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Ethical, Managerial and Methodological Perspectives in Knowledge Creation in Two Finnish Civil Society Organisations

TIINA KONTINEN, HISAYO KATSUI

1. Introduction

The knowledge creation achieved through monitoring and evaluation in development civil society organisations (CSOs) has gained increasing attention in recent years. The literature has engaged with the questions of multiple accountabilities (Ebrahim 2007; Jordan/van Tuijl 2007), the need for more transparent knowledge production (Horton/Roche 2010), the power relations between Western expert and indigenous knowledge (Swai 2010; Dar 2014), the dilemmas between managerial control needs and value-based partnership aspirations (Wallace et al 2006), and between the pressure to measure tangible outcomes and efforts for aiming at long-term societal transformation (Mitlin et al. 2007). Today, CSOs in development face increasing challenges in regard to knowledge creation, not least as a result of three prominent trends in the international institutional field of development (Tvedt 2006). These include results-based management (RBM), evidence-based policy-making, and the human rights-based approach (HRBA). The RBM emphasises the need for accurate and systematic knowledge collection within development interventions. The evidence-based drive, inspired by different academic disciplines, has extended the debate to include a variety of methodological approaches to impact assessment. HRBA, for its part, has for decades provided an entire paradigm for development cooperation, and was explicitly adapted also in the development policy of Finland in 2012 (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland 2012).

In principle, HRBA has been considered a shift away from the needs-based and charity-based approaches to development (OHCHR 2010: 10; Katsui 2012). It suggests that the focus in development practice should

be on supporting the process of realising the rights of rights-holders by increasing the capacity of both rights-holders and duty-bearers. In this process, the notions of empowerment and participation have been prevalent. Consequently, there is a growing body of guidelines on how to mainstream the HRBA (e.g. Kirkeman/Martin 2007; UNDG 2003; UNDP 2006; UNESCAP 2012) and much advice on its monitoring and evaluation is available (e.g. OHCHR 2007). However, the application of HRBA at the level of individual organisational management practices is an ongoing process, and requires novel ways of knowledge creation. These new approaches require a successful combination of knowledge perspectives of management, methodology and ethics (Holma/Kontinen 2012; Jauhola/Kontinen 2014), which all set slightly different standards for what is considered relevant and adequate ‘knowledge’.

The very notions of monitoring and evaluation are part and parcel of the *management perspective* typically realised through project cycle management (Biggs/Smith 2003). This perspective considers the best ways information can be collected, analysed and reported in order to keep on track in development projects and programmes. The focus is on activities conducted, resources spent, and the extent to which the planned objectives have been achieved. The knowledge perspective of management is often framed by the general aid-effectiveness debate, and guided by, for example, OECD/DAC (1991) evaluation guidelines. Different standardised tools, with widely acknowledged acronyms such as Logical Framework (LFA), Outcome Mapping (OM), or Most Significant Change (MSC) are typical of this perspective (see for example World Bank 2005; Outcome Mapping n/y; Monitoring and Evaluation News n/y). The management perspective stresses the need to turn the complex reality into a ‘manageable’ one (Davies 2004, 2005). This translation (Mosse 2005) typically leads to a tendency to describe the multi-faceted, often politically messy situations in technical terms, in order to enable intervention designs (Ferguson 1994). At a more practical level of CSO partnerships, the notion of multiple accountabilities is central. Whilst knowledge creation is closely tied to money transfers, control and upward accountability are essential parts of the practice (Townsend/Townsend 2004; Johnson 2001). Less space is left for learning and identification of alternative ways of conducting and evaluating interventions (Johnson et al. 2012; Guijt/Roche 2014).

The *methodological perspective* considers knowledge creation designs in order to ensure validity. A proper design requires an explicit understanding of the nature of change to be measured, and an established way with which to attribute the observed change with the intervention conducted (Roche 2010). The methodological debates on randomised trials (White 2011; Banerjee 2007), often challenged by advocates of participatory approaches (Chambers 2008, 2014), as well as the conversation about the complexity of change (Ramalingam 2013; Davies 2004), have echoed the general methodological debates in social sciences. The criteria for objectivity and validity in randomised trials align with those attached to positivist epistemology, whilst the participatory approach comes close to the principles of social constructionism. However, the hermeneutics and narrative epistemologies (see Bruner 1986; Gadamer 1975), as well as the feminist and post-colonial epistemologies (Harding 2006) prevalent in academia, have not yet, to a great extent, affected the monitoring and evaluation debate (see Davis 2011).

The *ethical* conundrums in development are multi-faceted (Gasper 2004), but in regard to knowledge practices three sets of questions are exceptionally important. First, ethical arguments related to the right to receive information are presented (Horton/Roche 2010). The donors, taxpayers, general public and individual citizens, notwithstanding their legal position, claim the ethical right to know how CSOs have used the money donated. Second, the participatory approach argues that the beneficiaries have an ethical right to participate in the knowledge creation concerning their lives, instead of merely being objects of knowledge production conducted by so-called experts (Chambers 2008; Powell 2006). Third, there is the question of the purposes of knowledge production and the consequent use of knowledge acquired (Johnson et al. 2012). The question of ethics applies especially when problems, flaws and mistakes are revealed. This can, on the one hand, be used for improvement and learning, but on the other, can provide arguments for ceasing the funding allocations.

Finally, when examining the managerial, methodological and ethical knowledge perspectives, the intersectional power relations (Collins 2000) characteristic of the development institution should be acknowledged. First, the historically constructed economic and knowledge-related asymmetries between global North and South play a central role in deciding

how and to what purposes knowledge is created. Both the donor-receiver types of accountability, and the postcolonial legacy of paternalism, of ‘knowing what is best for the others’, affect the knowledge practices in the CSO partnerships (Ebrahim 2003a, 2003b; Eriksson Baaz 2005). Second, the HRBA and the related concepts of empowerment and participation inherently consider change in existing power relations in specific contexts (Katsui et al. 2014). Gender relationships and women’s empowerment have been among the main focuses in development CSOs (Kabeer 1999). However, the power relations addressed in interventions also include those between different economic positions, hierarchical statuses, classes, castes, ethnic and religious groups, disability statuses and political affiliations. Therefore, when monitoring and evaluating, there is an increasing need to create knowledge about the changes in social relationships (Davies 2005).

To conclude, the combination of different knowledge perspectives leads to a variety of dilemmas in knowledge practices in development (Green 2012). Individual CSOs face a demanding task in responding to the variety of challenges and initiating new organisational practices. The aim of this article is to analyse how, and through what kinds of dilemmas, the above-mentioned three knowledge perspectives emerged in two Finnish civil society organisations, in their efforts to improve monitoring and evaluation practices.

2. The case organisations: World Vision Finland and Abilis Foundation

The research material was collected during two sets of research collaborations with Finnish CSOs in 2012–2013. The organisations, *World Vision Finland* and *Abilis Foundation*, aimed to develop new knowledge creation measures to address issues of empowerment and participation. World Vision Finland, established in 1983, engages with child sponsorship, development programmes, emergency aid, and advocacy. The organisation has approximately 30 staff members located in Finland. Its yearly budget is around nine million euros, of which nearly 50 percent comes from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs’ aid budget. In 2013, it supported 19 community development programmes in Africa, Latin America and Asia. World

Vision Finland is a member of the federative network of World Vision International, which operates in over 100 countries. The overall objective of the network is to contribute to the well-being of children all over the world. For World Vision Finland, the international network provides targets, methods for community development, and templates for programme planning and reporting. World Vision Finland functions as a support office working in partnership with the World Vision offices in programme countries. It channels contributions from individual sponsors and the governmental funds into community development programmes implemented locally. World Vision Finland communicates with its partners mainly through emails, reports, and, additionally, face-to-face meetings during short monitoring trips.

The Abilis Foundation, for its part, was established by a group of Finnish persons with disabilities in 1998, as a grant maker targeting groups and organisations of persons with disabilities in the global South. Its annual budget is around three million euros, most of which comes from the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Abilis has 14 staff members based in Finland and 13 partner organisations in as many countries. The partner organisations in the respective countries have a review board consisting of several representatives of local organisations of persons with disabilities (DPOs). The review board reviews and recommends projects to be approved by the Abilis board in the headquarters. Abilis facilitators belong to the partner organisations and are local persons with disabilities who play major roles in grant-making processes through peer-reviews and support. In 2013, Abilis approved 179 new projects and had 270 ongoing projects in 40 countries, 51% of which were in Africa and 46% in Asia. More than half of the projects are income-generating activities for persons with disabilities, while organisational capacity-building and human rights projects are also popular.

The organisations experienced two different needs: World Vision Finland sought for a method for monitoring empowerment in order to complement the existing exhaustive indicators used in its everyday work, and Abilis required more inclusive indicators that would better reflect the changes in the realities of persons with disabilities. In the case of World Vision Finland, as a result of the above-mentioned collaboration with researchers, a method for monitoring empowerment, *Pathways of Empow-*

erment, was initiated (Kontinen/Robinson-Moncada 2014). In Abilis, new sets of indicators for monitoring and evaluation, particularly meant for persons with disabilities in the global South, were created. The data collection methods in both organisations included workshops and interviews, and a survey in the case of Abilis. In World Vision, the research participants were staff of the Finnish organisation and its selected partners in Africa and Asia. In Abilis, almost all the research participants in participatory processes in diverse contexts were persons with disabilities in different countries, such as Bangladesh, Tajikistan and Uganda¹. In what follows, we describe in detail the dilemmas manifested in regard to the three knowledge perspectives discussed above during these particular processes.

3. Dilemmas in three knowledge perspectives in World Vision Finland and Abilis Foundation

3.1 Ethics: Whose knowledge, whose purposes?

CSOs are typically value-based communities that seek ethical conduct. World Vision's organisational values are based on Christianity, and it is committed to promoting the well-being of all children, their families, and communities. The Abilis Foundation, for its part, focuses on disability rights, to be realised by persons themselves with disabilities. Both organisations are committed to participation and empowerment. The ethical perspectives in regard to knowledge creation revolve around the dilemmas related to the 'right to know' and the 'right to participate'.

The ethical conduit to realising the 'right to know' was shown in the organisations' accountability duties. In World Vision Finland, the right of the individual sponsors and governmental donors to learn about the results was continuously articulated. However, it was also critically observed that the 'right to know' easily turned into a 'right to know about a success'. The emphasis of monitoring was on proving success, whereas the challenges and unintended changes tended not to be considered to the same extent. This, again, hindered deep understanding and learning about the complex processes of empowerment, and resulted in quite simplistic accounts of the perceived changes, and their attribution to the interventions conducted

by the NGO. The emphasis on success was also intertwined with ethical considerations about the consequences of the knowledge created. The need to show success partly resulted from the well-known fear of cuts in funding as a consequence of reporting challenges.

The ethical issues related to the 'right to be heard' are apparent in both organisations' normative commitments. The underlying ethical idea is that those not holding positions of power should be actively involved in knowledge creation. In Abilis, the development of new indicators took into account the ethical aspect of the knowledge creation process. For instance, when one of the new indicators which identified causes of exclusion was asked, it was an empowering experience for many interviewees who participated in the testing phase. One Central Asian woman with a physical disability said, "Previously, I thought I could not participate in anything and that was my destiny. But after being asked that question, I feel I am entitled to participate in different things."

The ethical commitments, however, faced challenges in practice. In Abilis, those with restricted communication abilities had often been previously marginalised from knowledge creation. In World Vision, there was an aspiration to actively include children, women, persons with disabilities, and members of the lower castes. The staff in the programme country offices was often successful in enabling their participation, but was also confronted with resource constraints, and sometimes a reluctance to participate. Building a trusting relationship in encouraging the participation of those not used to being heard, or creating distance from those with the habit of being vocal, is a long process, which includes making changes in the attitudes on the ground. One of the African interviewees illustrated a slow change in gendered participation in a project: "Sometimes, in the first meetings, the women did not come. Just men came. We talked, talked and talked, and the men would say no, women have a lot of work, they cannot come. After many things, they gave us an opportunity to talk to the women. Then, the women were afraid to talk, if you asked their name, they were afraid to tell you. After many training programs, many awareness classes, now the women are coming forward and talking."

3.2 Methodology and management:

Keeping on the track of change

Not surprisingly, the management perspective was prevalent in the case organisations, while the in-depth methodological questions were mainly tackled indirectly. The main dilemmas identified in these knowledge perspectives were related to the notions of complexity, validity, and voices.

A dilemma between the needed clarity and complex reality

The management tools used in the case organisations, such as LFA, emphasise clear project models and well-defined indicators to facilitate monitoring at each hierarchical level. However, the recent critical literature has pointed out the complexity of change, unintended consequences, subtle psychological changes, and the realisation that changes are results of many intertwining factors (see Vogel 2012). In the process of discussing the variety of empowerment processes in communities in the World Vision workshops, the participants acknowledged how difficult it was to speak about the processes in other than LFA-terminology, as an excerpt from a workshop discussion in India illustrates: “One problem is, see, we write this in the log-frame language [...]. Yeah, we structure the things as in LFA, oh, and now they are asking us to take away our jargon [laughter], the world is full of that jargon”.

The critical observations are even more valid in regard to HRBA, where the impact should be seen in the increasing capacity of right-holders to claim their rights and that of duty-bearers to protect, respect and fulfil rights, usually resulting from long-term and complex processes (see Katsui 2012). The notion of empowerment, which was central to both organisations, is itself a complex phenomenon that is difficult to define and therefore it is hard to measure its progress (Alsop/Heinsohn 2005; Ibrahim/Alkire 2007). The partners shared this idea, as illustrated by an African interviewee in the World Vision case: “I think it’s very complex, because it has different perspectives. What we call empowerment in our water project will be very different from what I call empowerment in an education project. So I think it’s a complicated subject that might need a lot of thought.”

In World Vision Finland, the notion of empowerment was used simultaneously in reference to the inner strength of individuals, to a feature of a community, and to a change in the structures of the societal environment. The internationally defined *Child Wellbeing Outcomes and Targets* and an Excel-based *Compendium of Indicators*, with over 100 possible indicators, were considered as useful tools for systematic information collection and programme monitoring in regard to the increase in child wellbeing. According to the interviewees, the relatively new compendium was a good attempt to harmonise indicators at a global level: “Of course, it is not intended to use the entire long list in every programme. There are certain main indicators, but also space left for local, context-specific indicators”, stated one of the Finnish interviewees. However, the organisational emphasis on empowerment (World Vision Finland 2012) called for contextual, programme-specific definitions and flexible means of measurement for this specific phenomenon. Moreover, as the complexity increased when it came to the long-term outcomes, the monitoring was often conducted at the level of activities rather than results or outcomes, which seemed to be partly due to the existing tools. A participant in a workshop in World Vision Finland stated: “Of course our questions guide towards the activities, we should not blame the partners for what we require them to do”, and an Indian interviewee told: “Among project level empowerment indicator, according to our log-frame, is a number of self-help groups, for example.”

Consequently, the method produced in collaboration with the staff concentrated on identification of processes of empowerment. The method starts with searching for a joint definition of empowerment, and identification of intended pathways of empowerment specific to each individual programme, and only thereafter proceeds to identify relevant events showing progress in empowerment (Kontinen/Robinson-Moncada 2014). In Abilis, the complexity of changes in regard to poverty and disability, and the need for multidimensional indicators, was acknowledged. Many interviewees described the difficulty of measuring psychological change in individuals, even though this is the foundation for many visible changes to follow. One of the newly established indicators is related to peer support, since many interviewees mentioned that having such support or a role model were important, even though concrete means of such empowerment had not previously appeared in mainstream indicators.

Dilemmas related to validity and voices

A dilemma related to the methodological perspective was that there seemed to be parallel, and sometimes even contradictory ideas concerning the validity of knowledge created in monitoring and evaluation. The existing measurable indicators, which had wide coverage, were seen as a way to capture objective and valid data to be used in knowledge creation. At the same time, the ability of indicators to ensure validity was questioned, and approaches stressing subjective experiences as criteria for appropriate knowledge were praised. In World Vision Finland, the drafting of indicators in many programmes seemed to have contained some problems with consequences for their ability to create valid knowledge. The Finnish staff stated that sometimes the indicators did not match well with the programme objectives; it was as if the “objectives were bananas that were supposed to be measured by apples”. The limited ability of indicators to produce valid knowledge about long-term impacts was also reflected upon. For example, an Indian workshop participant stated: “In the indicator tracking we have only numbers. It is easy for us to do. But how can we capture the impact in our indicator tracking system?”

Additional dilemmas in both organisations resulted from the increasing need to incorporate the quantitative indicators with the qualitative ones, and to produce knowledge about the very process of empowerment. In World Vision, there had been some efforts to use beneficiary life-stories in the framework of the Most Significant Change (Davies/Dart 2005). However, the method was often carried out by presenting one success story to be added to the annual reports. As illustrated by a representative of a Southern partner: “Yes, we collect them, we ask mobilizers if there is any significant change, and we ask them to provide only one story from the particular division. They go and find the best story and give it to us. By collecting all these things we provide one story for the support office.” This practice does not provide in-depth knowledge about the variety of changes in people’s lives, a result which would require compiling and contrasting different kinds of narratives. The same argument applies to Abilis’s final report narratives and the life stories book (Abilis Foundation 2014) which contains 50 life stories. The narratives are not necessarily ‘representative’ voices of the grantees: they represent the more advantaged ones and thus make empowerment perhaps more visible than is the reality

for many others on the ground. In order to tackle these biases, the method developed in World Vision also gave special attention to the analysis of side-tracking, dead-ends and obstacles in order to highlight the importance of not-so-successful stories for learning purposes. The Abilis Foundation thus created indicators of individual impact beyond organisational ones. In the latter set of indicators, leaders and/or more powerful persons tended to represent the groups, and to focus on success. Today, in the new monitoring and evaluation system, it is, rather than the project leaders, the aforementioned Abilis facilitators – who are local persons with disabilities – who collect personal changes and impacts. In this way, the previously unheard voices of individual project participants are heard on different kinds of changes.

Thus, the bias in narratives used in the monitoring and evaluation was related to power relationships: the donor-recipient relationship, as shown in the need to show success, and the power relationship within the beneficiary communities. The dilemmas in the inclusion of different voices revealed not only differences in the leaders-others positions, but also between genders and within genders, as well as within different forms of disabilities. Two interviewees in India illustrated occasions where relationships between women hindered participation: “the low caste women and the high caste women, they won’t sit together. They don’t want their food to be cooked together. We are struggling with that and to convince them to get to know each other, to believe each other, to accept each other”, and further “the mother-in-law plays a wide role. She’s almost dictating to the daughter-in-law, even how often she should eat, and what type of clothes she should wear”.

Similar dilemmas in listening to different voices were also apparent in the specific occasions of monitoring trips conducted by the Finnish staff to programme and project countries. Both World Vision and Abilis Foundation considered that indicators and reporting could not substitute for the personal experience achieved during these trips. However, the intention to listen to a wide variety of voices was often hampered by lack of time. While it is taken for granted that the visitors should meet with the community leaders and participate in the official celebrations, the limited time to be spent in the villages led to the ignoring of the points of view of those not in central positions. At the same time, in Abilis a substantial amount of

time was allocated for discussions with the beneficiaries. However, due to the group dynamics, often the more powerful persons tended to dominate discussions, even when efforts were made to create space for other project participants. For instance, women with psychosocial and/or multiple disabilities were too often disproportionately under-represented.

4. Conclusions

We have analysed how three knowledge perspectives and related dilemmas were shown in two Finnish CSOs, as seen in their efforts to develop new monitoring and evaluation methods to capture the phenomena of empowerment and participation. We acknowledged that the CSOs perceive knowledge creation from a strong ethical knowledge perspective, which, however, is often hampered by the realities in practice, and the knowledge demands posed by the international system. Furthermore, we identified a constant dilemma between the need for clarity, as posed by the management perspective, and the complexity of change, as suggested by the methodological discussions and everyday experience. Moreover, the dilemmas between parallel notions of validity, and challenges to the inclusion of voices, were shown.

Our findings indicate that, in their attempts to improve knowledge creation, CSOs relate to all three perspectives in a more or less successful attempt to combine management needs with methodological quality and ethical commitments. Whilst in both organisations, indicators presented a way to produce valid and objective knowledge, there were challenges in regard to these indicators. In a few cases, the indicators did not measure what they were supposed to measure, or, they did not address the issues that were essential for the empowerment processes on the ground. As such, they served more 'tick-the-box' reporting needs than knowledge creation. Second, the experimented narrative approaches easily fell into the pitfall of the selection of a few success stories told by the most powerful beneficiaries. Consequently, they could not capture the rich variety of empowerment processes and their obstacles, and were not beneficial from the point of view of quality knowledge creation. Third, whilst knowledge creation was considered important in the CSOs, its quality was often impaired

by constraints of time, money, skills and/or other resources. The CSOs emphasised the participation of the marginalised, but often in practice ended up interacting mainly with the not-so-marginalised ones, due to busy working schedules of the NGO staff and limited means of reaching the most disadvantaged people and address the root causes for the lack of their participation.

The practical dilemmas related to each of the knowledge perspectives echo the intersectional power relations in both the North-South relationships, and in the working environments of the CSOs. The power relations characteristic of the international aid system affect the ways in which accountability is understood, whose knowledge counts, and who participates in the knowledge creation. In the current context, the need for systemic, accurate and rigorous knowledge creation regarding results, outcomes and impact as suggested by results-based management, and the focus on supporting the realisation of rights in complex processes of exercising citizenship as required by the human rights-based approach, have to be combined in organisational knowledge practices. A search for producing simple knowledge under conditions of increasing complexity, the pressure to show success, and dealing with multi-layered power relations, pose a real challenge for contemporary CSOs. More research is needed on the practical ways the CSO staff deal with these dilemmas in their everyday activities, in which the organisational guidelines have to deal with and adapt to all the intertwining challenges on the ground.

Acknowledgements

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- 1 The data for the case of World Vision was collected in 2012 and 2013. It includes organisational workshops (n= 7), interviews with the staff of World Vision Finland (n=10) and its selected partner World Visions in Africa and East-Asia (n=26). The data for the case of Abilis Foundation was collected between 2012 and 2013. It includes a focus group discussion of Indian disability NGOs (n=10), interviews with the staff members of Abilis Foundation (n=7), survey of selected partner organisations (n=5) and its selected grantees' staff members and project participants in Cen-

tral and Southern Asia and African countries (n=64). The direct quotes presented in the text are illustrative examples of the data revolving around the selected themes. When interviewed, the interviewees were guaranteed anonymity. Therefore, we do not provide detailed characterisations of the individuals quoted.

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Abstracts

The recent drives for implementation of results-based management and human rights-based approaches in international development have increased pressures to improve and modify monitoring and evaluation systems in CSOs. On the basis of an analysis of two Finnish civil society

organisations (CSOs) committed to participation and empowerment, the article examines dilemmas in practical efforts to develop new approaches to meet the variety of needs. In this context, the ethical, methodological and managerial perspectives on knowledge creation in CSOs are identified and the dilemmas in knowledge practices related to monitoring and evaluation are examined.

Die in letzter Zeit zunehmenden Vorgaben, in der internationalen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit eine ergebnisgeleitete Verwaltung (*results based management* – RBM) sowie menschenrechtsbasierte Ansätze zu implementieren, hat den Druck auf zivilgesellschaftliche Organisationen verstärkt, ihre Monitoring- und Evaluierungsmethoden entsprechend anzupassen. Dieser Beitrag analysiert die Auswirkungen auf zwei finnische Nichtregierungsorganisationen (NROs), deren Schwerpunkt auf Partizipation und Empowerment liegt. Er untersucht die Dilemmata, die in der praktischen Umsetzung der neuen Ansätze und im Bestreben, den verschiedenen Anforderungen gerecht zu werden, entstehen. In diesem Kontext werden auch die ethischen, methodologischen und administrativen Perspektiven auf Wissensproduktion in NROs sowie die Herausforderungen und praktischen Widersprüche, die mit den neuen Formen von Monitoring und Evaluierung einhergehen, untersucht.

Tiina Kontinen
University of Jyväskylä, Finland
tiina.t.kontinen@jyu.fi

Hisayo Katsui
Abilis Foundation, University of Helsinki, Finland
hisayo.katsui@abilis.fi