need for shared values as well as diversity of perspectives and experience

- Multistakeholder approaches and their role in promoting local ownership and negotiating relations of differential power

- Development of individual competencies and organisational capacities to effectively support thematic and operational improvement

HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation (Helvetas) is an organisation of approximately 1300 people working with a wide variety of partners in over 30 countries. This represents an extraordinary amount of cultural, experiential and linguistic diversity and knowledge. Building on this rich basis for our work and supported by the Knowledge and Learning (K&L) Strategy 2015-2019:

> ***We leverage the rich and diverse knowledge of our staff and partners by fostering critical reflection and exchange. This increases the effectiveness of our work, through improved learning, engagement and knowledge flow.***

2. Context
2.1 Knowledge Sharing Strategy 2009-2012[1]

Experience during implementation of the previous Knowledge Sharing (KS) Strategy provided some insights into how knowledge and learning in our organisation can be strengthened. The areas to which the 2009-2012 strategy responded include the:

- Creation of a KS Culture through support for Communities of Practice[2] and for staff who would act as KS Champions in different countries

- Evolution from mostly internally oriented K&L-focused activities to increased partner engagement as well as an increased emphasis on learning from evaluation

- Exploration of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and new uses of existing technologies.

In all of these areas there are indications of positive progress as well as of continuing challenges, both of which can contribute to our learning and to the new K&L Strategy. For example, although

---

[1] The 2009-2012 KS Strategy was created before the merger of Helvetas and Intercooperation (2011). During the merger, it was decided that as the two organisations had similar approaches to strengthening knowledge and learning, the former Helvetas strategy should be adopted and extended until after the current organisational strategy for HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation was developed.

[2] The term Community of Practice was coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, and can be defined 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…". See http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/ .

Communities of Practice have been slow to develop within the organisation, there are increasing indications that collaboration amongst staff and partners around specific themes and supported by virtual spaces is beginning to take root.

The emergence of KS Champions has also been sporadic, which suggests that an alternative approach to cultivation of an organisation-wide KS culture should be adopted. The evolution to greater engagement of partners over the course of the previous strategy has been given a boost by the relatively rapid evolution of our extranet, which shows the potential of continuing to move towards increased partner engagement in such spaces.

In terms of learning from evaluation, both internal and external reactions to the meta evaluation exercise undertaken in 2012 indicate a high level of interest in and appreciation for such learning, although the foreseen integration of more learning-focused elements to project impact assessments requires ongoing emphasis. This topic will be taken up further in the section on providing space for reflective practice.

Concerning the exploration of ICTs, a great deal of progress was made around our corporate intranet **Pamoja** and the related extranet. This includes development of the platform itself, the ongoing introduction of new functionality, and the substantial increase in support for increased skills of staff and partners to use the platform effectively. This strong foundation will continue to be built upon. Other technologies, including public social media as well as technologies that are increasingly relevant to field contexts (particularly the spread of mobile connectivity), were not given emphasis in the previous strategy. The latter in particular is an area the current strategy sees as an important opportunity for us to explore further.

2.2 Quality Management

Attention to Quality Management (QM) within the organisation increased substantially during the 2013-2014 period. There is a particularly strong resonance between QM and knowledge and

---

Learning NGO Survey 2013

In 2013 a survey of staff perceptions of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation as a learning organisation was conducted, as part of the evaluation of the KS Strategy 2009-2012. This was the first time the survey was administered within the post-merger organisation, but it could be compared with results from previous occasions (2005-2010) within the former HELVETAS. The most significant findings were:

- Results were more positive than in previous years on all eight survey components
- Staff ratings around Developing an Organisational Memory were lowest, although this component was also the most improved over previous survey results
- There is a perception across the organisation that insufficient time is available to reflect on what we are learning
- As with previous surveys, staff strongly agreed that they are encouraged to share information using electronic media

The above results give a good indication that knowledge and learning are increasingly being perceived by staff as important and useful elements of the organisation's effectiveness, and that we are making visible progress on both.

---

learning, which creates opportunities for mutual reinforcement. Certainly the increased emphasis on a future orientation and on learning from past experience offer direct links with our efforts to

strengthen knowledge sharing, learning and innovation. Similarly, the recognition of the importance of how we work with and through partners – and the related aspects of Human Resource Development (HRD) and Capacity Development – is another example of the common interests QM and the K&L Strategy enjoy.

A further and highly important area of overlap is navigation of the tension field represented by a participatory working culture and the need for guidance and control over policies and procedures. This is consciously addressed by our approach to operationalising the K&L Strategy (see section 3, Implementing the K&L Strategy for more on this).

Overall, the institutional furthering of QM will provide strong support for the K&L Strategy, and the latter will contribute to all components of the QM as illustrated in the QM "quality management wheel" (Figure 1).
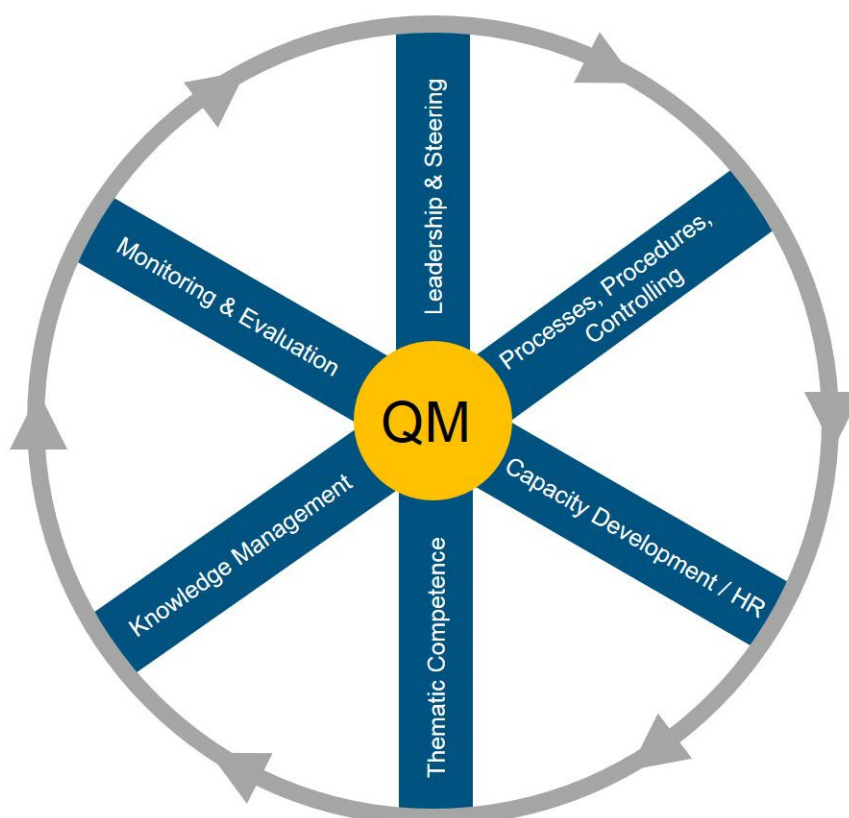

Figure 1. Quality Management Wheel

2.3 Knowledge, Learning and Innovation Trends

Development cooperation first focused on technical solutions implemented by organisations based outside developing countries. Over the past several decades, projects and programmes have relied more and more on collaboration with local partners, and on better understanding local communities, organisations, and development challenges.

Along with this change, knowledge, learning and innovation in the face of development challenges has become increasingly important. Since the 1990s, the decisive link between knowledge, learning and development effectiveness has become a commonly held belief. This started with a focus on information and the codification of knowledge as key, but from the 2000s the significance of people, what they know and how they work together has become the core of our evolving understanding of knowledge, learning and innovation.

A significant influence on this evolution has been the application of a complexity science perspective to knowledge, learning and innovation. The contribution of complexity thinking to our understanding revolves around the recognition of the contexts in which we work as **systems**[3]. In complex contexts, such systems are characterised by unpredictability, by dynamics that cannot be fully controlled or understood, and by actors whose behaviour is influenced by and in turn influences other actors. Thus, the notion of a complex, adaptive system is one where the relationships and influences among its constituent parts are its main determinants.

Along with the application of complexity thinking to development is the continuing acceleration of globalisation, illustrated by the geometric expansion of information flow and the infrastructure upon which that flow depends. This infrastructural expansion has enabled the rise of entirely new business models and ways in which individuals and groups (self) organise. Sometimes referred to as a networked world, the implications of this dramatic rise in interconnectivity are difficult to fully appreciate, as is the extent of its reach (this reach is considerable, an indicator of which is the spread of mobile connectivity even in relatively remote areas)[4].

The realisation that any individual or organisation has a truly limited capacity to understand or influence the contexts in which they act, means that our work needs to be undertaken in ways that:

- Maximize the application of collective knowledge (or more accurately multiple knowledges)[5]
- Allow for the co-identification of major challenges and the co-creation of solutions to overcome them
- Rely on ongoing feedback loops to validate or point to the need to adjust behaviour
- Accept the centrality of networks and multistakeholder partnerships as means of navigating and influencing development contexts

These trends provide the backdrop for the development of the Helvetas Knowledge and Learning Strategy 2015-2019, taking into account the organisation-specific factors outlined above.

---

[3] See, for example, the work of Dave Snowden and Cognitive Edge for particularly interesting and informative thinking and application of complexity science.

[4] It is claimed that there are now more mobile devices than people on the planet. See Did You Know? 6.0 Change to Thrive, April 6, 2014, xplanevisualthinking.

[5] One implication of this is that no single type of knowledge is able to fully encapsulate reality, and therefore we *need* to rely on multiple knowledges to act effectively in complex contexts. Recent discussions of the notion of knowledge ecologies in the KM4Dev [as summarized in the KM4D Journal, May 2011] and IKM Emergent communities provide more detail on this.

3. Implementing the K&L Strategy[6]

THE CHALLENGE: Knowledge sharing, learning and innovation already occur on a regular basis in various projects and programmes. What is, however, more difficult is to systematise them, and to tap into good practices in one context for the benefit of others. Why is this so? It is true that there are barriers such as language, physical and contextual differences, as well as uneven distribution of skills, but perhaps the single biggest hurdle to overcome is the shortage of opportunities for individual and collective reflection, which contribute to improved practice.

THE RESPONSE: The K&L Strategy 2015-2019 is geared toward making it easier for staff and partners to share their knowledge, key outputs, and pressing issues so they can together create practical solutions for the real challenges they face. This is intended to occur throughout our activities, but particular focus will be given to the issues identified in the current organisational strategy, including the three cross-cutting priorities as well as: Advocacy, Climate Change, Emergency Response, Fragility and Migration. Different issues will require different kinds and amounts of support, which will need to be defined by the people who pursue them. The elements of the K&L Strategy provide direction for them to do this.

Helvetas, with its combination of intimate familiarity with local contexts and broad thematic expertise and global reach, is well positioned to provide appropriate and innovative solutions based on the dynamic interaction of knowledge generated locally and that generated externally.

We support this through the combined pursuit of *collaborative learning*, *purposeful innovation* and *transformational change*, which contribute to improved learning and application of knowledge, leading to increased effectiveness of our work. These three strategy elements require contributions and commitment of a critical mass of staff and key partners in a variety of positions and contexts in order to realize their potential. These contributions and this commitment will be stimulated through the action lines described in this document. The action lines themselves flow directly from the components of the K&L strategy elements (see Figure 2 below).

The interplay of the three K&L Strategy elements creates a powerful mutual reinforcement. We believe that promoting improvement in these areas on the part of our staff, our partners and other stakeholders will contribute to a deeper understanding of sustainable development that embraces diversity, shared ownership, and multiple perspectives as essential ingredients. Acting on such an understanding will lead to increased development impact of our projects, programmes and beyond.

---

[6] The examples provided in the boxes throughout this section give a more tangible illustration of activities resulting from implementing the K&L Strategy.

Collaborative Learning builds on experience and exchange. *Reflective practice* and *managing* information and knowledge *outputs* enhance our understanding of what we do and of the way we do it.

Purposeful Innovation focuses our attention on the interplay between 'business as usual' and new ways of working. *Targeted research* and *entrepreneurship* enable us to continuously improve the approaches, tools and methods we use.

Transformational Change enables us to consciously adapt the way we organise our work in response to our environment. Nurturing a *networked working environment* and *working out loud* help us maintain an understanding of what is happening around us and keep our colleagues and partners informed of what we are doing.

Figure 2 illustrates the mutually reinforcing effects amongst the three elements through their key components.
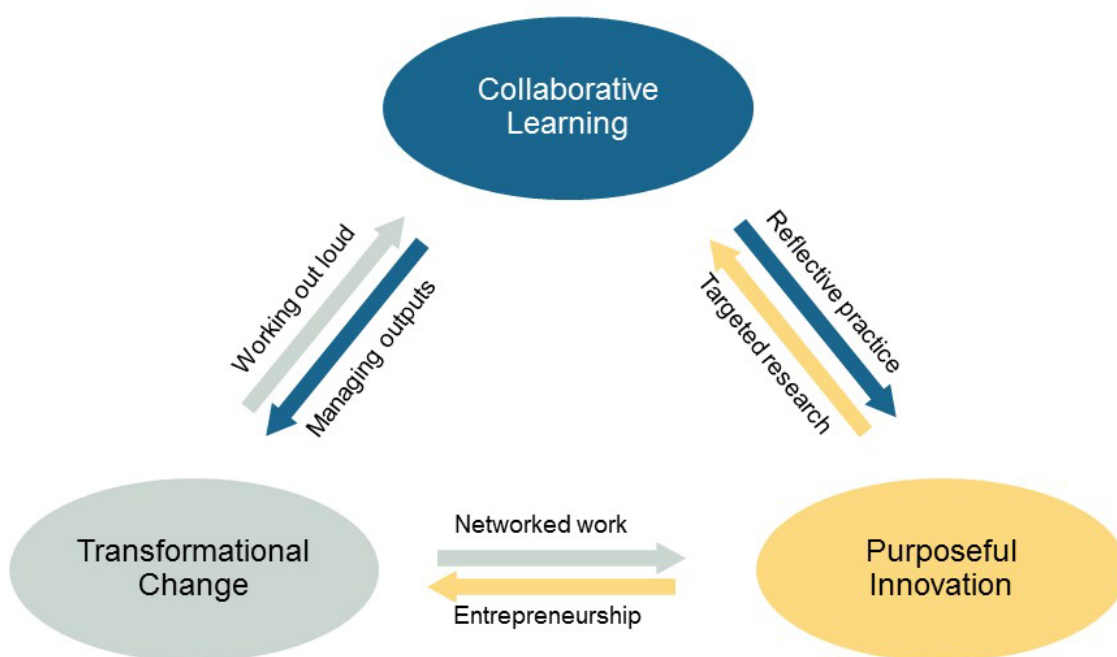

Figure 2. K&L Strategy Elements

The three elements provide the conceptual framework for the K&L strategy. Operationalising this framework will also involve a balance amongst:

1) **Organisation-wide services** and **standard practices** related to knowledge and learning, which contribute to consistency of approach and building of competencies and capacities across the organisation and beyond;

2) The **principle of subsidiarity**, which is based on the belief that where practicable, decisions should be taken at the level where their implementation and effects are most directly experienced. In other words, self-directed **individual and small group decision-making** is often most appropriate because those individuals and groups generally have the highest level of contextual engagement and knowledge, and;

3) Enabling **information and knowledge flow through numerous interlinkages**. This is where we take advantage of the motivation and behaviour of women and men inside and outside the organisation to share their knowledge, to learn and to create new methods and tools.

These ways of pursuing the strategy will enable us to ensure consistency around core skills and behaviour and core processes across the organisation, at the same time as leveraging the creativity of our staff and partners in their respective working contexts. The descriptions of the strategy elements below elaborate further on what this balance means in practice.

The K&L Strategy therefore represents an approach that is *emergent* (arising from the motivation and behaviour of many individuals and small groups), *agile* (intentionally building in a maximum of flexibility and responsiveness that allow decisions to be made based on feedback and changing realities), and *networked* (promoting and leveraging the increased interconnectedness within and outside the organisation that supports a high level of resilience in the face of complexity).

What is not described in detail here is the complementary support for development of competencies and capacities supported by the organisation's HRD and Capacity Development activities[7]. It is obvious that implementation of this K&L Strategy needs to be pursued in close consultation with activities in the HRD and Capacity Development domains.

3.1 Collaborative Learning

"…learning in the network era, is a continuous process of seeking, sensing, and sharing…Seeking includes observation through effective filters and diverse sources of information. Sensemaking starts with questioning our observations and includes experimenting, or probing. Sharing through our networks helps to develop better feedback loops." Harold Jarche, 'Personal Knowledge Management', [blog post January 2013, accessed November 14, 2014]

Based on results of the 2013 Learning NGO Survey and on organisation-wide discussions on knowledge and learning in the global Shareweek 2014 workshop and in a 2014 K&L strategy discussion forum on Pamoja[8], the two main areas of emphasis for collaborative learning are:

---

[7] See the Capacity Development Concept and HRD Strategies for more information on their respective orientations. Note: as of the finalisation of this K&L Strategy, these documents are in draft form and therefore not published.
[8] Note: the Shareweek and K&L Strategy discussion forum are only available on the Helvetas intranet.

1) Providing space for meaningful *reflective practice*, which will help to close the loop from learning to incorporation into improved practice

2) Creating the conditions for greater collaboration through systematic *management of* information and knowledge *outputs*, thereby making them more accessible and available both internally and externally and providing further opportunities for shared learning

3.1.1 Providing space for reflective practice

As highlighted earlier, staff at Helvetas feel they do not have sufficient time to reflect on their work. There is a perception that most of our time is spent on planning and implementation with an insufficient amount of time devoted to reflection on what we do, which would allow us to more effectively learn and to apply our learning to future activity.

How can we create opportunities for reflective practice without increasing feelings of shortage of time? We need to make it easier for people to integrate reflection into their ongoing work through the provision of appropriate guidelines (around reflection processes in general, and around Working Area-specific reflection), as well as tapping into existing opportunities such as learning moments within project and programme cycles, online dialogues around specific topics and periodic events such as Shareweeks and other workshops. It is especially in the context of these cycles and events that reflection can be strengthened because they are familiar, they involve planned activities at regular intervals, and they gather a higher number of project/ programme/ organisational stakeholders to collaborate.

The Shareweek is a face-to-face workshop that brings together representatives of all Helvetas programmes and departments for a week of strategic thinking, discussion and looking ahead. The focus of the 2014 Shareweek was on implementing the new organisational strategy. Through a variety of plenary and small group sessions, field- and Swizterland-based staff put their heads together to reflect on what the key topics of the strategy meant in their respective contexts, and on what they could learn from each other and concretely apply moving forward. Between those discussions and more generic consideration of things such as Quality Management, Innovation and internal collaboration, participants left with a deeper understanding of the organisation and of how they can tangibly improve their work.

Action Line:

Reflection tools and methods: A useful spur to the promotion of deeper reflection within the organisation would be the creation of a *Reflective Learning Toolkit*, which would be a compilation of short and user-friendly methods and tools, along with provision of support for their use. Some would be newly created, but many already exist and just need to be made more readily available. An indication of roles and responsibilities (e.g. on the part of Country Directors, Project Managers, Programme Coordinators, Advisors, etc.) will need to be included, along with specific methods and tools.

Greater reflection on what we and our partners are doing will help identify practices which are working well and should be strengthened, as well as those which do not appear to be having the desired effect and should therefore be adapted or discontinued. Elaboration of the toolkit will be coordinated with complementary efforts in the HRD and Capacity Development domains.

The toolkit will cover reflective learning around: mid-term reviews, end of phase evaluations, impact assessments, team learning cycles, partnership reviews, policy reviews, etc. It will complement

guides focused on specific thematic areas (e.g. the 3-step manual for working in Fragile & Conflict-Affected Situations). There will be a mix of supported methods, some of which can be employed with only a small amount of preparation, time investment and follow up (e.g. After Action Reviews to develop key learnings during project implementation). Toolkit development will take an iterative approach (identify areas of greatest demand/potential, prototype and test a tool and/or method, refine based on feedback), to ensure this approach is effective and can itself incorporate learning as additional tools and methods are developed or identified. Two important messages to be included are: how to incorporate the learning into ongoing practice, and; how to ensure voices of all stakeholders are heard[9]. The intention is to help close the loop between learning and (modification of) future practice as well as to ensure inclusive approaches are internalised.

3.1.2 Management of information and knowledge outputs

Bringing Market Systems Development (MSD) resources together: In mid-2014, a number of Helvetas staff in different projects and countries began informal discussions around their interest in sharing resources more systematically in this thematic area. These discussions led to the creation of a Pamoja-based extranet space where staff and partners could discuss issues of common concern and share relevant resources. As of early 2015, the MSD space was set up to share key manuals, templates and good MSD examples from different contexts, so all could benefit from the wealth of existing materials and thereby avoid 'reinventing the wheel' in their efforts to strengthen MSD in the various projects in which they are working.

Here the point of departure is the recognition that many outputs we produce – from manuals and guides, to case studies, to video and other stories, to evaluations, to project reports – have tremendous potential to contribute beyond the contexts in which they are produced. This potential is partly limited by the ability of staff and partners to absorb large amounts of information. However, a more significant limitation is that our outputs are not systematically made available outside restricted groups of people, making the discovery of relevant content more difficult and time-consuming than it otherwise would be. This applies to externally produced content as well, however much of the learning, innovation and knowledge produced within Helvetas is particularly relevant for sharing amongst staff and primary partners. More effective management of the outputs we produce will also create more collaboration opportunities, reinforcing our collective capacities for innovation and transformational change.

Across projects, programmes and departments, some information and knowledge outputs are stored on fileservers and some within individual email accounts. In many cases this is not an issue because a lot of the outputs produced are for the use of a small, specific group of people. However, the potential added value to support greater learning, knowledge sharing and innovation justifies some effort towards a more coherent managing of particularly precious resources. This should additionally point more clearly to information and knowledge gaps to be filled.

The challenge is how to support more coherent sharing of such outputs without adding a debilitating strain on the work lives of all concerned. This can be done by supporting the distribution of information and knowledge outputs produced as part of our Management Information System (e.g.,

---

[9] This surfacing of voices applies both internally and externally. Often, gender or ethnicity based patterns of behaviour are unconscious and can affect exchange and collaboration both within the organisation and amongst organisations and communities. Our tools and methods must take such influences into account.

project reports, evaluations, impact assessments), as well as enabling and encouraging sharing of relevant outputs through:

1) Identification of similar types of output that have potential or existing broad interest (e.g. manuals and guides, strategies, project & programme evaluations, mid-term reviews)

2) Enabling effective sharing of information and knowledge outputs. This could be done largely through Pamoja in terms of outputs of internal interest, but may need to be supplemented through, for example, extranet spaces or country and corporate public websites where audiences are broader.

This is more about changing behaviour than it is about technical platforms. Some platform enhancement will be required, but the majority of energy will be expended on changing attitudes and practices towards sharing information and knowledge. Here is where leaders (of teams, projects, programmes, departments, the organisation) must play a strong role in demonstrating, encouraging and supporting desired behaviour.

The intended behaviour change will not occur by itself, but will be reinforced by actions taken in pursuit of the other components of the K&L Strategy. For example, targeted research will require and invite collaboration, as will working out loud and within networks. Similarly, innovation requires bringing in new perspectives on existing challenges, and can therefore be stimulated by collaborative work.

Action Lines:

At the organisational level: Discussion and agreement on the ***most valuable*** information and knowledge outputs (e.g. strategies, resources on core methods, tools and approaches), and prioritisation of key outputs to share globally and how they should be shared. Emphasis is placed on most valuable because as information and knowledge consumers people desire access to more than they can realistically either absorb or provide as producers. Thus, it is crucial to seek economy of effort for information and knowledge providers and narrowness of focus for information consumers.

At the programme level: Discussion and agreement on the most useful information and knowledge outputs (e.g. manuals, policy documents) that can tangibly contribute to greater effectiveness of projects and programmes on the one hand, and can build and maintain relationships at the national and regional levels on the other.

At the department and team levels: In addition to the above two information and knowledge contexts, departments and teams should review their own requirements, outputs and intended audiences with a view to rationalising information and knowledge output management.

At all levels: The behaviour needed to fully establish sound information and knowledge output management will need champions at each level – especially but not restricted to middle management – to both model and promote good practice. Support will also need to be provided – through training, backstopping and recognition – to ensure online spaces are configured in easily accessible ways and that information and knowledge output sharing behaviour becomes routine. This is a good example of the overlap between Capacity Development, Human Resources Development (HRD) and K&L, as they must all play a part in enabling staff and partners to develop the necessary behaviours and competencies.

Note: The degree to which Information and knowledge outputs will be used in real-world situations is directly related to the level of interaction potential users have. Thus, as implied above, decisions

about information and knowledge output management mentioned here need to take collaborative spaces, relationships and networks into account.

3.2 Purposeful **Innovation**

"*In an innovative culture, employees know that their ideas are valued and believe that it is safe to express and act on those ideas and to learn from trying. Leaders reinforce this state of mind by involving employees in decisions that matter to them*." Marla Capozzi, Development Outreach, December 2009, World Bank Institute.

"…we need to get rid of linear plans, and think about experimentation, failing faster, and getting better at spotting and backing success, even when it's accidental." Duncan Green, From Poverty to Power blog, November 28, 2014

In order to establish a culture of innovation, the K&L Strategy promotes:

1) Undertaking *targeted research* on key topics
2) Supporting *entrepreneurship* as an essential component of innovation

This approach is based on the understanding that supporting innovation consists of two complementary pursuits, which tend to occur at different organisational levels: one, normally taking place at regional or global levels, that focuses energy on priority topics, thereby increasing the efficiency of the innovation process by directing available institutional resources to where they are most needed, and; a second pursuit, most often at programme and project levels, that nurtures organisational culture and behaviour in a direction that encourages exploration of new topics, technologies and ways of working which sometimes involve a higher short-term risk than existing ones. This orientation to short-term risk ultimately lowers the overall exposure of the organisation to longer-term risk by increasing its capacity to adapt its core ways of working at a rate and in directions corresponding to trends in the broader development community.

3.2.1 Undertaking Targeted Research on Key Topics

> *A Learning Expedition: Along with recognition that projects to improve water quality were not achieving desired levels of impact, the HELVETAS Water and Infrastructure (WIN) team increasingly realised that broader behaviour change around hygiene was required for successful water quality projects. As this issue was continually increasing in significance, HELVETAS decided to embark on a Behaviour Change Learning Expedition including the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (eawag), staff in several affected projects, and partners. Although it took some time to get off the ground, in the end the organisation was ahead of the curve in finding effective ways to grapple with the challenges of water quality in its affected programmes.*

At any given time, there are topics of interest to Helvetas with which we are either only partially engaged or only aware of as topics of increasing relevance. Often they are beacons of emerging thinking in particular thematic areas, and/or indications of regional or global trends which need to be taken into account in our work.

In order to avoid a haphazard and fragmented path to understanding and integrating such topics, Helvetas created the Learning Expeditions approach, which provides a framework for developing a

deeper conceptual understanding in tandem with validating that understanding in field realities. Aside from this combination of conceptual and practical aspects, a Learning Expedition is also conceived of as a collaborative exploration, involving various partners depending on the specific context. More detail on how this approach works can be found in the Learning Expeditions Concept Note. [See Learning Expeditions]

Action Lines:

Identification of Learning Expedition topics: Guided by the organisational strategy, and through strategic planning events and processes such as annual planning exercises, interdepartmental meetings, Shareweeks, working group discussions and online discussion forums, Helvetas staff collectively identify key topics in which we have a particular interest in learning more and deciding whether and how they should be integrated in our ongoing work. Priority topics are then taken up in Learning Expeditions. Different Expeditions will occupy varying lengths of time, but it is assumed that most will be sufficiently developed over a 2-year period that they will either continue on the path to greater integration in our programming or be superseded by other priorities. This anticipated rhythm, coupled with the fact that Shareweeks (key strategic events which bring together representatives of all programmes and departments) take place on a biennial basis, suggest that identification of topics for Learning Expeditions could best be done in connection with those events, and validated by later follow-up. Note that although the tendency is to think in terms of thematic topics corresponding to working fields or our thematic Working Areas, it is equally important to think of other topics that may further our institutional effectiveness (e.g. the use of mobile technologies in project contexts, to support citizen engagement, to dynamize value chains, etc.).

Implementation of specific Learning Expeditions: Once a topic has been earmarked for a Learning Expedition, the relevant department and team need to designate a topic lead. The topic lead will steer the process (typically facilitated to a greater or lesser extent by the Knowledge and Learning team) of scoping out the topic, doing background research and linking up with key partners, modeling/prototyping, and applying them to specific contexts for learning purposes. Aside from the shared learning among partners, a guide, manual or similar output would normally be produced out of a Learning Expedition.

With thematic topics, the lead will usually be a member of the Advisory Services department. With other topics, it would need to be decided on a case-by-case basis. Although there is an assumed consistency of approach across Learning Expeditions (including similar types of outputs and milestones), each one will unfold in its own way accord to a variety of factors (existing knowledge, availability of key partners, opportunities for action research, etc.). Thus, the Learning Expeditions concept provides guidance rather than prescription for each expedition.

3.2.2 Supporting Entrepreneurship

South-South entrepreneurship: The HELVETAS Ethiopia team knew of many places in Ethiopia with limited road and market access due to poor rural infrastructure and often dangerous river crossings. Wondering whether the decades-long Nepal experience with trail bridge construction could be relevant, they invited Nepali colleagues to come and share their experiences with project and government staff. Soon after, a pilot project started with Nepal playing a central capacity development support role. Some of the first bridges built in Ethiopia suffered from quality issues, but soon a vibrant bridge building programme was enthusiastically undertaken in collaboration with the Ethiopian Roads Authority.

Innovations generally do not occur as a result of people trying to produce something innovative, but as a result of them trying to confront a specific challenge. This often involves creating a different tool, method or approach than usual. Such innovative behaviour will occur more often when people are encouraged to try new things, to experiment when it makes sense.

It is obviously inadvisable to promote uninhibited experimentation. Too much risk-taking could quickly undermine our Quality Management, our reputation and our effectiveness. On the other hand, an overly conservative approach to our work stifles creativity and presents its own risks in terms of programmatic stagnation. There is no single answer in terms of either how much experimentation is healthy or what mechanisms should be employed to manage it. However, we can be confident that without it, a high level of innovation cannot be sustained. Also, innovation does not have to be completely disruptive of existing practices. In fact, innovation can equally result from a series of small adjustments that may not seem significant at the time, but eventually result in a new tool, method or practice.

This does not imply a revolutionary approach to the way we work. We have QM and other mechanisms for operational oversight and these should not be dismantled. What is required is rather more along the lines of opening up greater space for informed entrepreneurship that will lead to more purposeful innovation. It should be noted here that even when exploring something new leads to disappointing results, it will often constitute a powerful opportunity to contribute to collaborative learning, which provides significant added value.

Action Line:

Supporting informed experimentation: The main threads to be followed here are active skills development of all levels of management around supporting effective experimentation, as well as organisation-wide capacity development around appropriate risk assessment[10]. Thus, throughout the organisation, we need to develop a common understanding of when it makes sense to try a new tool, method or approach, as well as what level of risk is a comfortable one for us (this may vary among programmes or even among projects, depending on the nature of the activities and the surrounding contexts), keeping in mind that increasing levels of risk to the livelihoods of primary stakeholders must be avoided.

The other side of the entrepreneurship coin – in addition to making the decision to experiment – is taking the right approach to exploring an innovation opportunity. Prototyping is an important way to

---

[10] Elements of effective risk-taking include: sound risk assessment; informed decision-making of key stakeholders; designing simple but informative feedback loops; regular review of interim results; readiness to change or stop an activity as appropriate.

successively validate and adjust an innovative idea on a scale that does not invite insurmountable problems if the innovation is not viable. This is in line not only with prevailing wisdom on innovation, but also on approaches to working in complex contexts.[11]

As innovation competence is among the core competences pursued by the organisation, skills building of staff in this area will be done through targeted exercises (e.g. providing opportunities for participatory action research, applying approaches such as Participatory Innovation Development) in collaboration with those responsible for Human Resources Development, as well as through promotion and recognition of innovation where opportunities exist (e.g. in Annual Appraisals, Shareweeks, Knowledge Sharing Awards, etc.).

3.3 Transformational Change

"If there is one single thing a learning organization does well, it is helping people embrace change"
Peter Senge, et al., The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook

Collaborative learning and purposeful innovation will contribute significantly to enhancing Helvetas' effectiveness and impact. They can be further leveraged by consciously pursuing an agenda of **transformational change** in how we think about our work and how we go about it. This is at the same time the most challenging and the most urgent element of the K&L strategy.

3.3.1 Why transformational change?

The essence of transformational change is a shift from working as individuals or members of organisational units only, to also working within a fluid set of relationships (e.g., a personal network) that crosses organisational boundaries and changes depending on the tasks at hand.

For some time, development discourse has recognised that the work of development organisations frequently takes place in complex contexts. Complex contexts exhibit systemic characteristics that require substantially different approaches than most development organisations are used to applying. For example, in complex contexts there are multiple actors and conditions which influence each other in a variety of ways, making prediction based on linear causality ineffective: we literally cannot fully predict what will happen in such contexts, even in relation to our own interventions.

We can, however, be better at keeping track of what is happening and adjusting what we do to match evolving contexts if we take advantage of the perceptions of a wider group of people. As individuals, we can only have limited confidence in our observations, but if we can tap into what various others are also observing in the same or similar contexts (ie. colleagues, partners), we can dramatically improve our ability to correctly assess a situation[12].

---

[11] There are many references to the importance of prototyping to innovation in the innovation literature. See for example Miller, P., and Wedell-Wedellborg, T., 'Innovation as Usual', 2013, Harvard Business Review Press, Quaggiotto, G., 'Innovation for Development: what is *really* different?', March 18, 2013, UNDP Voices from Eurasia blog, and Martin, R.L., 'The innovation catalysts', June 2011, Harvard Business Review
[12] This is related to the idea of 'distributed cognition' from cognitive science, which proposes that cognition and knowledge are not confined to individuals, but act across individuals and their environments.

We have been and will continue to be involved in a variety of formal networks, but what we are speaking of here is not only membership of such networks for strategic purposes, but actually transforming the way we work such that it is easier for individuals to be exposed to and potentially contribute to the work of a variety of others, not just those in their immediate teams, but in other teams within and between programmes.

Some of the most meaningful personal and small group networks also transcend institutional boundaries and can have a dramatic impact on the agility with which we undertake development work, because they can tap into a broader range of experience. The two main aspects of enabling transformational change are:

1) Supporting staff and partners to **work in networked ways** through the creation of personal or small group informal networks, which are at least as important as formal organisational structures in promoting high quality development work

2) Modifying hard and soft infrastructure to enable staff and partners to **work out loud**, thereby providing real-time information and incentives for transformational change.

In other words, by working through personal networks embedded in our day-to-day work and the use of spaces to share and co-develop what we are doing, we:

- promote greater transparency, fulfilling our obligation to inform others
- increase the interconnectedness of our work, making us more aware of what is being done elsewhere that is of relevance to us
- cultivate a culture of asking questions, both of ourselves and of others, allowing us all to help each other strengthen our work
- create more and better feedback loops, helping us to monitor and adjust as we go along, making minor course corrections and avoiding major disruptions

This can come from simple things such a brown bag lunches or blogs. It can also come from more complex ongoing interactions, for example around developing a new approach to a particular type of challenge.

In order for networked work to take place, available information and communications infrastructure needs to support such work, AND the soft aspects of infrastructure (such as recruiting, performance assessment, staff recognition processes, partnership development) need to promote and acknowledge it.

In terms of ICT infrastructure, this implies staff (and partners, as appropriate) being able to:

- Create their own Pamoja spaces and pages with minimal support
- Interact effectively with each other through Pamoja with mobile devices (which are not only globally ubiquitous, but fast becoming the most common way for people to access digital content and services)
- Use social media as and when it suits the purposes of their work (e.g. public blogs, Twitter, Linkedin, Hootsuite, etc as networking tools)

On the soft side, the integration of support for networked ways of working into HRD and capacity development processes are equally important enablers of transformative behaviour.

3.3.2 Working in Networked Ways

To say that networks have an important role is to state the obvious. What is being asserted in this strategy is different. The K&L strategy advocates a shift towards networked work, which involves working in and through networks of varying degrees of formality (sometimes cutting across teams, across departments, across organisations).

Many of these networks will be wholly informal, being the personal networks of individual staff built up over time. Others will have more visibility, for example as Communities of Practice or other acknowledged networks around particular topics. Similarly, some will be relatively short-lived, arising from a specific and time-delimited need, and disappearing again when that need is fulfilled.

> *An organisational-wide strategic dialogue: This Knowledge & Learning Strategy was itself elaborated in a networked way. Starting with agreement in the Learning & Innovation Working Group on the key conceptual starting points, staff from around the world were invited to share their thoughts and experiences on knowledge, learning and innovation. The results were taken up in a first draft of the strategy, which was again shared with all staff for comment. A third iteration was produced which was taken back into the defined organisational process of an interdepartmental Program Commission, resulting in its final form. In this way, perspectives from various locations, disciplines and positions in the organisation were integrated by weaving formal and informal processes together.*

Action lines:

As with the systematic management of information and knowledge outputs described in the section on <u>collaborative learning</u>, the cultivation of a culture of working in networked ways needs to be developed through interventions at a variety of levels.

At the organisational level: Strategic internal and external networks need to be identified and appropriate membership encouraged. The value of these networks in this context is not only in relation to organisational visibility, but equally to their potential to contribute to innovation and learning. A key enabler of dynamic network formation is the creation of a ***competence map of expertise*** within the organisation. This will be pursued as an enhancement to the current People Directory in Pamoja, and will involve a platform development aspect as well as a marketing and outreach aspect, driven by senior and middle management. The goal is to generate sufficient momentum and usefulness for staff to readily identify others with similar interests or needed skills. Once this occurs, the competence map will become self-sustaining.

At the programme level: Similar to the organisational level, but focused more on identification of and engagement with national and regional networks and their real or potential contribution to programmatic diversity and evolution.

At the department and team levels: Again, the rationale is the same as at the other levels: to leverage the power of existing networks to contribute to departmental and team dynamism in the sphere of knowledge learning and innovation.

At all levels: The support required here from management is to enable individuals to join and form relevant networks as they are required (i.e. networks that are likely to contribute to impact through their influence on knowledge, learning and innovation), and the development of capacities to undertake this way of working, which for many will be new. Here we speak of both technical competence and social competence. This is another good example of the overlap between Capacity Development, Human Resources Development and K&L, through which the development of such competencies are supported. Specific examples of support to be provided include training and

coaching in online and face-to-face facilitation and in the use of online tools, as well as inclusion of participation in networks in Job Descriptions.

3.3.3 Working Out Loud

Feedback loops in Nepal & Pakistan: The HELVETAS Nepal and Pakistan country programmes decided they could both benefit by collaborating more closely on a regular basis. This required an initial investment (mostly of time), but after a couple of years it was clear that both programmes benefitted directly: Pakistan from the Nepal Water User Master Plan approach to water resource management, and Nepal from the application of the CRiSTAL tool oriented to supporting climate change adaptation. Based on these early successes, both programmes decided to deepen their collaboration through joint acquisition, peer reviews, and strengthening implementation capacities more generally.

In order to create effective conditions for feedback loops to exist, we need to work more in 'public' ways, sometimes called 'working out loud'[13]. This refers to a relatively high level of transparency in the way we work, both internally and externally. Thus, works-in-progress, evolving approaches, etc., can be strengthened by opening them up to participation from others with relevant expertise and similar interests. They will also contribute to sharing what we already know more widely.

When people are encouraged to share their plans, strategies, reports, etc. at early stages, both they and interested colleagues and partners will benefit from developing solutions early in the process and will thereby be able to create more powerful solutions more quickly than by traditional methods of sequential work.

Relationships between organisations can also be enhanced by increasing levels of transparency and mutual influence gained through early sharing of evolving concepts and plans.

A successful approach to transformational change will boost our capacities to innovate and to learn more effectively, because all members of the organisation will co-create an environment that is characterised by a high level of dynamism and change, providing staff and partners with opportunities to provide feedback on their work and on the work of others. At the same time, the various mechanisms we use to ensure consistency (e.g., QM efforts, HRD and Capacity Development, sensitisation to issues of Gender and Social Equity) will act as stabilising influences on such dynamism, and allow the organisation to take a strategic approach to what is essentially a system with distributed knowledge, learning and innovation.

Action Lines:

Infrastructure development: A core element of creating a conducive environment for transformational change is continued development and support of Pamoja. Pamoja will need: a *user-friendly mobile interface* that gives access to key content (this may be the most important enhancement of Pamoja given the potential reach it would have amongst colleagues and partners), and; well-configured and *easily created collaboration spaces*. The latter would require redesign of the existing generic collaboration space template and the default inclusion of common macros so users could create a fully functioning space based on filling out a simple form.

HRD/Capacity Development: In addition to the Pamoja enhancements, support and coaching for engagement, facilitation and management of information and knowledge outputs needs to be put in

---

[13] See for example the work of John Stepper and others on the Working out Loud website.

place. This requires establishment of competence to deliver such support at least at regional levels. Thus, HRD and Capacity Development plans need to incorporate these kinds of support as well.

We also need to integrate recognition of and selection for desired behaviour in our various routine and occasional processes (e.g. KS Award, performance review process, transparency award, recruiting). Management encouragement to work out loud (e.g. sharing drafts of documents at an early stage, and evolving ideas through blogs and discussion forums in order to get broader input) is crucial to the success of our efforts in this area.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation

Aside from the K&L strategy's contribution to learning from the variety of M&E exercises going on throughout the organisation, we need to be in a position to determine whether the K&L strategy itself is having the desired effect. This will be done by:

- Conducting a survey in late 2017 or early 2018 of staff perceptions about learning and knowledge sharing in the organisation using the Learning NGO Survey method[14]
- Using and analysing a small set of indicators to monitor and evaluate progress on the three strategy elements (see Annex 1- K&L Strategy 2015-2019 Logical Framework)

The survey will be essential to determine how staff and key partners experience knowledge, learning and innovation after several years of implementation of the K&L strategy. This is of particular relevance given the intangible nature of such things as knowledge, learning and innovation. As a complement to this, other contextual information will be gathered that will allow for triangulation of results of the survey, and provide additional quantitative data (e.g. associated with Pamoja use, with Learning Expeditions, etc.).

---

[14] Previous Helvetas Knowledge Sharing strategies were assessed using the Learning NGO Survey, which is aimed at gathering impressions of staff about where we stand as a learning organisation. They collectively provide both a solid baseline and a longitudinal picture of such perceptions across a decade of the organisation's existence.

Annex 1 – K&L Strategy 2015-2019 Logical Framework

K&L Strategy 2015-2019		*Leveraging knowledge by fostering critical reflection and exchange for improved learning, engagement and knowledge flow*		
Strategy Element	Expected Outcome	Action/Output	Assumptions/Comments	Indicators
1. Enhance collaborative learning	1.1 Future activities are planned taking previous learning into account	• Make previous M&E results more widely available • Build learning moments (reflection) into PCM and team & department activities • Document learning and prioritise action through reporting and planning	• All levels of management will actively support integration of past learning into future activities	• Evaluation/Impact Assessments uploaded on Pamoja • Project/team/department retreats and reflection moments in PCM • Reflective Learning Toolkit produced • 90% of project/programme reports include an explicit component on learning (and, if applicable, reflection on recommendations)
	1.2 Methods & tools are adapted to different contexts across the organisation 1.3 Awareness of projects, programmes & initiatives is high throughout the organisation	• Staff share guidelines and tools • Core organisational information outputs and announcements are shared widely	• Production of guidelines and manuals can readily be adapted to wider audiences • Information output sharing behaviour can be easily learned and reinforced through examples of others	• Guidelines and tools uploaded to Pamoja • Strategies and project documents uploaded to Pamoja • A core method/tool illustrating the Helvetas way of working is created for each working field • Lively exchanges take place around the majority of methods/tools (e.g. in regional workshops and/or CoPs)

K&L Strategy 2015-2019		*Leveraging knowledge by fostering critical reflection and exchange for improved learning, engagement and knowledge flow*		
Strategy Element	Expected Outcome	Action/Output	Assumptions/Comments	Indicators
2. Instill an orientation of purposeful innovation	2.1 Existing and new tools, approaches and methods are regularly explored	• Learning Expeditions on specific topics are periodically organised • Meetings and workshops seek out speakers and participants with diverse perspectives	• People have an interest in learning from others • Exposure to different perspectives often stimulates new thinking	• 1-2 Learning Expeditions are initiated or continued each year • 1/3 of learning events include inputs or participation from outside the programme or organisation
	2.2 A willingness to explore new technical and process solutions is part of the organisational culture	• Sensitisation of senior & middle managers to benefits of risk-taking and ways to promote it • New activities are adopted if feedback/early results are positive	• Calculated risk incorporated into the work environment will occur if there is explicit management support	• 2/3 of senior management & 1/2 of middle management undertake training on entrepreneurship • Prototyping used to accelerate innovation/manage risk
3. Trigger transformational change	3.1 There is a relatively high level of engagement in networks amongst staff Staff and partners employ collective ways of working	• Engagement in internal and external networks is promoted and recognized • Groups of staff & staff + strategic partners form communities to further their work	• Many staff already participate in networks (but connectivity is a constraint) • Social capital is created with early examples of 'selfless' behaviour	• Increased levels of Pamoja use over time • Expertise Competence Map constructed and used • More intranet and extranet spaces created on Pamoja
	3.2 Staff routinely 'work out loud', inviting engagement of others in their evolving thinking	• Early drafts of new strategies, methods and tools are shared for comment discussion of ideas is invited when they are still tentative or relatively undeveloped • Staff are recognized for their transparency in working out loud	• Management will cultivate a culture of mutual trust • Fear of exposure will be quickly reduced with positive experience of working transparently	• Increased numbers of staff blogging about their work • It becomes standard practice to share early drafts, project and other concept notes, strategies (e.g. in Programme Commissions)