Social Learning and Networking

How multiple actors can learn through joint analysis, dialogue and co-creation

**Edited by Lieke van der Zouwen, Nina de Roo,
Herman Brouwer, Karèn Verhoosel**

Seminar Report

The Centre for Development Innovation (CDI) works on processes of innovation and change in the areas of secure and healthy food, adaptive agriculture, sustainable markets and ecosystem governance. It is an interdisciplinary and internationally focused unit of Wageningen University & Research centre within the Social Sciences Group.

Through facilitating innovation, brokering knowledge and supporting capacity development, our group of 60 staff help to link Wageningen UR's expertise to the global challenges of sustainable and equitable development. CDI works to inspire new forms of learning and collaboration between citizens, governments, businesses, NGOs and the scientific community.

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Innovation & Change

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Edited by
Brouwer, J.H.
Roo, de N.
Verhoosel, K.S.
Zouwen, van der L.

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Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation

We are facing complex societal problems such as climate change, human conflict, poverty and inequality, and need innovative solutions. Multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) are more and more seen as a critical way of coming to such innovative solutions. It is thought that when multiple stakeholders are able to meet, share experiences, learn together and contribute to decisions, new and innovative ways of dealing with problems are found and turned into action. Still, much remains to be understood about the role and effectiveness of social learning in multi-stakeholder settings. This report summarizes the deliberations of the seminar "Social learning and networking: How multiple actors can learn through joint analysis, dialogue and co-creation", which was held in Wageningen on 16 September 2010.

Preface

This report is a follow up of the seminar "Social learning and networking: How multiple actors can learn through joint analysis, dialogue and co-creation". The seminar was held in Wageningen on 16 September 2010.

The seminar was organized and hosted by the Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation and was part of the three week international course 'Facilitating Multi-Stakeholder Pro-cesses and Social Learning', attended by 25 participants from all over the world. This course covered state-of-the-art thinking about participation from local to global level and introduced the most up-to-date methodologies and approaches for facilitation and participation; and discussed how multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) and social learning relate to concepts such as innovation systems, complexity, interactive policy making and adaptive management. The participants of the course partly facilitated the seminar and actively took part in the event.

The seminar was attended by over 60 people coming from different professions and backgrounds. During the event several case studies on learning alliances in multi-stakeholder settings were presented. In a number of interactive sessions, the participants were stimulated to share their experiences. At the end of each session lessons were drawn and recommendations for future work were made.

This report makes the outcomes of the seminar available for the participants of the seminar and for people who are interested in the field but who were not able to attend the event.

Dr. A.J. Woodhill
Director Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation

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Executive summary

We are living in a world which is currently characterized by dynamic upheavals and insecurity. Facing complex societal problems such as climate change, human conflict, poverty and inequality, we need innovative solutions. Multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) are more and more seen as a critical way of coming to such innovative solutions. It is thought that when multiple stakeholders are able to meet, share experiences, learn together and contribute to decisions, new and innovative ways of dealing with problems are found and turned into action. Still, much remains to be understood about the role and effectiveness of social learning in multi-stakeholder settings. For this reason, Wageningen UR – Centre for Development Innovation (CDI) organized a one-day seminar on 16 September 2010: titled *"Social learning and networking: How multiple actors can learn through joint analysis, dialogue and co-creation".* The seminar was attended by over 60 people from all over the world, coming from different professions and backgrounds.

During the event several case studies on learning alliances in multi-stakeholder settings were presented. In a number of interactive sessions, the participants were stimulated to share their experiences. At the end of each session lessons were drawn and recommendations for future work were made. The following topics were discussed: the role of social media in learning alliances, the role of learning institutions in learning alliances, partnerships in learning alliances, monitoring and evaluation of learning alliances, and from social learning to social change.

The sessions resulted in a long list of recommendations and lessons learnt. One issue that was highlighted was the increasing popularity of social media in social learning. Nevertheless, face-to-face meetings are still needed, especially to build trust among stakeholders. The participants of the seminar brought up many more necessary success factors for social learning, such as the building of cohesion between the stakeholders, the formulation of a shared problem definition, the acknowledgement of the authenticity and context specificity of each learning process and flexible systems for monitoring an evaluation that enhance the learning process. Professor Arjen Wals furthermore stressed the importance of diversity of stakeholders and stakeholders' views to come to innovative problem solving. Finally, successful social learning needs good facilitation which is able to turn the diversity of the stakeholders into a constructive asset, rather than letting it be a source of conflict. More findings, discussions and lessons learnt are found in the report.

1   Introduction

We are living in a world which is currently characterized by dynamic upheavals and insecurity. Facing complex societal problems such as climate change, human conflict, poverty and inequality, we need innovative solutions. Multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) are more and more seen as a critical way of coming to such innovative solutions, but they are not a 'silver bullet'. Accordingly, it is increasingly recognized that learning alliances, and hence the collaboration between multiple actors (such as research and education institutes, NGOs, government, private sector and community based organisations), contribute to highly improved understanding of the complex issues that Wageningen UR addresses. It is thought that when multiple stakeholders are able to meet, share experiences, learn together and contribute to decisions, new and innovative ways of dealing with problems are found and turned into action.

However, much remains to be understood about the role and effectiveness of social learning in multi-stakeholder settings in a wider context of politics, governance and societal change. How does this learning take place? How can it be facilitated? And does social learning indeed lead to solutions for complex problems and social change? Despite the field of social learning developing quickly, it is still a great challenge to understand how it can function as a tool for development. For this reason, Wageningen UR – Centre for Development Innovation (CDI) organized a one-day seminar on 16 September 2010. In this seminar a number of presentations and workshops addressed the following questions:

1. What is the rationale for the use of learning alliances as conceptual and practical approach in multi-stakeholder processes?
2. What are the theoretical assumptions and reflections made by influential academics in these domains?
3. What is the relation between learning alliances and multi-stakeholder processes?
4. What are critical success factors for learning alliances in multi-stakeholder settings?

The topics which were discussed during the seminar and the main lessons that were drawn from the discussions are presented in this report. Before turning to the outcomes of the seminar, the concept of social learning and the way it is understood in this report will be briefly discussed.

1.1   Social Learning

The concept of social learning is subject of many disciplines, including human psychology, sociology, communication science, policy studies and management studies. This partly explains why there are so many perspectives and interpretations of the concept. Researchers and practitioners even use a wide variety of related and (partly) overlapping terms such as collaborative learning, societal learning, participation and collective learning. Since people in the first place learn through interaction with each other, through observation, imitation and modelling (Bandura, 1977), discussing social learning easily leads us to raise questions like 'isn't all learning social?' and 'is it possible to learn without interaction?'

This report takes a specific approach of social learning by referring to a kind of learning that takes place in multi-stakeholder settings in which a group of actors together tries to learn its way out of complex societal questions such as environmental problems and resource dilemma's. For these complex problems to be solved, new knowledge and new practices are required. Learning alliances (groups of different stakeholders in which a social learning process takes place) as producers of novel ideas and actions are therefore increasingly seen as a promising way of dealing with complex problems. Thus, social learning is not only the outcome of a multi-stakeholder process, but also has a normative connotation as the learning has to lead to a 'better' or more sustainable world (van Bommel, Röling, Aarts & Turnhout, 2009).

Learning alliances are characterized by diversity. The stakeholders have different backgrounds, different perspectives, values, interests and knowledge with regard to the issue at hand. Social learning in this respect "both characterises and contributes to a 'learning system' in which people learn from and with one another and, as a result, become more capable of withstanding setbacks, of dealing with insecurity, complexity and risks" (Wals, van der Hoeven & Blanken, 2009, p.11). It is the heterogeneity of the group which offers the opportunity of producing new knowledge and to create a shared awareness of the various interests involved. On the other hand, this diversity can lead to conflict and hold the process hostage (Beers, Sol & Wals, 2009). Good facilitation is needed in order to make the group able to use the diversity in benefit of the process. This implies that considerable attention should go to building trust and social cohesion, collective meaning making, and to stimulating the participants to reflect upon their normative considerations (Wals, van der Hoeven & Blanken, 2009; and Beers, Sol & Wals, 2009). Only in an open and trusting atmosphere, people will be willing to think beyond their own interests and to create room for new perspectives and actions.

The discourse on how multiple actors can learn through joint analysis and collaboration is developing quickly. Nevertheless, much remains unknown about how social learning can function as a tool for solving the complex societal problems we face today. This report aims at (partly) answering a few of the questions we still have. An overview of some basic concepts is found in box 1.

The remaining of this report is organized as follows. Chapter 2 introduces two case studies on learning alliances: Prolinnova and the Global Platform on Forest Landscape Restoration, and offers a reflection on these cases by exploring the challenges and opportunities posed by the cases. Chapter 3 discusses the outcomes of the five workshops that were held during the seminar. Chapter 4 concludes by reflecting upon the key-questions and by presenting the main lessons that were drawn from the sessions.

Box 1: *Some concepts*

As described above, there are many terms used to describe social learning processes. It is useful to elaborate a little on the backgrounds of 'social learning', 'societal learning' and 'learning alliances as these concepts are closely related, but easily mixed.

Social learning
Social learning is a type of learning that takes place in multi-stakeholder settings in which a heterogeneous group of actors together tries to learn its way out of complex societal questions such as environmental problems and resource dilemma's.

Societal learning
Societal learning puts more emphasis on wider societal and systemic changes. The outcome of this type of learning thus goes beyond a specific group or alliance of people as the new capacities and insights are societal.

Learning alliance
Usually, social learning takes place in settings where stakeholders have different interests, values and perspectives. When the concept of social learning is used, usually emphasis is put on conflict as a potentially fruitful basis for learning. In learning alliances on the other hand, also different perspectives are found, but here it is usually the convergence of interests which is stressed. Nevertheless, this report recognizes that learning processes within these alliances are often characterized by diversity and conflict.

Despite these 'definitions', one should always be attentive for specific definitions as these concepts are often defined in different ways.

2 Two case studies on learning alliances

The true meaning of social learning only becomes clear when zooming in on concrete cases. For this reason, the seminar started with the introduction of two examples of learning alliances: PROLINNOVA and the Global Platform on Forest Landscape Restoration (GPFLR).

2.1 PROLINNOVA

Mariana Wongtschowski (PROLINNOVA)

Prolinnova (Promoting Local Innovation) is an NGO-initiated programme aimed at building a global learning network to promote local innovation in ecologically-oriented agriculture and natural resource management. The programme starts from the recognition of farmers as creative innovators and builds on and scales up farmer-led approaches to development that start with finding out how farmers do informal experiments to develop and test new ideas for better use of natural resources.

Prolinnova works at the local, national and international level in countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, resulting in a large and diverse range of stakeholders that is involved in the different programs. Farmers, farmer groups, NGOs, extension officers, ministries and other groups together share experiences and learn from each other in order to improve the use of natural resources. This is done by among others joint experimentation, farmer-led documentation, local innovation support funds, sharing knowledge and policy influencing. One example of joint experimentation was the development of a fish smoking oven in Niger. The experiences with regard to this locally developed innovation were finally shared at the national and international level through the network of Prolinnova.

Throughout the years Prolinnova has built up considerable experience with learning through Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs). A few lessons learned on these partnerships are: the need to decentralize as this will give room for flexibility; the need for a common vision among the stakeholders in order to bring them together, the need to facilitate these partnerships; the need for transparent governance mechanisms; the importance of sharing tasks and resources; the need to build these partnerships on both institutions and individuals; and the value of reflecting and learning on partnerships.

Building up long term strategic partnerships is however no easy task, partly because of short term funding. Besides, it is difficult to get fundamental shifts within governmental organisations and to get farmer organisations involved in governance. Finally, to really bring change, one needs to move beyond the circle of 'old friends', but it appears to be quite challenging to bring this into practice and to decrease dependency on a few key persons in a country programme.
More information about Prolinnova is found at www.prolinnova.net

2.2   The Global Platform on Forest Landscape Restoration (GPFLR)

Cora van Oosten (Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation)

The Global Platform on Forest Landscape Restoration (GPFLR) is a network of governments, organisations, communities and individuals aiming at restoration of forests and degraded lands. By sharing ideas and information between global and local actors GPFLR promotes an integrated approach to restore and conserve forests and the functions that they provide. The starting point of their approach are local landscape sites and the initiatives and experiences of people at the local level. By including global organisations the platform aims at relating specific cases to the wider global picture of landscape restoration so that countries can learn from each other. In this way it becomes possible to reflect on how the learning networks evolve and emerge between different stakeholders, even in different parts of the world.

At a given moment there emerged a need for a space where people could come together to discuss. Therefore, recently, a virtual network was established where participants could join and exchange ideas. This ´learning network´ is connected to the global structure of local landscape sites. This network facilitates learning on the concept of landscape restoration, the variety of applications and getting into touch with people who do the same in a different part of the world. The participants especially appreciate the international exposure (empowerment); increased contact with peers at site level, increased contact with peers in other countries; and a better definition of what we are doing (bonding). The fact that people were asking for real life encounters to further learn from each other, could mean stimulation for donors to help in a financial way.

Nevertheless, there are still many questions about how to evolve with the learning process from this point onwards and about what the exact contribution of the virtual network is to the learning process of the participants. Is this type of learning really innovative? Does it lead to a better practice at site level? Does it improve policies? Does it lead to social change? And, in the end, does it lead to more trees? Besides, they face challenges like how to continue with the network, how to organize the necessary resources, and how to come to a point where real life encounters and online learning come together in a ´blended´ learning.

More information about GPFLR is found at http://www.ideastransformlandscapes.org. The learning network is found at: http://forestlandscaperestoration.ning.com

2.3   Reflection

Arjen Wals (Wageningen UR)

Reflecting upon these two cases, several issues came to the fore. First, it became clear that social learning through virtual networks is becoming increasingly popular. A globalizing network world makes connectivity easier, but does not necessarily facilitate social learning. Networked learning has the potential to lead to a more democratic way of learning, though it does not work in all situations as globally there is no equal access to internet. Slow internet connections, illiteracy and long distances to internet are a few of the factors that constrain virtual learning networks.

An interesting idea is the concept of blended learning, a form of learning which mixes the virtual and the real. Virtual learning may be an economic complement of real life learning, but real life learning is not necessarily more expensive. In the end, learning is a matter of continuous reflexivity. In every situation there is something to learn. The question however is what it takes to be reflexive all the time and whether this reflexivity is strengthened by participating in virtual networks. In virtual discussions there is more time to think about a response than in face-to-face interaction. On the other hand you miss the facial expressions which are of central importance in human interaction.

The presence of internet shows us that we need to move from a body of knowledge to a body of people. The World Wide Web is a perfect example of a huge body of knowledge, virtually everything can be found on the web. The difficulty is that the authority behind the different pieces of information is unknown. We need to be very critical towards the information we absorb. The other side of learning is the interactivity side which is about improving (the quality of) dialogues, among others through cohesion. There is a lot of potential in this body of people, but it remains questionable to what extend social cohesion can be built through virtual communities. Most learning takes place in informal settings and face-to-face interaction, the dynamics in a virtual platform are completely different. Despite these remarks, there is a lot of potential in these virtual networks, especially for marginalized people who for instance would not be able to come to international conferences.

Social learning also brings up the question to what end we are learning. What is the ultimate purpose of our learning networks? We can talk about reforestation or local innovations, but in the end sustainable solutions need to address fundamental normative issues with regard to our lifestyles and consumption patterns. In this discussion it is useful to distinguish between two forms of learning: instrumental learning, which is aimed at changing people's behaviour and the development of more sustainable practices; and emancipatory learning, which is about capacity building and people's ability to contribute

to a more sustainable world. This has to do with the ability to look at local issues from different perspectives. Social learning can be helpful in putting issues in among others time, spatial, cultural and disciplinary perspective. When you are part of a learning network it is easier to look at issues from a different perspective.

In the cases, the concepts of *bonding, bridging and linking* were mentioned. Bonding is helpful as long as it does not become a circle of old friends. Bridging is a powerful tool for social learning, especially when you bridge with people with a different mindset. Linking local experiences to the international level raises the question to what extent the contextual is relevant for the global. The assumption behind this is that local experiences can inform practice elsewhere. This is however quite problematic as we tend to speak about 'best practices' and 'success stories', while prescribing certain solutions and telling people how they should lives their lives is counter effective as it disempowers people to learn. It would be more constructive to talk about 'good practices' which are honest about what is happening. In the end, success is found in the extent to which people are able to critically analyze what went well and what didn't go well and to be transparent about this. In our virtual platforms we should give more attention to sharing honest and critical reflections rather than just telling our success stories.
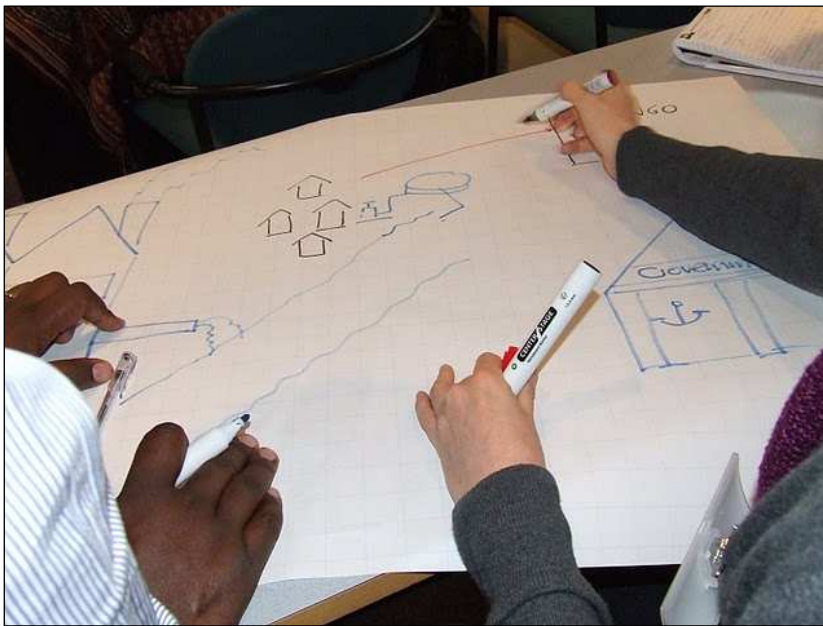
3   Workshops

The variety of themes that can be discussed in the context of social learning is infinite. During the seminar a few of these topics were addressed and discussed in the workshops, by which the participants were encouraged to share their personal and professional experiences with regard to the issue at hand. This section discusses the main lessons and recommendations that were drawn from the workshops.

3.1   The role of social media in learning alliances

Joitske Hulsebosch (independent consultant)
Nowadays, information can be easily shared among people and organisations living in different continent. The strong increase of the digital sharing of information is facilitated by the development of a whole range of new techniques and tools. One can imagine this opens a lot of potential for e-learning, but what are exactly the advantages and disadvantages of digital communication for social learning?

Learning types are often classified in formal and informal learning. Formal learning is an organized way of learning, generally taking place within a school system in a teacher-learner relationship. However, the majority of what we learn takes place outside the classroom, through day-to-day experiences. This informal way of learning happens continuously and often even unconsciously, it is a social process taking place through interaction with other people. Reflecting upon our experiences can deepen the learning process.

Informal learning (in learning alliances) does not only take place through face-to-face interactions, but also by the use of social media. Social media consists of a group of internet applications with which people can exchange user generated content such as ideas and opinions, pictures, news and videos. Examples of social media are Facebook, WordPress, various Wiki's, YouTube and Twitter. An overview of some of the social media is found in table 1. Social media are all about interaction, we are able to share our information within an endless space with and endless amount of people. An impressive amount of information is being shared by an impressive number of people online. Considering the importance of informal learning and the current revolution of interaction on the internet, what does this mean for learning alliances?

It is important to move beyond face-to-face events based learning. In some cases it is still normal to have a conference once a year, but this is a very sporadic way of learning. Nowadays we need vibrant communities with sustained interaction. Therefore social media can be helpful, it can be used as 'just-in-time learning', avoids that people are reinventing the wheel and in some cases reduces communication costs.

With social media developing so quickly, information can be shared faster and faster.

However, online social learning is not something that takes place spontaneously and without any regulation. In fact there is a lot of facilitation involved. In some cases not everybody is used to using these tools and need instruction. Even if people are familiar with using social media, there is a lot that can be done. You can organize twitter chats, make maps, use polls, stimulate blog conversations and harvest information on wiki's. Through social media it also becomes possible to organise internet based peer review processes in which colleagues can share very honest and private information. By rewriting the stories and making them anonymous and available for others, 'deep learning' becomes possible. You also need to manage what kind of information is put on the web and whether it will be open for everyone. Do you want the information to pop up somewhere else? Do the participants feel free to share (personal) information with people they may not know? Finally, contrary to what is often thought, it is not always necessary to start a new blog, network or facebook group. You can also start from existing groups or initiatives that are already present among the participants, for instance blogs. This requires an eye and an ear for what people are already doing.

Table 1: *Social media*	
Tool	**Explanation**
	Facebook is a social networking website on which people and organisations can create their own profile and join networks. The Rainforest Alliance is an example of an organisation using Facebook to create a network. Facebook makes it easy to reach out on bigger group, but it needs a lot of facilitation since it is harder to keep attention of the members for a longer period of time.
	A wiki is a website that makes it possible to create and edit numerous interlinked web pages by using a simplified text editor. Generally, a wiki is organized around a certain topic, such as Akvopedia which is on water and sanitation projects. People are free to add information and so, different resources are put together.
	Twitter is a website which offers a social networking and microblogging service. Users can send and read other users' messages, which are called 'tweets'. There are organisations and groups that organize weekly exchange meetings via twitter. By adding 'hashtags' to certain information, one can easily search on specific topics and join the discussions on those topics.
	Ning is an online platform for people to create their own social networks. Users can create networks around specific interests or topics and make group websites, adding forums, photos and videos. Currently it is a paid service. An example is the GPFLR learning network, which is discussed in section 2.2.

Previously, the internet was used as a support for face-to-face meetings. Social learning was purely event based with a few e-mail exchanges to support the event. Now it often seems the other way around as a lot of social learning takes place online. Nevertheless it remains useful to balance virtual learning with face-to-face events as the energy of real life interaction cannot be mimicked on the internet. If not all participants of the virtual network can attend the meeting, they may choose representatives or use video.

An important issue that needs to be taken into account when working with social media, is that there are always people who are excluded. Access to internet is still not being distributed equally across the globe, especially poor and marginalized people may be (computer) illiterate or live far away from internet access. Even when these people are being represented by practitioners and policy makers, one should be aware that a lot of information is lost when local knowledge is brought to higher levels.

To include groups without access additional means are needed, for instance through meetings, local radio, cell phones and brochures.

> *"In Ghana we have a collaborative forest management forum. We aim to share information 'from the ground' to show how policies are working, as to generate information for evidence based policy advocacy. At the community level there is no internet available, but we use rural radio, videos or cell phones."*

Concluding, internet cannot stand alone as a platform for social learning. Face-to-face interaction remains of central importance in learning processes, for instance to build trust among the participants or to include groups without internet access. Nevertheless, social media form a valuable contribution to social learning processes and taking into account the current trends, it is only likely that the importance of the internet in social learning will increase.

> *"We use the internet as well, but internet can still not stand alone, so we have face-to-face meetings once a year. We also found it is useful to use just a few tools from social media. So, we don't go for everything that's available, but we choose the ones that suit the organisation best".*

3.2   The role of learning institutions in learning alliances

Arjen Wals (Wageningen UR)
Discussing the role of knowledge institutes in learning alliances raises questions like *what is their added value? What is their role in a learning process? What role can universities play in a world which is characterized by complex and interlinked challenges? Can it be in the world that these institutes do research?*

Central concepts in (social) learning are diversity and reflection. The power of diversity in learning communities can be tremendous, provided that there is social cohesion. There will always be differences between people in a learning network and these can constrain the learning process as people have different interests and use different frames of reference. As long as there is social cohesion, these differences form a great advantage as people bring in different ideas and forms of knowledge.

Another precondition for social learning is reflexivity. We need to be able to reflect on ourselves and the diversity within ourselves in order to be able to learn at all. Besides, we are part of families and communities to whom we need to show our empathy. The ability to place ourselves in the position of others is of central importance in social learning. Knowledge institutes have the potential to develop

and strengthen reflexivity. However, currently, most universities still work in a rather static old-fashioned way by researching *about* people rather than doing research *with and for* people. In order to relate better to challenges of today, universities need to reconsider the way they work.

Three binary trends and counter-trends can be observed in higher education:

– *Science for impact factors versus science for society:* scientists need to publish all the time in order to have a high impact factor. There has been an enormous rise in articles, but these are less and less read by peers as they are also busy publishing. This trend is countered by a science which is more relevant for society, where universities and practices are blend. This leads to a dilemma: should we make information freely accessible so that it can be used by society or should scientific insights be protected so that scientists can make money?
– *Increasing efficiency versus promoting authentic learning:* nowadays universities can be seen as 'diploma factories', the number of students has grown dramatically while the number of teaching staff has not. This puts pressure on the meaning of a diploma. At the same time there is a call for authenticity, for more interactive, practical and reality based learning. This type of learning is however less efficient as it requires more teachers.
– *Science as 'commodity' versus science as 'community':* science is increasingly seen as a commodity. Research often depends on private external funding, which in many cases set the research agenda. Topics which are not funded are hardly researched or critically assessed. However, complex questions like how make people better able to live sustainable, require a more trans-disciplinary perspective. We need depart from perspective that does not come out of one discipline, but which takes the current situation as a starting point. Besides, we need to cross the boundaries between science, technology and society. Each area has its own networks and communities which need to be linked in order to work towards more sustainable solutions.

Figure 1 offers a helpful scheme to structure thinking on post-modern science. On the horizontal axe one finds the extent to which people participate in the learning process. The vertical axe reflects to which extent goals are predetermined or open. Universities are generally positioned at the upper left. Here we talk about steady bodies of knowledge which are transmitted to learners in an authoritative way. We still need fundamental science, but this is no longer sufficient. We need to move to the right were we find a more open way of conducting science and education. At the lower right the body of knowledge changes all the time. Which knowledge works or not is a matter of context. Here we speak about knowledge co-creation rather than about knowledge transmission. This is usually how learning in multi-stakeholder processes takes place.

Figure 1: *learning model*
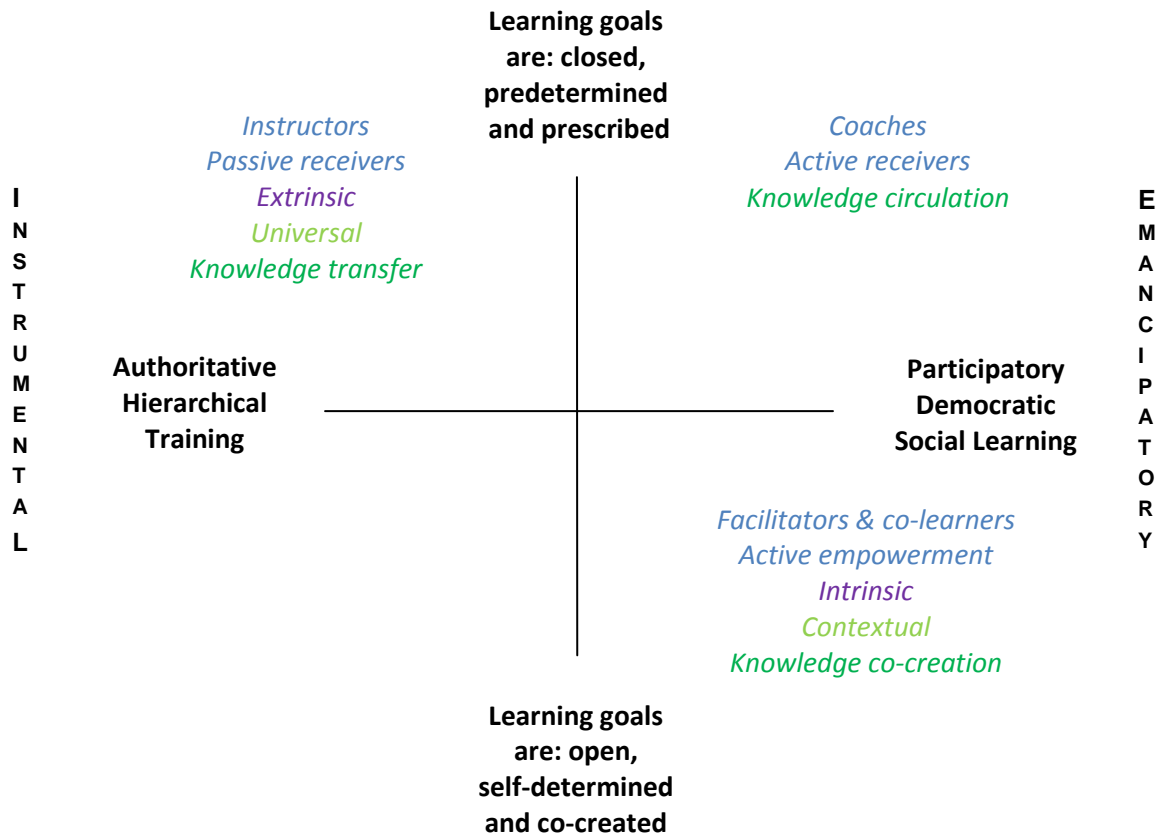
When rethinking the position of knowledge institutions in our post-modern world there are certain questions we may want to ask ourselves:

− Normatively: to what end do we need knowledge institutes? What is our ultimate purpose of our learning? Why do we need to innovate?
− Epistemologically: what kind of knowledge do we count in? There is a lot of knowledge outside universities, science is not superior to these other types of knowledge.
− Rationally: what kind of interface with the community/society is needed for knowledge institutes to remain relevant?
− Methodologically: what kind of research methodologies are consistent with the changing role of universities? Here we distinguish between three types of learning: learning as mining, where the researcher enters a community to extract data which is processed in an article that the community certainly will not read; research as learning, where the researcher co-learns with the community and reflects and share his or her insights in a way that is also relevant for the community itself; and research as activism, in which the researcher chooses sides and aims at improving the situation of marginal communities, even though it is difficult to get such a research published.

All forms of research can be legitimate, systematic and scientific. As a researcher you need to think over the implications of your research and methodology, and the relationship you have with the communities.

Our society and the issues we deal with have changed. These changes require new ways of learning. Learning should be open, reflexive and co-creative. Knowledge institutes generally still have a different tradition in which fixed bodies of knowledge are transmitted to rather passive learners. Social learning in learning institutes is still a niche even though this is the type of learning that is required in a complex world. Knowledge as a product is not sufficient anymore, it needs to become part of social processes. Universities will have to undergo fundamental changes and strengthen their linkages with society, in order to offer a meaningful contribution to contemporary challenges. They need to think more critically and incorporate thinking about to what end they are doing research and to what extent their research and education is leading to a more sustainable world.

Partnerships in learning alliances

Stella Pfisterer & Anke Hoekstra (Partnership Resource Centre)

The learning alliances in which social learning takes place are often characterized by partnerships between different actors. The Partnership Resource Centre - which is part of the Erasmus Research Institute of Management (ERIM) - generates, retrieves and shares knowledge on cross sector partnerships for sustainable development. Working together with a diversity of actors which range from researchers from different universities, government institutes, NGOs, companies to students, the centre can be considered a learning alliance itself. Its main activities are to conduct research, develop tools, share knowledge, offer web based learning modules and executive training. These are all aimed at enhancing partnerships.

The starting point of the centre's approach is the societal triangle (see figure 2). State, market and civil society need to cooperate in order to be able to deal with the complex problems we are dealing with today and to work towards a more sustainable world. In a partnership participants have a shared goal, they all invest their resources and share resources. A partnership relation thus goes beyond mere contact, it is a relation based on mutual trust and commitment.

Figure 2: *Societal Triangle*
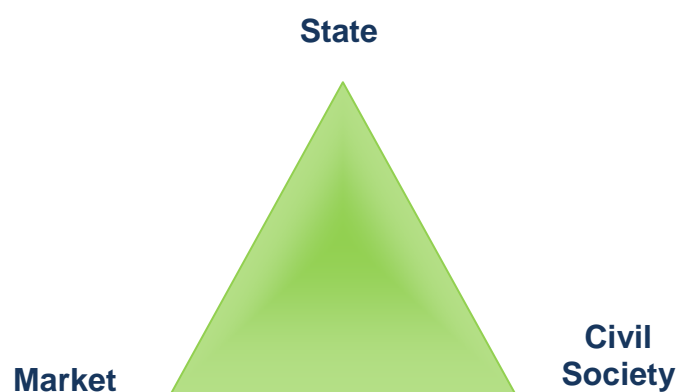
The actors in a partnership usually have quite different motives to participate in a partnership. A company wants to improve its image and branding, enhance employee loyalty, trigger innovation, develop new products and enter new markets. Motives for a NGO can be to get funding and marketing information, entrepreneurial development and technical knowhow on among others products and markets.
Despite the many potentials of a partnership, the partnership process is not easy and often fails. Power differences and a lack of transparency about interests often thwart the process. Different organisational aims, working cultures, professional languages and organisational structures and procedures all constrain a smooth partnership process. How can all these different perspectives and backgrounds be brought together? According to the Partnership Resource Centre a shared working culture is of central importance to make a partnership process possible. Such a shared working culture is based on trust, commitment, mutual understanding and a constructive handling of conflicts.

Next to the need to build up a shared working culture, it is important to think about the different levels of a partnership. First there is the organisational level of companies and NGOs. However, in the end it are individuals who interact, so the individual participants have to be taken into account when working with or in a partnership. Together, these individuals (who are embedded in the organisational level) form the third

level: the partnership. In the partnership three processes take place: trust building, governance and coordination. Trust issues, power differences and the managing of a partnership all need to be dealt with. External facilitators or brokers can be quite helpful in improving communication to avoid or manage conflict.

Considering the diversity of perspectives, resources, knowledge and ideas, partnerships have great potential for being platforms for constructive social learning processes. Different interests and power levels may clash, but the complementary knowledge and experiences of the partners also form an opportunity for learning. NGOs for instance have specific knowledge on communities, local customs and structures, and have technical knowhow on poverty issues. Companies can offer market linkages, entrepreneurial knowledge and information on issues like marketing, managing and production. Together they can form new processes and products that in the end contribute to (sustainable) development. It would be useful though to set up structures within these partnerships that facilitate critical reflection and social learning in order to enhance the partnership process and inform practice elsewhere.

More information on the Partnership Resource Centre is found at
http://www.erim.eur.nl/ERIM/Research/Centres/SCOPE/Partnerships_Resource_Centre
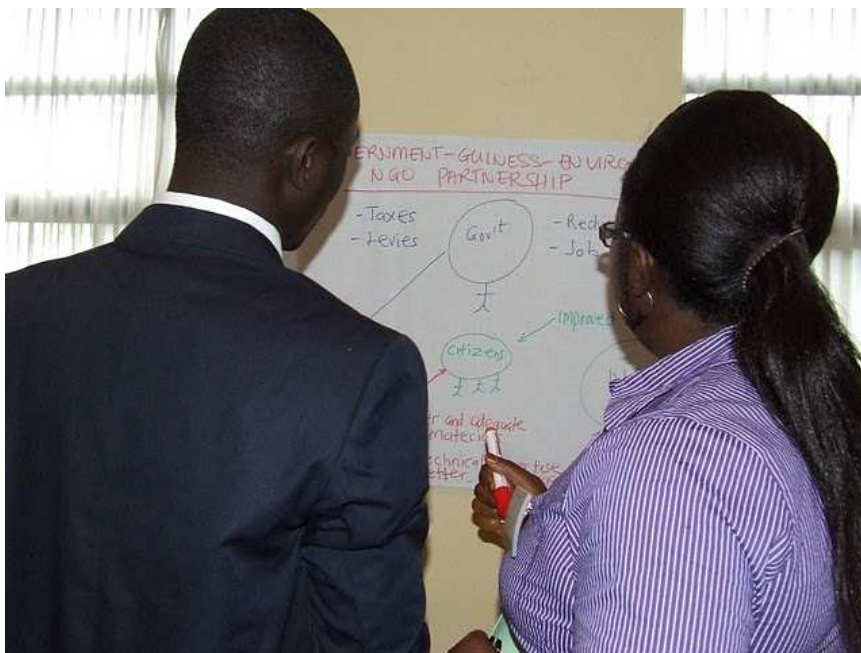
3.3   Monitoring and evaluation of learning alliances

Jouwert van Geene (the Hunger Project, previously with Wageningen CDI)
In order to improve learning processes in multi-stakeholder situations, and to learn about the learning process itself, they need to be monitored and evaluated (M&E). Agri-ProFocus, a learning alliance consisting of a variety of actors, recently set up such a M&E system, though it is not being used yet. Agri-ProFocus (APF) is a partnership of Dutch donor agencies, credit institutions, companies, training and knowledge institutions, with the goal to promote farmer entrepreneurship in developing countries. One of

its main goals is to build solid, transparent knowledge and action networks and to promote farmer entrepreneurship. This is done by linking up with existing efforts, and coordinating and harmonizing these networks. The assumptions behind their actions is that if people learn together, they can share knowledge and in the end reduce poverty.

Together with the Centre for Development Innovation (CDI), APF developed a tool to track progress. To set the direction of progress, first a theory of change was developed. This theory contains the ultimate goal and tools to reach that goal based on theories and concepts. In this theory of change farmer entrepreneurship is of central importance as a means to reduce poverty. An overview of the key steps for setting up a M&E system is found in box 2.

Box 2: *Key steps for setting up the APF M&E system*

1. *Develop a theory of change*
2. *Define purpose, users, use and scope of the M&E system*
   Why do we need M&E, who is going to use it, how comprehensive should our M&E system be, and on what level are we going to evaluate?
3. *Set-up evaluation questions and progress markers*
   What do we need to know to monitor and evaluate the process?
4. *Collection and organisation of information*
   How will the required information be gathered and organized?
5. *Analyze the information and critically reflect*
   How will we make sense of the information gathered and use it to make improvements?
6. *Communicate and report*
   How and to whom do we want to communicate what in terms of our processes?
7. *Conditions and capacities of the M&E system*
   What are the conditions and capacities we need in order to implement and evaluate this M7E system?

With regard to the second step - defining the purpose, users, use and scope of the M&E system - three spheres of influence are found:

1. A sphere of direct control (on APF's own contribution towards action and learning networks);
2. A sphere of influence (on the contribution towards effective intervention by the different actors, in this sphere you are directly influencing partners and actors within your system, but you cannot control them); and
3. A sphere of interest (on the contribution towards improved farmer entrepreneurship, you can only indirectly influence your target groups and other actors outside your direct influence).

It is critical to make choices on what to evaluate, therefore APF decided to mostly focus on the sphere of direct control. Other organisations may focus on other spheres of influence, so it is important to integrate your M&E system with already existing M&E initiatives.

When talking about learning networks that are aimed at strengthening farmer entrepreneurship, the network really is about capacity building. For this reason APF took the five capabilities as defined by ECDPM as a starting point for formulating evaluation questions. These are the capability to achieve coherence (the coordination of existing efforts); the capability to relate (to collaborate with other

stakeholders); the capability to survive and act (to take charge and act efficiently and effectively in joint actions); the capability to adapt and self-renew (to learn, innovate and adapt to internal or external trends and factors); and the capability to achieve development results (to improve farmer entrepreneurship). The progress markers are informed by these evaluation questions and refer to three levels of achievement: what we expect to see (spaces and rhythms for critical reflection and learning by the APF country networks); what we like to see (country networks who share learning with other stakeholders and countries); and what we love to see (country networks who feed back the learning into their operational management and strategic directions).
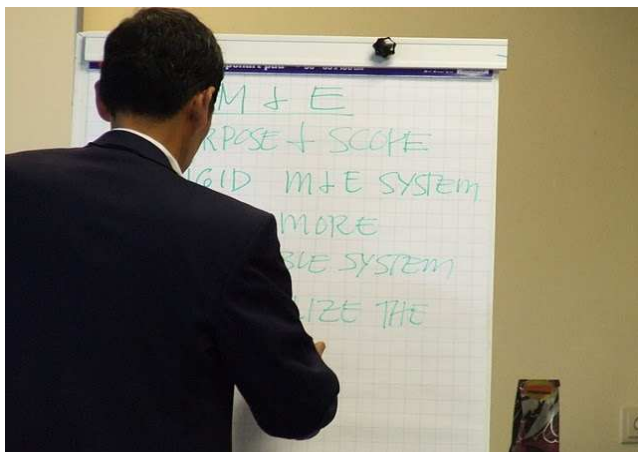
Despite the relevance of a M&E system, the process it is not without challenges. It proves difficult to put M&E into practice in a useful and context specific way. The presence of a framework for M&E can limit flexibility, creativity and diversity of opinions and ideas. People may feel forced in a certain structures and feel constrained to freely reflect on certain experiences. Also, M&E might be framed in a way that does not deal with power issues and cultural specifities which may be underlying to the openness of learning. M&E systems need to be operationalized to make it suitable for the local context.

The general framework is still too complex and abstract, In each country the framework has to be re-designed and simplified by reducing the number of indicators.

One of the conclusions when discussing monitoring and evaluation of learning alliances, is that it is not easy to shift from rigid measurement, boxes and matrices, to a more reflexive method of learning. An M&E system may even endanger a learning culture as people could feel constrained to openly share stories and insights on failure since M&E is also about accountability and sharing negative experiences might influence funding. Besides, it is important to internalize the M&E system in order to make it work for you. For some fixed frames may work, for others not. Some people feel the need for a more measurable and quantified and qualified system of indicators, whereas others prefer a more open and reflexive learning process. Finally, it could be useful to integrate M&E with existing rhythms and spaces of learning, but then one should be aware of potentially conflicting purposes (accountability versus critical reflexivity).

More information on Agri-Profocus is found at http://www.agri-profocus.nl

3.4   From social learning to social change

Severine van Bommel (Wageningen UR)
Social learning can mean a lot of different things to different people. Some researchers define social learning as learning from what others are doing. You can also have a more normative perspective, by expecting a specific outcome from the learning process, such as a more sustainable world. Social learning in this respect means to learn your way out of a problem together with others, this can be a resource dilemma or competing claims for instance. If there are multiple stakeholders with different claims on a resource (e.g. water, land or nature), a social learning process can help people to find a solution

together. Social learning is learning from others, from their mistakes and from what they are doing, so, it is all about participation and finding a new world together.

Following the literature on social learning, certain preconditions need to be met to transform negotiations into a social learning process. Some of these preconditions are that the participants need to have a shared interest in the issue at hand, there needs to be mutual interdependence and a shared problem definition, power differences should not be too large and there should be a feeling of trust among the participants. However, it seems that meeting these preconditions is no guarantee for social learning. This was for instance the case in a MSP on the Drentsche Aa area, a nature area in the northern part of the Netherlands. The area is unique in terms of landscape, natural beauty and biodiversity, but nature is being threatened by agricultural practices. In 1990 an MSP was started to find a solution for this situation and to develop a new future for the area. Surprisingly, the social learning process failed despite the group meeting all preconditions. In the end, the process was more about distributive negotiation than about social learning. This raises the question whether social learning can lead to social change, and if it can, how social learning can contribute to change.

This case gave some important insights in how social learning should take place. Usually, when such a process fails it is either because social learning itself is not working, or because the preconditions were not there. In the end it appeared that the stakeholders were not truly interdependent and that the precondition of mutual interdependence maybe is not a precondition as such, but something that needs to be built in the process. This probably also goes up for the other 'preconditions'.
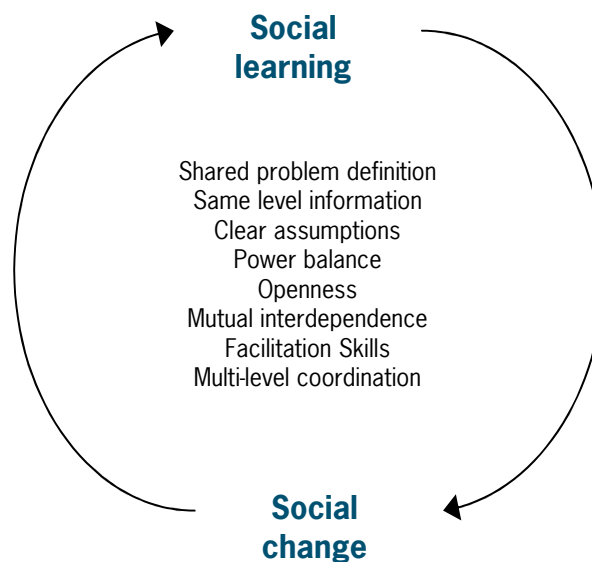
Mutual interdependence, a shared problem definition and trust are part of the negotiation process. This implies that in a social learning process, shared problem definitions and mutual interdependence are issues that need to be negotiated in the process itself. So, social learning has the potential to have an impact on social change, but this is very context dependent. In every context one needs to understand what is going on and adapt the approach and process to the context.

Change is a normative outcome of the learning processes, in the ideal situation learning leads to a better situation. However, one should always think about the questions 'what is the direction of change? Who decides on this directions? What are the consequences of this change?' MSPs are no guarantee for an equal outcome of the process, they do not automatically lead to an improved situation. If these processes are not facilitated carefully they can confirm or even strengthen existing power differences. A discussion on the desired direction of change is therefore a crucial aspect of every learning process.

Learning and change are mutually linked, the processes can feed each other back and forward. In between there are many elements that need to be part of the process in order to make learning lead to changes. It is very important to start by negotiating a shared problem definitions, all participants

should start with the same level of information and be aware of the room for negotiation. Besides, interests and power differences need to be identified in an open process in which the outcomes are not set. Only in an open process people can freely share their thoughts and stakes on the issue. In this process, there should be a balance of power between the participants as people who feel marginalized will not be open to the process. Another important aspect is that different levels should be involved. In the case of the Drentsche Aa for instance, participants relied on conflicting subsidy systems. Social learning and change are not just regional issues, also local, national and international levels need to be involved in order to make the process possible and to make sure the outcome is coherent with processes at other levels. Other important aspects of the process are trust and clear assumptions. In a trustful and clear situation people are more willing to reframe their initial assumptions and stakes and work towards more fundamental changes within themselves that in the end can lead to social change. Finally, the way the learning process is being facilitated has considerable influence on the outcome of the process and whether it will lead to social change. A facilitator with the right skills can direct the learning process towards change. So, social change can indeed be initiated. An overview of these aspects is found in figure 3.

Figure 3: *From social learning to social change*

Social learning

Shared problem definition
Same level information
Clear assumptions
Power balance
Openness
Mutual interdependence
Facilitation Skills
Multi-level coordination

Social change

To conclude, there are quite some ideas and assumptions about how social learning can lead to social change. Nevertheless, there is still a lot to be explored before we can really answer the question whether social learning can lead to social change and if it does so, how it can contribute to (what kind of) change.

4   Conclusions

Social learning often takes places in settings where people with a variety of backgrounds come together. This definitely was the case during the seminar, where the different cultural and professional backgrounds of the participants often informed interesting discussions on personal experiences and wider lessons. Many of the outcomes of these discussions are already discussed in the sections on the workshops. This chapter reflects upon the key-questions that were addressed during the seminar.

1.   What is the rationale for the use of learning alliances as conceptual and practical approach in multi-stakeholder processes?

There are many reasons why social learning is stimulated in multi-stakeholder settings. The main rationale for the use of learning alliances is that it is believed that the world we live in today is characterized by complexity, dynamics, interlinkages, insecurity and stress, which requires a different approach of solving problems. We need to be more reflexive and use co-creative ways of learning to be able to deal with this world. Many issues transcend the individual, so we need each other in strategic partnerships and together learn our way out of complex problems. Besides, the use of learning alliances has the potential to lead to solutions which contribute to a more sustainable world, but also solutions which are sustainable in the sense that they represent different values and interests. Often, the rationales for the use of learning alliances are implicit, we are not always conscious about it. Nevertheless, it is useful to be aware of our assumptions in order to get better understanding of the process.

2.   What are the theoretical assumptions and reflections made by influential academics in these domains?

The basic assumption behind social learning is that it potentially leads to innovation or solutions for complex societal problems. It is often assumed that the group of stakeholders should be heterogeneous in terms of values, backgrounds, perspectives and interests in order to create new knowledge. So, it is important to move beyond our circles of 'old friends'. There are several issues that need to be dealt with in the process, like building trust and mutual interdependence, cohesion, commitment, a shared goal and collective meaning making. Good facilitation is needed to turn the diversity of the stakeholders into positive aspect rather than as a source of conflict, although confrontation can also be helpful for the process. For some academics, social learning is an inherently normative concept as it should lead to a specific outcome such as a better or more sustainable world.

3.   What is the relation between learning alliances and multi-stakeholder processes?

To some extent, learning always takes place in multi-stakeholder settings. However, in order to turn MSPs into constructive and effective learning alliances which are able to develop sustainable solutions, good facilitation is needed. In this facilitation, one needs to pay attention to the development of a shared goal, mutual interdependence and trusting relationships. This does not automatically mean that the participants need to have a shared stake or perspective. Diversity can be very constructive as long it is handled well.

4.   What are critical success factors for learning alliances in multi-stakeholder settings?

During the seminar, both presenters and participants came up with a wide range of factors that contribute to the success of a social learning process. To name a few: *engagement* and *facilitation* are very important. Facilitation needs to be contextual as the process depends on the specific contexts in which it takes place. Considering the *diversity* of the stakeholders, facilitation should focus on *trust*, *cohesion* and *commitment*. These are crucial aspects if we want to move beyond conflicting interests and to use the diversity in a constructive way. Besides, there should be some *multi-level coordination* as a learning process cannot be seen apart from its wider context. We often tend to speak about best practices and apply successful learning processes to other contexts. However, it is more constructive to speak about *good practices* as each situation is different, there is no perfect model. So, we need to accept the context specifity and *authenticity* of each learning process. *Flexible funding structures* are needed to support creativity and authenticity of the process.

In many cases, initiatives for social learning work with the internet to share ideas and experiences. Since this type of interaction is very different from face-to-face encounters it can be very helpful to work with *blended learning*, by combining virtual learning through social media and face-to-face interactions.

In the end, well facilitated learning processes can initiate social change. At the same time we need to remain aware of the direction of change as MSPs can also confirm and strengthen existing power structures. So, the direction of change needs to be part of the negotiations in the learning process.

References and resources

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Annex I

Overview of workshops and presenters

Sharing of case studies on learning alliances:

Case 1:
Prolinnova (Maria Wongtschowski, ETC)

Case 2:
Global Platform on Forest Landscape Restoration (Cora van Oosten, Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation)

Reflection by Prof. Arjen Wals (WUR – Education and Competence Studies Group)

Workshops

Workshop 1:
The role of social media in learning alliances (Joitske Hulsebosch, independent consultant)

Workshop 2:
The role of knowledge institutes in learning alliances (Prof. Arjen Wals, (WUR – Education and Competence Studies Group)

Workshop 3:
Partnerships in learning alliances (Stella Pfisterer and Anke Hoekstra, Partnership Resource Centre)

Workshop 4:
How to monitor and evaluate learning alliances (Jouwert van Geene, the Hunger Project)

Workshop 5:
(How) can social learning contribute to social change? (Severine van Bommel, Wageningen UR)

Annex II – List of participants

Name		Organisation	E-mail
1.	Abubakar	Muhammad Bello	European Union Support To Reforming Institutions Programme	mbabubakar2002@yahoo.com
2.	Agber	Nguher	Greenwacth Initiative	nguherimba@yahoo.com
3.	Baasandamba	Erdenechimeg	People Centered Conservation	munchimeg@yahoo.com
4.	Banjade Butwal	Jagannath	Chamber of Commerce and Industries	banjadej@gmail.com
5.	Bey	Valérie	IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre	bey@irc.nl
6.	Van Bommel	Severine	Wageningen UR	Severine.vanbommel@wur.nl
7.	Breen	Mary	Ethiopia Canada Cooperation Office	mbreen07@gmail.com
8.	Brobbey Lawrence Kwabena		International Network for Bamboo and Rattan (INBAR)	lkbrobbey@inbar.int
9.	Brouwer	Herman	Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation	herman.brouwer@wur.nl
10.	Chowdhury	Mousumi	Bangladesh Institute of Theatre Arts (BITA)	mousumi@bita-bd.org
11.	van Dijk	Sylvia	University Of Guanajuato	dijkhoog@prodigy.net.mx
12.	Dwumor Armah	Vivian Akosua	The Women Peace and Security Network Africa (WIPSEN)	kossyluv@yahoo.co.uk
13.	van Geene	Jouwert	The Hunger Project Nederland	Jouwert@ThehungerProject.nl
14.	Gerrets	Tabitha	Hivos	t.gerrets@hivos.nl
15.	Gohl	Christopher		christopher.gohl@gmx.net
16.	Goodman Sibiya	Thandokwakhe	South African Cane Growers Association	tsibiya@canegrowers.co.za
17.	Gordijn	Femke	InnerAction	femke.gordijn@wur.nl
18.	Graat	Lotte	Wageningen UR	lotte.graat@wur.nl
19.	Harding	Mayke	PSO Kenniscentrum	harding@pso.nl
20.	Harms	Bette	LEI Wageningen UR	bette.harms@wur.nl
21.	Hoekstra	Anke	Partnership Resource Centre	ahoekstra@rsm.nl
22.	Hope-Simpson	Michael Francis	Centre for Intercultural Learning	michael.hope-simpson@international.gc.ca
23.	Iacob	Andra	Wageningen UR	andra.m.iacob@gmail.com
24.	Indiyati	Rini	Ministry of Agriculture	rini.indi@gmail.com
25.	Hulsebosch	Joitske		info@joitskehulsebosch.nl
26.	Johnson-Robinson Nkeiruka Joy		Ifad/Community Based Natural Resources Management	joynikky2004@yahoo.com
27.	Korkor Caesar	Clementina	Care International	tinacaesar@yahoo.com

28.	Malinab Domingo	Diosdado Dado	Land Bank of the Philippines	dadodomingo@yahoo.com
29.	Mason	Helen	Child Helpline International	helen@childhelplineinternational.org
30.	Modiba Limpopo	Matlakala Dinah	Department of Agriculture	modibamd@gmail.com
31.	Nascimento	Ellen Waleska		ellem.waleska@ig.com.br
32.	Ndazima Donny	Silus	CARE International	donnyndazima@yahoo.com
33.	Nuer	Alexander	Wageningen University	alexander.nuer@wur.nl
34.	van Oosten	Cora	Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation	cora.vanoosten@wur.nl
35.	Osharode	Modupe Patience	IFAD/FGN COM.-BASE NAT. RES. MGT.PROG.	oossai@yahoo.com
36.	Onumah	Jacquilene	Wageningen University	jacquilene.onumah@wur.nl
37.	Paudyal	Dhananjaya	Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation	dhanan35@yahoo.com
38.	Pfisterer	Stella	Partnership Resource Centre	spfisterer@rsm.nl
39.	Prins	Djura	Prins In Communicatie	djuraprins@prinsincommunicatie.nl
40.	Pushpalatha	Sivasubramanian	Wageningen UR, Communication Innovation Studies	pushpalatha.sivasubramanian@wur.nl
41.	Ritzema	Henk	Wageningen UR	henk.ritzema@wur.nl
42.	van der van der Roest Joop		RIKILT / Wageningen	joop.vanderroest@wur.nl
43.	de Roo	Nina	Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation	nina.deroo@wur.nl
44.	Rodela	Romina	Wageningen University and Research Centre	romina.rodela@wur.nl
45.	Rugumire	Makuza	Nile Media Network	Rugusuki@yahoo.com
46.	Schaap	Mirjam	Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation	mirjam.schaap@wur.nl
47.	Shen	Jian	Finance Bureau of Hunan Province	s.jackie@163.com
48.	Sreylon	May	Institute to serve facilitators of development (VBNK)	sreylon@vbnk.org
49.	Til	Jan	Plan Nederland	jan.til@plannederland.nl
50.	Tombili	Marwiyah	Development and Investment Board (Bappeda) - Konawe	mtombili@yahoo.com
51.	Turetta	Ana Paula	Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation's – EMBRAPA	anaturetta@cnps.embrapa.br
52.	Tran	Thong Anh	An Giang University	tathong@agu.edu.vn
53.	Uwase	Jost	Minagri / Papsta	jostuse111@gmail.com
54.	Verhagen	Saskia	OXFAM NOVIB	saskia.verhagen@oxfamnovib.nl
55.	Verhoosel	Karèn	Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation	karen.verhoosel@wur.nl
56.	Wals	Arjen	Wageningen UR	arjen.wals@wur.nl
57.	Wogbemase Ofori Komla		Ghana Ports and Harbours Authority	komlaofori@yahoo.co.uk
58.	Wongtschowski	Maria	ETC Energy	m.wongts@etcnl.nl
59.	van der Zouwen	Lieke	Wageningen UR	liekevanderzouwen@gmail.com
60.	Zhu	Yuan	Poverty Alleviation and Development Office - Hunan Province	christina21cn@163.com

We are living in a world which is currently characterized by dynamic upheavals and insecurity. Facing complex societal problems such as climate change, human conflict, poverty and inequality, we need innovative solutions. Multi-stakeholder processes (MSPs) are more and more seen as a critical way of coming to such innovative solutions. It is thought that when multiple stakeholders are able to meet, share experiences, learn together and contribute to decisions, new and innovative ways of dealing with problems are found and turned into action. Still, much remains to be understood about the role and effectiveness of social learning in multi-stakeholder settings. For this reason, Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation (CDI) organized a one-day seminar on 16 September 2010. The seminar "Social learning and networking: How multiple actors can learn through joint analysis, dialogue and co-creation" was attended by over 60 people from all over the world, coming from different professions and backgrounds.

During the event several case studies on learning alliances in multi-stakeholder settings were presented. In a number of interactive sessions, the participants were stimulated to share their experiences. At the end of each session lessons were drawn and recommendations for future work were made. The following topics were discussed: the role of social media in learning alliances, the role of learning institutions in learning alliances, partnerships in learning alliances, monitoring and evaluation of learning alliances, and from social learning to social change.

The sessions resulted in a long list of recommendations, new ideas and lessons learnt. One issue that was often highlighted was the increasing popularity and importance of social media in social learning processes. Nevertheless, face-to-face meetings are still needed, especially to build trust among the participants. Besides trust building, the participants of the seminar brought up many more necessary success factors for social learning, such as the building of cohesion between the stakeholders, the formulation of a shared problem definition, the acknowledgement of the authenticity and context specifity of each learning process and flexible systems for monitoring an evaluation that enhance the learning process. Professor Arjen Wals furthermore stressed the importance of diversity of stakeholders and stakeholders' views to come to innovative problem solving. Finally, successful social learning needs good facilitation which is able to turn the diversity of the stakeholders into a constructive asset, rather than letting it be a source of conflict. More findings, discussions and lessons learnt are found in the report.

More information: www.cdi.wur.nl