

Social Learning in South–North Coalitions: Constructing Knowledge Systems Across Social Chasms

by L. David Brown

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This paper was prepared for the Conference on ‘NGOs and Voluntary Organizations: North and South Learning from Each Other’, at the Centre for Voluntary Organizations of the London School of Economics, September 18-19, 1997. An earlier version was presented to the panel on Civil Society and the Construction of Knowledge Systems at the World Congresses on Participatory Action Research and on Action Research, Action Learning and Process Management, in Cartagena, Colombia, June 1-5, 1997. It will be published in D.L. Lewis, ed., Bridging the Chasm: International Perspectives on Voluntary Action, London: Earthscan, 1998. The author wishes to express appreciation to the participants in both conferences and to Darcy Ashman, Jane Covey and Aimin Yan for their helpful comments during the revision process.

Introduction

The construction of knowledge systems involves the development of ideas and conceptual frameworks that inform thinking and practice. Knowledge systems are the product of sustained and iterative inquiry that is shaped, supported, validated, and preserved by the social systems in which system creators and users are embedded (Kuhn, 1970). Knowledge construction, in short, involves both intellectual and social processes.

The creation of knowledge systems to guide complex activities may require contributions from quite diverse actors. Developing knowledge systems that enable effective and sustainable local development in an increasingly global world, for example, may require contributions from local activists as well as academic theorists, and from Northern policy-makers as well as Southern villagers. Creating certain kinds of needed knowledge systems may require spanning social, political, economic and cultural chasms.

But we also know that, all things being equal, human beings are most comfortable with those like them. It is not easy to work with or learn from others who are different. Communities with different assumptions may well belittle each other’s claims to producing knowledge. Scientists and practitioners often have difficulty understanding each other, just as representatives of different cultures, ideologies or political perspectives may have difficulty in appreciating each other’s perspectives.

It is clear that there are sometimes large benefits to be had from joint learning by researchers and practitioners. ‘Participatory action research’, for example, is an approach to knowledge creation that brings together activists and researchers to produce outcomes that neither could achieve by themselves (Whyte & Greenwood, 1991; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991). Actors in this tradition have invested heavily in learning from the differences between activists and researchers. But even participatory action researchers may have difficulty with the gulfs that separate North and South. While both Northern and Southern investigators practice participatory action research, the two traditions have very little contact with one another (Brown, 1993; Brown & Tandon, 1993) even though they have potentially complementary strengths and weaknesses. The Southern tradition is

sophisticated about power inequalities and social transformation; the Northern tradition has useful technologies for organization development and capacity-building (Leach, 1994). But participatory researchers from the North and the South have made little effort to learn from one another until very recently.

This paper is concerned with building knowledge across both the researcher–activist and North–South boundaries. More specifically, it focuses on “social learning”—the emergence of frames and perspectives that can reshape behavior—in networks that include representatives of both researcher–activist and North–South perspectives. The paper seeks to identify circumstances in which differences among network members can be combined in ways that promote mutual learning. It proposes to identify patterns of social interaction and organization that enable diverse stakeholders to generate new knowledge systems by examining three experiences with networks of Northern and Southern civil society organizations. Each network was concerned with generating new knowledge about organizing for grassroots development—knowledge relevant to both theory and practice.

Background

Social learning that enhances social system capacities to respond to new situations and solve problems has been heralded as a critical capacity for societies and civilizations facing increasing interdependence and accelerating change (Botkin, *et al.*, 1979; Milbrath, 1989; Finger & Verlaan, 1995). Social learning can be distinguished from learning by individuals or by organizations in that it alters the capacities of social entities—like interorganizational networks or communities or nations—that include individuals and organizations as sub-units. Social learning may involve learning by individuals or organizations, but its impacts are embodied in more inclusive systems.

The challenge of organizational learning has become a major concern for organizations that face a rapidly changing and increasingly competitive world (for example, Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 1990; Swieringa & Wierdsma, 1992). It has been argued that organizational learning involves changes in organizational cognition and awareness, repertoires of potential behavior, and actual behaviors.

Four processes (Huber, 1991) have been described as contributing to organizational learning:

1. *Knowledge acquisition* is the process by which knowledge is obtained. It may include knowledge that the organization has at birth, learning from experience, learning from observation, knowledge acquired by bringing in new members, and knowledge acquired by intentional search.
2. *Information distribution* is the process by which knowledge is shared within the organization.
3. *Information interpretation* is the process by which distributed information is given one or more common meanings within the organization.
4. *Organizational memory* refers to the means by which information is stored for future use.

We cannot assume that social learning will necessarily be similar to organizational learning. Since there is much less research and theory available on social learning, however, it does seem reasonable to use categories from analyzing organizational learning as initial lenses for examining learning in interorganizational networks. This analysis will therefore focus in part on how the networks deal with the challenges of knowledge acquisition, distribution, interpretation and retention.

Interorganizational networks have emerged as important actors in many arenas in the last two decades. For some situations, such as complex activities in competitive and uncertain environments, networks have advantages over the more familiar hierarchy or market forms of organization (Powell, 1990; Jones, Hesterly & Borgatti, 1997). They may be particularly useful when rapid learning is necessary, but no one organization has access to all the knowledge required for success (Powell, Koput & Smith-Doerr, 1996). The creation of knowledge systems for fostering sustainable development must be carried out in notoriously complex and uncertain circumstances with relevant information dispersed among many actors, so network organizations may be important actors in that process.

The rise of network organizations has been particularly visible among organizations of civil society, in part because so many of them are small, narrowly focused, and limited in their impacts. Joining like-minded others may be essential to carry out larger tasks. The rapid emergence of NGO networks (see Fisher, 1994; Salamon, 1994) as information linkages may herald increased capacity for social learning. But networks that span activist–researcher and South–North differences are much less common.

For our purposes here two aspects of network development will be particularly important: network creation and network decision-making. *Network creation* refers to the ways in which members are selected and network goals and roles are defined, since those decisions have major impacts on how learning can take place. It is clear that the composition of networks and early decisions about member roles have big impacts on their capacity to generate new ideas and perspectives (Gray, 1989). *Network decision-making* refers to the process and patterns by which key choices are made and differences among members are handled. Patterns of decision-making create or destroy trust among the members; and the frank exchanges that enable synthesis of new perspectives depend on that trust (Browning, *et al.*, 1995; Ring & Van de Ven, 1992).

In the analysis that follows, the experience of three South–North networks of researchers and activists concerned with developing knowledge systems that promote sustainable development will be considered. The next section will briefly describe these networks. The following section examines patterns of network creation and decision-making and processes of knowledge acquisition, distribution, interpretation and retention. The final section explores implications of those comparisons for network learning in other situations.

South–North Network Experiences

The three networks described here all sought to develop new knowledge from the experiences of Southern and Northern civil society organizations. The networks sought to integrate perspectives from North and South and from research and action to generate new knowledge *and* improved practice. The author’s organization, the Institute for Development Research (IDR), was a member of all three networks, and is called “IDR” in the descriptions. All the other organizations are described regionally and functionally: “US Policy Organization” refers to a US agency concerned with developing alternative policies; “Kenya Support Organization” refers to a Kenyan agency involved in providing training and technical support to grassroots groups. Almost all the network members were “support organizations” (SO), in the sense of providing training, consultation, research and advocacy support to non-governmental development organizations (NGOs).

Table 1 summarizes briefly the actors, primary concerns and knowledge products of the three networks.

Table 1: South–North Networks

	Community Problem-Solving Coalition (“Coalition”) (1990–94)	Consortium for Intersectoral Cooperation (“Consortium”) (1989–95)	Inter-Regional Support Organization Alliance (“Alliance”) (1994–97)
Network Actors	<p>Northern: University Research Group (URG); Institute for Development Research (IDR); US Support Organization (USSO).</p> <p>Southern: Kenya SO (KSO); Indonesia SO (ISO); Nicaragua SO (NSO).</p>	<p>Northern: US Policy Organization (USPO); Institute for Development Research (IDR); US Support Organization (USSO).</p> <p>Southern: African SO #1 (AfSO1); Asian SO (AsSO); Latin American SO (LASO).</p>	<p>Northern: University Management Development Project (UMDP); Institute for Development Research (IDR).</p> <p>Southern: Asian SO (AsSO); African SO #2 (AfSO2).</p>
Primary Concerns	Learn and share grass-roots strategies for environmental activism in different countries.	Learn about cooperative problem-solving among NGOs, government agencies and grassroots groups.	Train facilitators and adapt participatory action methodologies for SOs in Asia and Africa.
Knowledge Outcomes: Theory & Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems of the poor are similar across countries; • Participation and local mobilization is crucial to sustainable change; • Grassroots activists offer much to global conferences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation <i>and</i> conflict are key to joint action by diverse groups; • NGO bridges and grassroots groups can catalyze joint problem-solving; • Grassroots organizations can access “invisible” resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Northern participatory action methods can be adapted to meet Southern priorities; • NGOs need strategic thinking; • Future searches can find common ground among NGOs and governments.

Each of these networks operated over several years and their members engaged with each other over a relatively long term. Each network engaged in initial discussions that created a longer term network that was sometimes larger or smaller than the initial network. In each case, the networks made use of funds from Northern donor agencies interested in the questions under investigation and they mobilized grassroots organizations as active partners in the learning process.

Many of the ideas developed in this analysis have emerged from discussions among network members. The author was a participant observer rather than a neutral bystander. Participant observers have access to detailed data about network events, but they also have interests that may color their observations. The descriptions of the next section and the analysis of the following section have benefitted from and been distorted by the participant observation process.

Since this paper seeks to understand patterns of interaction that enabled the development of new knowledge systems, some of the key events in each network will be briefly summarized before discussing patterns that emerged across cases.

Community Problem-Solving Coalition (1990–94)

The Coalition grew out of an invitation from the University Research Group (URG) to a US grassroots support organization (USSO) and IDR to help design a series of international meetings with support organizations

concerned with grassroots environmental activism. With a planning grant from a US foundation, the three sponsors brought together support organizations from Indonesia, Kenya and Nicaragua to explore possibilities for joint learning.

USSO arranged visits to community groups in several southern US states for the visitors, and then convened a three-day workshop on local activism to fight industrial pollution with the visitors and local activists. All participants agreed that they learned much from their interaction. As a result of discussions concerning global issues, USSO took the lead in organizing participation of US grassroots activists in the Environmental Summit the following spring.

Subsequent discussions led to a decision to propose a three-year program that would involve participatory action research projects in each of the four countries as well as four workshops, one in each country over the four years of the project. This planning process was marked by considerable conflict and misunderstanding—some between Southern and Northern participants and some among the Northern sponsors. However, planning moved forward after participants agreed that the support organizations (USSO, KSO, ISO, NSO) would define the project goals and call on the research organizations (URG, IDR) for support. The support organizations then redefined the program goals to emphasize capacity-building for local action rather than the more theoretical research approach emphasized in the original agenda.

Resource constraints ultimately further reduced the role of research and prompted URG to withdraw from the project. Over the next three years, participatory action research projects were carried out in each country with local activists, and dozens of activists participated in the workshops held in each country. Over the course of the project, core participants became increasingly ready to engage with each other, share their perspectives, and be open to learning from others' experience. In the final workshop, for example, the Kenyans actively sought to learn more about how to catalyze the local participation they had observed in other countries and recognized as a critical ingredient to sustained change. The US, Kenyan and Nicaraguan support organizations used the Coalition to build their own capacities. KSO developed a whole new division to pursue the issues raised; NSO revised its long-term strategy as a consequence of its participation; USSO developed a thriving international program.

Consortium for Intersectoral Cooperation (1989–95)

The Consortium was initially organized by a US policy research NGO (USPO) committed to promoting intersectoral cooperation. It brought together a group of civil society support organizations, including a US grassroots support organization (USSO), regional support organizations from Asia (AsSO), Africa (AfSO1), Latin America (LASO), and IDR, to develop and analyze case studies of successful cooperation among grassroots organizations, development NGOs, and government agencies. The project organizer and IDR between them had contacts with all the initial participating agencies (See Figure 1).

Consortium members articulated research questions and criteria for case selection. Regional coordinating organizations selected the cases in consultation with the rest of the Consortium. In Asia, IDR and other Consortium members helped train casewriters, gave feedback on initial case drafts, and participated in a week-long conference to discuss the cases and draw lessons from their comparison. Several different documents were produced for different audiences: an academic analysis (by IDR and AsSO), a practitioner analysis (by AsSO), and a policy analysis (by USPO). These analyses emphasized the importance of conflict as well as cooperation in making the partnerships work, the different kinds of cooperation possible, and the importance of bridging organizations (especially indigenous NGOs) and grassroots organizations in launching and maintaining successful cooperative problem-solving.

In Africa, the process involved more contact among African participants and less contact with other Consortium members. AfSO1 organized a case selection workshop, a training workshop, and a conference for presenting and analyzing the cases. International Consortium members spent three days with the casewriters discussing the lessons of the cases. The African process provided less opportunity for contact among Consortium members and African actors than the Asian process. AfSO1 and USPO produced a summary document and coordinated a policy conference with representatives from several African governments and NGO communities.

IDR produced several comparative analyses that considered both the African and Asian cases. The African case comparisons confirmed many of the findings of the Asian case comparisons.

Inter-Regional Support Organization Alliance (1995–97)

The Alliance brought together four organizations concerned with enhancing the resources of civil society support organizations to facilitate organization and sector capacity-building. IDR had been working with the two regional support organizations (AfSO2, AsSO) for several years, while the US-based University Management Development Program (UMDP) had a continuing relationship with IDR. All four parties believed that their different resources could be organized for mutual gains.

The Alliance produced a series of workshops and projects in South Asia and in Eastern and Southern Africa over the next 18 months. An initial workshop for facilitators from support organizations in both regions produced interest in advanced training in several participatory action methodologies (such as strategic thinking, future search conferences and appreciative inquiry). Further workshops in those topics were held in the regions to support participatory action research projects by facilitators to apply the methods to their own civil societies.

Relations among Alliance members, however, were troubled by disputes over resources and decision-making. Expectations for regular meetings and joint decision-making (especially on the part of UMDP) were frustrated by busy schedules and the high costs of getting together. Concerns about how funds should be managed also produced tensions between UMDP, the holder of most of the financial resources that supported the Alliance, and the other partners. Relations were particularly strained between AfSO2 and UMDP. IDR's efforts as a third party failed to keep relations between UMDP and the other three partners from deteriorating, though they did come to agreement on shared responsibilities and resource use.

A second inter-regional workshop brought together participants from a dozen Asian and African countries to share experiences with using the methodologies and adapting them to fit their own circumstances. Participating support organizations reported on more than 20 applications of the participatory action methodologies carried out with their own resources, and discussed in detail how the modifications required to fit the methodologies to local circumstances. Participants agreed that the methodologies were useful and could be modified to fit their concerns. By the end of the workshop, participants had articulated national and regional strategies for developing cadres of facilitators to develop and use participatory action methodologies in their own settings.

Discussion: South–North Learning Networks

Figure 1 represents the three networks in graphic terms. Each network is represented in an early form in the left column and in a later form in the right column. The organizations at the top of each figure are located in

the North; those on the bottom are from the South. Cooperative links among the actors are represented by connecting lines: where links are missing the parties do not know each other or have become adversaries. The primary source of funding at the beginning was through Northern actors, though in the Alliance case by the end of the project all four actors were mobilizing external funding to support the program. Note also that the primary links to grassroots groups were through Southern partners, with the exception of USSO in the Coalition (it was recognized as a “Southern Support Organization” by other Coalition members). Both funding and links to grassroots actors were critical resources for the learning agendas of all these networks.

What can we learn from these experiences of joint learning by Northern and Southern actors about the construction of shared knowledge systems? Obviously there are many possibilities. This paper will focus on issues relevant to acquiring new knowledge, distributing that knowledge across network members, elaborating interpretations through network members, and building shared perspectives that will affect future awareness, capacities and actions of the network and its members.

Creating Networks

At the outset of all these cases, no networks existed to provide an institutional basis for joint learning. Potential members of such networks were separated by chasms of power, wealth, culture, and many other differences. Indeed, choosing the “right” members for networks was and is difficult when network purposes remain unclear. In each of these networks steps were taken by some members to start the network, but membership and participation changed as goals and expectations evolved. In the Coalition the three Northern initiators sought Southern support organizations that would enable work with local environmental activists, and network membership changed as its goals focused more on supporting local capacity-building. The Consortium was initiated by three members (two Northern, one Southern) and gradually grew to include different regions. The Alliance was initiated at a meeting of all four original members, but levels of member involvement changed significantly over time. The composition of these networks and the definition of the appropriate members was therefore evolutionary, though networks continued to include a mix of Northerners and Southerners, researchers and activists. There was some tendency to recruit Southern activists and Northern researchers, though there were Northern activists and Southern researchers in each network as well, and those “hybrids”—such as USSO—often acted as bridges across differences.

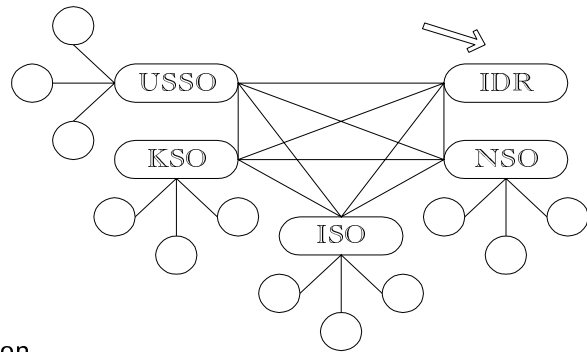
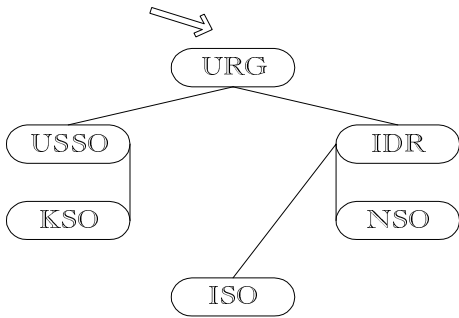
Many members brought quite different initial goals to their respective network. While all had some stake in learning more about the problems and possibilities of civil society roles in development, they often balanced research and practice priorities differently. Developing a shared set of goals around which network activities could be organized was a critical step. The Coalition for Community Problem-Solving, for example, brought together organizational representatives with relatively little previous contact; their planning process stalled until it was agreed that the grassroots support organizations (including USSO) would define goals for the network and invite support from the research organizations. This reformulation of the network’s decision-making process gave primacy to local capacity-building over the more academic interests of the research organizations, even though the latter had initiated the network. In the Consortium, arguments over whether to produce knowledge for policy-makers, academic researchers or local support institutions were resolved by creating products for all three audiences. In contrast, three members of the Alliance were already working together and its proposed goals were very compatible with the program priorities of UMDP, so the Alliance found network formation and initial goal-setting to be relatively easy. For the Alliance the challenges came later, in the implementation of programs and the use of resources.

A third issue in the formation of these networks was the articulation of member roles, particularly on the dimensions of research and practice. Many Northern participants were academics and consultants, comfortable

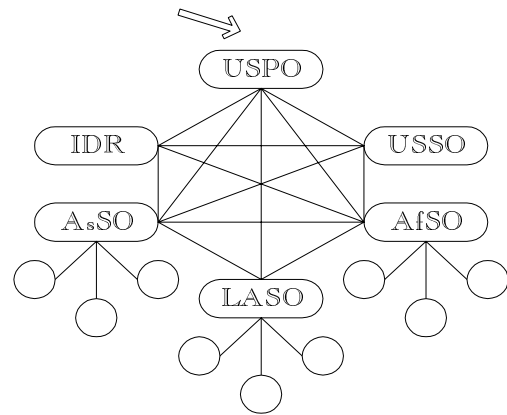
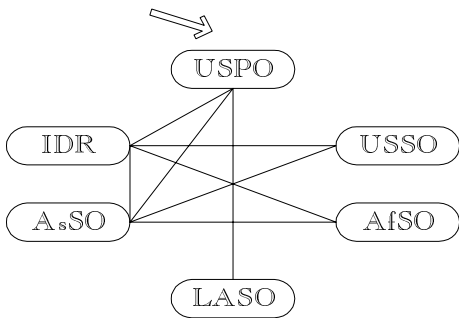
with being ‘expert’ resources. But Southern members pressed them to take roles that were less familiar and comfortable. The decision by the Coalition to emphasize local capacity-building deprived Northern actors of research roles. Northern experts in the Consortium were challenged by Southern members to be “friends and supporters, not consultants,” and to join in inquiry about intersectoral cooperation in which research skills were often outweighed by Southern understanding of local realities. Some members of the

Figure 1: Early and Late Learning Networks

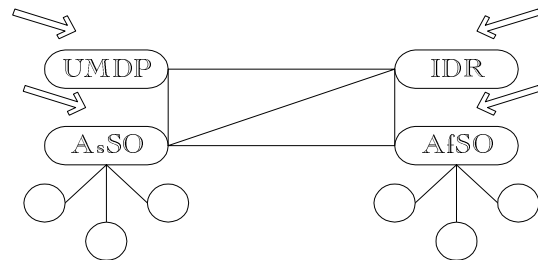
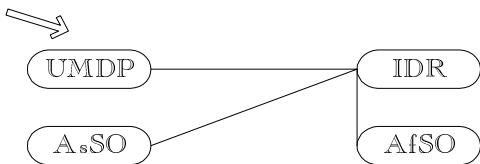
A. Community Problem-Solving Coalition



B. Consortium for Intersectoral Cooperation



C. Inter-Regional Support Organization Alliance



➔ Source of Funding

○ Grassroots Organization

Alliance were disappointed that interest in participatory action methods was closely tied to immediate problems, and that academic creativity was valued less than easy application to local capacity-building. For many Northern researchers participation in these learning processes required significant adaptation from their customary approaches and stances. Joint inquiry required them to “accompany” their Southern colleagues rather than “teach” or “advise” (Hoyer, 1994). By the same token, participation often asked Southern participants to act as researchers and reflective observers, when many were more comfortable focusing primarily on action-oriented practice. To step back from immediate applications to see many sides of issues and take a “balanced” view of events seemed “theoretical” or even in some cases disloyal to their constituents. The most successful joint learning seemed to take place when network members were willing to experiment with unfamiliar roles and respond to others’ interests and concerns.

This discussion can be summarized in a tentative proposition:

Proposition 1: The potential for creating a learning network increases as:

- i. *members are recruited that are appropriate to network learning goals;*
- ii. *mutually acceptable goals can be articulated and negotiated;*
- iii. *member representatives adapt their roles to fit network needs.*

Network Decision-Making

Networks composed of autonomous organizations must create new processes for decision-making since they do not share a common authority structure. In order to carry out joint activities, all these networks had to develop processes for planning, implementing and assessing learning activities. These initiatives were begun with financial resources held by Northern members. While it is clear that the Southern actors brought critical resources—such as access to and credibility with grassroots groups—access to financial resources contributed to initial perceptions that Northern partners had more power than their Southern colleagues. Although it was not explicit at the outset, Southern members subsequently indicated that their ongoing participation in the network depended on developing a sense of mutual respect and influence across the North–South difference. Thus convening parties across a North–South learning process often requires managing differences and balancing power in joint decision-making processes.

In part, questions about power differences and conflict management were answered by experience. The Coalition brought together Southern participants who had little prior contact with the Northern organizers, so there was considerable ambiguity about how decisions would be made. The decision to have the primary goals of the network set by the support organizations rather than the research organizations was critical to establishing some degree of mutual influence. In addition, Southern experience in community visits and the workshop with local activists convinced them that USSO was really a “Southern” support organization, committed to working with impoverished grassroots communities much like their own constituents. They agreed to participate in the Coalition as long as USSO vouched for it. The same experiences, however, undermined relations among the Northern members, for URG felt that decision-making among network initiators violated its expectations about how differences would be handled. The experiences that enabled Southern partners to join the network also set the stage for URG to leave it, largely because of disagreements about how conflicts were to be managed. In short, both the substance of the resolution and the processes by which decisions are made can be critical.

The other networks were more able to draw on existing social capital in making decisions about critical issues.

The Consortium for Intersectoral Cooperation built on existing bonds among some of its members: the link between IDR and USPO at the outset made it possible to bring together their partners, and USPO supported a series of meetings to build Consortium relationships and shared perspectives needed for joint inquiry. Many potentially controversial decisions were delegated to the regional partners in Asia and Africa who held responsibility for choosing cases, training and supporting case writers, and organizing case conferences. A continuing controversy focused on the inevitability of conflict in intersectoral cooperation—an issue which produced so many arguments it became a standing joke. However, this issue did not produce North–South polarization because Northerners were major protagonists on both sides, so Southerners acted as mediators rather than primary parties. Decision-making processes in the Consortium were initiated by the three network founders, and others were invited to join a network with an existing tradition of mutual influence and delegated decision-making.

The Inter-Regional Support Organization Alliance also drew on pre-existing links to catalyze joint action. IDR had long-standing relationships with all the other actors, and a conference organized by UMDP offered an opportunity for exploring how joint work might advance the goals of all the members. In this case, however, perceived power differences led to continuing conflict: UMDP’s efforts to ensure financial accountability were seen as distrust and disrespect by other Southern partners, especially AfSO2. Efforts by IDR and AsSO to mediate these differences were only partially successful. As in the Consortium, however, agreement to delegate responsibility for much activity to regional partners reduced the need for decision-making across long distances and contested relationships, so programmatic activity could continue in spite of unresolved differences.

Experience with decision-making across power, wealth and cultural differences in these networks suggests that both the continued existence and the quality of network learning may turn on processes and structures that emerge quite early in the network’s development. To summarize some of these patterns in a proposition:

Proposition 2: The potential for network decision-making increases as:

- i. *mutual influence replaces initially perceived power differences;*
- ii. *differences are managed by mutually-accepted processes and structures;*
- iii. *bridging roles and relationships emerge to mediate conflicts.*

Knowledge Acquisition in Networks

Knowledge acquisition in networks involves processes for acquiring new information, learning from past experience, or generating new perspectives from existing knowledge. In all of these networks, conferences that brought together members for discussion of key issues were an important part of the knowledge acquisition process; for many, knowledge development also took place in sub-groups authorized to act on the networks’ behalf.

The conference process offered opportunities to focus on critical issues, explore different perspectives on those issues, and generate new ideas and syntheses out of comparisons. Negotiating shared frames and acceptable stances sets the stage for detailed planning of how joint work will be carried out. The organization of joint inquiry includes agreement about how major decisions will be made, the nature of the inquiry process itself, and the distribution of responsibilities and resources for carrying out that process.

In the Coalition for Community Problem-Solving, for example, the design and facilitation of annual conferences was the responsibility of national host organizations, rotating each year. Each year the host

organization would arrange for teams representing activists associated with other members to visit grassroots projects and then participate in a workshop on grassroots environmental issues current in the host country. These workshops led to lively discussions and sometimes heated debates on problems like alternative strategies for dealing with local pollution or regenerative agriculture. Host organization and IDR facilitators were charged with fostering synthesis across the different views.

The Consortium on Intersectoral Cooperation, in contrast, focused on the same issue of intersectoral cooperation on different problems and in many regions. This network also used conferences as a major learning tool, though the membership in the primary conferences varied from many outsiders in Asia to mostly Africans in Africa. The regional partner worked with other members to facilitate syntheses across cases and regions, but documenting the resulting learning was delegated to AfSO1 and AsSO for regional practitioner documents, USPO for policy-maker summaries, and IDR for academic research syntheses.

In the Inter-Regional Support Organization Alliance, the network agreed to focus an initial workshop with facilitators from both regions on a menu of participatory action methods, and then to respond to regional concerns for further developing concepts and tools for local use. Follow-up workshops focused on topics of regional interest, and workshop participants—with support from regional network members—then adapted participatory action methodologies to fit local concerns. A second inter-regional workshop brought facilitators who had undertaken these projects together to share and learn from their experiences. Network members provided facilitation and research assistance in fostering synthesis of more general learning from the specific experiences. In part because of the opportunity for multiple conferences and the encouragement of local experiments, this network was particularly successful in fostering a wide range of innovations.

The patterns of knowledge acquisition and development in these experiences seem quite similar. To summarize:

Proposition 3: Network knowledge acquisition is facilitated as:

- i. *networks focus attention and resources on critical issues;*
- ii. *differences in information and perspective are recognized, valued and explored;*
- iii. *differences are synthesized into new perspectives and knowledge.*

Knowledge Distribution in Networks

Social learning in these types of networks involves more than sharing information with member representatives in conferences, or interpersonal communications. For large-scale and long-term effects, individual learning in conferences must be translated into learning for the organizational members of the network and for some of their constituencies as well. In these networks, the inquiry focus encouraged Southern members to seek the perspectives of their constituents and to distribute knowledge from network deliberations back to them. The processes for disseminating knowledge to constituents of Northern members were often less direct and explicit.

For the Coalition, conferences encouraged grassroots activists (many from the host country and a few from others) to hear other perspectives and share their own, and then to make sure of results in their own work. The emphasis on local capacity-building encouraged action at the local level on the basis of network learning. Thus the participation of US grassroots environmental activists in the Earth Summit in Rio was a direct result of sharing results from the first conference with USSO's constituents, largely because of the widespread activist antipathy to being represented by "Establishment" environmental organizations. In part because of the decision to emphasize local capacity-building over research, however, the Coalition built fewer links to the

constituents of the Northern organizations, so relatively little was done to educate donors or Northern actors about learning from the network's experience.

For the Consortium, in contrast, attention was paid to both Northern and Southern constituents as recipients of network learning. The conferences included participants from Southern constituencies, such as organizations involved in the cases, and from Northern constituencies, such as the donors that supported the network. In addition explicit commitments were made at the outset to develop summaries of Consortium learning to be shared with NGO leaders, development policy-makers, and academics concerned with intersectoral cooperation. For each constituency, documentation was intentionally couched in appropriate language to make sure that learnings were relatively easy to absorb.

For the Inter-Regional Support Organization Alliance, information was distributed to Southern constituents through a series of conferences, first to facilitators in support organizations in two regions and 13 countries, then back to the interregional conference, and finally through participants to regional cadres of facilitators. Less attention was paid to influencing Northern constituents, though donors attended parts of the conference at which local projects were shared. Indeed, the donors have actively supported further Alliance activities because they were impressed with its results, and there have been efforts by UMDP and IDR to disseminate the results of some of those experiences.

Experience with distributing information through extended networks suggests that attention to building links to the appropriate constituents and formulating learning in terms relevant to those constituents are both important. In proposition form:

Proposition 4: Network knowledge distribution is facilitated as:

- i. *processes and structures create bridges to key constituents;*
- ii. *information is translated in terms relevant to constituents.*

Interpreting Knowledge in Networks

Networks of diverse members offer great opportunities for eliciting new interpretations and meanings from complex information, since they represent a wide variety of perspectives and concerns. These networks used conferences to interpret their diverse perspectives. The Coalition for Community Problem-Solving, for example, convened meetings of NGO leaders and grassroots activists concerned with key issues from four countries on four different occasions. The Consortium on Intersectoral Cooperation convened its multinational steering committee on many occasions and organized several conferences which brought together grassroots representatives, NGO leaders, government officials, and donor agency representatives to discuss specific cases. The Inter-Regional Support Organization Alliance brought together scores of participants from different regions and countries to examine issues from many perspectives.

While these conferences of diverse actors offered many opportunities for joint learning, they were not all equally successful. Such conferences place a high premium on the capacity of organizers to facilitate meetings to explore the views of potentially adversarial participants. Neither grassroots activists nor academic researchers are renowned for their skills in managing conflict to produce constructive dialogue, mutual understanding, and creative synthesis. These particular networks were blessed with both Southern and Northern actors skilled at managing differences, and they also continued over periods long enough to develop interpersonal relationships and trust that made it possible to explore and understand each others' perspectives.

The exploration of different perspectives provided a basis for assigning meaning for diverse experiences. Members of the Coalition, for example, after examining grassroots activism on environmental issues across four countries, gradually converged on the idea that building relatively autonomous grassroots organizations is critical to providing sustainable change. The Consortium developed a synthesis of experience with intersectoral cooperation that emphasized the importance of balancing power relations among the parties that emerged from reported examples in many issues and in many countries. The Alliance moved toward regional emphases on capacity building for strategic thinking and organization development through the integration of experiences in many local projects.

A third way in which information was further interpreted was through extensive documentation after conferences in papers or presentations. The Consortium on Intersectoral Cooperation has been very active in engaging a wider audience through public presentations and papers (for example, Brown & Ashman, 1996, 1997; Tandon, 1993). Although the other networks developed new perspectives among participants, they did not have the resources for such extensive interpretation and dissemination of results.

This discussion can also be summarized in the form of a preliminary proposition:

Proposition 5: Developing interpretations in network social learning is facilitated as:

- i. *participants and constituents explore different perspectives;*
- ii. *members develop shared meanings to account for experience;*
- iii. *resources support elaborating, testing and documenting new perspectives.*

Preserving Network Learning

The results of joint inquiry may be various: new perspectives on the issues, basic knowledge about development problems and interventions, applied knowledge of new practices and problem-solving strategies, new capacities for the organizations involved. Some of the results most valued by participants are easily predicted from their initial interests; other outcomes emerge from joint inquiry independent of and beyond initial expectations.

Some of these networks generated results relevant to *basic knowledge systems* that may be relevant across many situations and regions. The Consortium for Intersectoral Cooperation, for example, generated case studies and comparative analyses of grassroots–NGO–government cooperation from which a variety of general lessons relevant across countries and regions have been extracted (Brown, 1998; Brown & Ashman, 1996; 1998; Schearer, 1993; Tandon, 1993). Some of these ideas are being utilized in settings well beyond the initial network, when pursuing the results in more depth fits the organizational agendas of some members.

Other parties were more interested in constructing *practical knowledge systems* for action in specific situations. Many of the national and regional support organizations in the networks were particularly interested in enabling grassroots groups to participate more effectively in development processes. Some members of the Coalition for Community Problem-Solving, for example, used the network to develop new action strategies for supporting grassroots initiatives: KSO developed a new department to promote grassroots policy influence and decided to emphasize more participatory approaches; NSO used the Coalition to revamp its strategy for local development. Support organizations that participated in the Inter-Regional Alliance used ideas from the workshops and their own resources to develop participatory action research projects with their own constituencies, and agreed to build cadres of facilitators to use participatory action methodologies in each region in the future.

Some consequences of joint inquiry in these networks were *changed perspectives* on critical issues. Interaction with other participants can reshape member priorities. IDR became more interested in promoting social learning networks as a consequence of seeing USSO, KSO and NSO use the Coalition to foster strategic learning. AsSO made improving civil society relations with government and business an important program area after assessing the cases generated by the Consortium. AfSO2 is promoting regional cooperation among governments, businesses, and civil society organizations as a consequence of experience with multi-stakeholder planning in the Alliance. The conditions that foster social learning in North–South networks may also lead participants to identify new issues and possibilities. In all of these cases, member

recognition of network ideas as meaningful and important was critical to their preservation, elaboration and dissemination.

Finally, the extent to which network learning is preserved by member organizations depends on the characteristics of their representatives. When representatives were chief executives or other influential actors, as in the Consortium or the Alliance, new perspectives from the network exerted substantial influence on organization members. Where representatives were less influential—as in the case of some actors in the Alliance and the Coalition—network ideas were less likely to affect organizations or their constituents.

This analysis may be summarized in a final proposition:

Proposition 6: Preservation of network social learning is more likely as:

- i. *learnings are articulated in terms relevant to member concerns (for example, research or practice outcomes);*
- ii. *networks produce novel ideas of high relevance to member organizations;*
- iii. *representatives are positioned to influence their organizations.*

Conclusion

Social learning across research-practice and North–South boundaries is possible—and potentially very fruitful. But learning across such differences is not easy. It requires engagement among actors with very different values, tools and perspectives. Such differences ensure that a rich mix of perspectives, information and intellectual capacities can be brought to bear on the problems, but they also increase the likelihood of diverse interpretations, easy misunderstandings and disagreements that range from mild to fundamental. In short, social learning in these networks often generates conflict.

Conflicts can produce many outcomes: withdrawal that reduces conflict at the cost of less engagement; escalation that achieves victory at the cost of undermining future relationships; accommodation that preserves relationships at the cost of ignoring important differences; compromises that build agreements by sharing costs; or syntheses that integrate different views into innovative perspectives (Thomas, 1976). Whether the differences revealed in inter-organizational networks that seek to learn together will produce explosions of conflict, withdrawal, accommodation, or some form of joint learning depends in large measure on whether organizational representatives can create a shared institutional base for managing their differences constructively.

Table 2 summarizes the propositions generated in this comparison across the three networks discussed in this

paper. In its second and third columns, Table 2 also suggests implications for Northern and Southern network participants interested in fostering social learning. These implications are based on the assumption that Northern and Southern actors have different perspectives, shaped by their different social, economic and political experiences as well as their different organizational agendas. Table 2 attempts to indicate action implications relevant to some common differences across Northern and Southern perspectives, though not all organizations will have the same biases. This list is intended to stimulate discussion rather than establish a universally relevant set of implications, so it should be treated with some skepticism.

Learning that enhances the awareness, capacities and actions of social systems will be ever more essential as societies face rapid changes in an increasingly interdependent world. Civil society organizations can play critical roles in such learning processes, both as the advocates of social values and unheard interests and as sources of social innovation to respond to unmet needs. To fully play such roles, however, civil society organizations must understand and engage many other interests—and become adept in creating institutional arrangements that enable creative and widespread use of diverse viewpoints.

Table 2: Southern and Northern Actions to Promote Network Learning

	Implications for Northern Members	Implications for Southern Members
Creating Networks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite right members • Mutually acceptable goals • Role flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek Southern help to find key actors • Negotiate goals for mutual gain • Explore alternative roles for North 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cast a wide net for key actors • Insist on goals that meet Southern needs • Expand Southern roles to fit resources
Network Decision-Making <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balanced power • Difference management • Bridging roles and trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume unbalanced at the start • Jointly devise management process • Seek credible Southern activists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insist on mutual influence • Expand Northern management process • Seek like-minded Northern researchers
Knowledge Acquisition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus attention on issues • Value differences • Synthesize shared frame 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define Northern inquiry agenda • Respect Southern “local knowledge” • Integrate Southern views in frame 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define Southern inquiry agenda • Emphasize different perspectives • Integrate Northern views in frame
Knowledge Distribution <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local translations • Build needed bridges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize diverse needs • Build links to donors, NNGOs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate Southern concerns early • Build links to grassroots, SNGOs
Interpreting Knowledge <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore differences • Build shared meanings • Document perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage challenges to status quo • Seek integrative ideas, mutual gains • Record agreement and disagreement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulate alternatives to Northern views • Seek integrative ideas, mutual gains • Record “minority reports” if needed
Preserving Network Learning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fit results to constituents • Recognize novel ideas • Influential members 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legitimate diverse learning goals • Highlight new possibilities • Use delegates with organization clout 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish early what is relevant • Test novel ideas for local application • Use delegates with organization clout

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