Answers to specific research questions and related recommendations for Helvetas

From the theoretical discussions in Chapters two, three and four, twenty-four questions for further research emerged (listed in Table 5-2). All these questions have already been answered explicitly or implicitly (in Chapters six and seven) in regard to the reality in <h>. Here they have been once more answered explicitly in the form of short summaries, some of which are followed by a few specific recommendations for Helvetas, presented in *italics*.

1. *To what extent are NNGOs making efforts to create awareness across the organisation on the issues: IM, IA, KM, OL, IS, ICT?*

    The recent IM/KM strategy formation effort in <h>, which started in the beginning of 2000 was certainly concerned with awareness creation on the above issues as a precondition for creating a holistic corporate IM strategy. The virtual electronic forum on ICT in development and on KM issues that was launched in June 2000 across the organisation was an important first effort to stimulate thinking, curiosity and enquiry about those issues. In the following period, the innovators and early adopters (those already open to and familiar with ICTs) among the <PDs> were more intensively informed, involved and consulted by the Working Group on KM. The dissemination of the latest KM strategy document (Appendix [6]) was another effort to enhance awareness on IM, KM, OL, IS, ICT and IA, while the operationalisation of the Intranet and CoPs raised awareness by exposing colleagues to new realities.

    Such awareness-creation processes are bound to intensify dialogue as well as to trigger conflicts, which are both seen to be happening in <h> and which could be regarded as indicators in the process. Relating to my analysis I believe that the abstract nature of these issues requires quite some efforts to overcome the barriers that might hamper colleagues' openness and participation. Broad awareness among staff is a precondition for stimulating contribution and capturing valuable creative input from all over the organisation and especially from the periphery.

It seems that how thoroughly the awareness creation process is carried further at the country office and the projects level depends very much on the interest and priorities of the <PDs>. <h> Nepal has already made efforts to train two resource persons in each project office on ICT issues.

Yet, it is not only the awareness about ICT that I see as crucial, but more the awareness of the strategic importance of appropriate information management and a respective information management culture. Awareness should be created throughout the organisation about the existence (pattern) of and the need for IM strategies. A review of existing IM strategies will reveal those that have emerged as patterns and those that have been deliberately planned and will foster an appreciation for both types of strategy.

Since this paper (although not meant as a direct tool for Helvetas) explores the above issues in quite some depth from a theoretical perspective as well as in regard to Helvetas' reality, it might well serve the purpose of an awareness creation instrument in Helvetas and also in other NNGOs.

2. ***Who within the NNGO is involved in a respective discussion on IM ?***

Actually quite a few colleagues in <h> seem to be involved in discussions on IM, at HO and also in the field. But, as my analysis explains, many of them also have very different definitions, concerns and interpretations regarding IM (HO-KM; <h> Nepal - <LTM>; etc.), which makes communication difficult and hence even more important. At HO a task force dedicated to KM (the <WGKM>) steers and drives the discussions not only at HO but also with the field and external stakeholders. At <h> Nepal <PD> and project managers are all information managers and thus all concerned with IM issues related to their tasks and contexts.

The diversity of objectives, issues and efforts regarding IM reveals a need for more communication and effective knowledge exchange and alignment efforts between all those who are in one way or the other involved in IM strategy formation in Helvetas.

3. *Do NNGOs take a more technology- or more human-centred approach to their ISs and IM?*

Helvetas takes a more human-centred approach. Much of the HO's IM strategy paper (Appendix [6]) deals with HRM and <h>'s organisational culture, while <h> Nepal's <LTM> strategy concept represents strong evidence of a human-centred approach. It is however the right balance of human and technology concerns that is required to bring about sustainable information management and information systems. The driving force of technology in IM strategy formation in <h> has been analysed in depth in Section 7.5., which argues that the abstract nature of the IM strategy formation processes seems somehow to attract more the involvement of technology enthusiasts, fostering adoption of innovative technology solutions.

This indicates a need for a new category of facilitators in NNGOs, the hybrid manager/facilitator, who aims to balance technology with business and social aspects and has credibility in both camps, among ICT professionals as well as development practitioners. Marc Steinlin, the Programme Coordinator for Knowledge Sharing is such a hybrid facilitator at the HO. I think it would be beneficial to have hybrid facilitators at various levels across the organisation.

4. *Do NNGOs take a tactical (i.e. departmental) or a strategic approach to ISs?*

The present corporate IM strategy process in <h> is rather young. Before that, IM strategies at HO and the field seemed more to emerge and were more of a local nature, and could thus be labelled tactical. There were however some (although not very far reaching) umbrella strategies, regulating financial management, reporting between field and HO and the use of standard OA software. The current IM strategy formation process is recognising the strategic importance of information for <h> and aims to integrate in a strategic way IM, IS, ICT, organisational culture and <h>'s mission across the organisation.

The SIMToNs and Conceptual Tensions identified in my analysis might be helpful in approaching and structuring IM strategy formation (see Sections 8.3, 8.4) at the organisational, departmental and field level (country programme, project level).

5. *To what extent is the IA mapped?*

Previously it was little mapped in <h>, although some isolated attempts had been made to map the IA at HO. With the present IM/KM strategy however, <h> acknowledges the importance of mapping information and knowledge resources. A systematically planned IA parallel to the one in use is just being created, which will be transparent and accessible through the new Intranet. This corporate IA will feature an information or knowledge map that allows users at core and periphery to locate relevant knowledge items, persons, projects and documents. It will use taxonomy and search engines. In order to derive the anticipated benefit and encourage use and contribution <h> is aware of the need for systematic maintenance of this IA. HO will be responsible for maintenance of the map, for deciding which documents (produced anywhere in <h>) qualify for being put on the Intranet and for extracting the relevant learning from the ongoing CoPs to be made available through the IA.

It is quite likely that parallel structures will continue to exist especially at the field level. To increase transparency and intensify lateral information flows, it would be advisable to gradually also map those parallel structures. Already the process of mapping IA is beneficial since it facilitates discussion about information needs, information flows and priorities, which enhances awareness among colleagues and introduces them into this rather abstract domain of IM planning and strategy formulation.

6. *Who is concerned with the planning of IA?*

In the past there was little coordination on IA planning. So the information architectures of HO, field offices and projects very much emerged rather independently, based on their individual contexts and needs. At HO it were probably the heads of departments and in the field the <PDs> and project leaders who were most concerned. How much IA planning was affected by ICT considerations depended on the interests and priorities of those leaders. The planning of a corporate IA is now coordinated by the <WGKM>.

Planning of IA at the periphery and integrating it with the corporate IA would surely benefit from involvement of hybrid facilitators at the periphery.

7. ***Where is the balance of emphasis for NNGOs between management of information, knowledge and learning?***

It seems that the emphasis has shifted in <h> considerably from the management of information towards the management of knowledge and learning. That the emphasis of the field (<h> Nepal) is on learning, through strategic as well as informal learning events and social processes is reflected in their <LTM> concept. The emphasis at HO is understandably still strong on IM since HO is the hub for the flows of explicit information throughout the organisation. But the current IM/KM strategy (Appendix [6]) gives evidence of the increased emphasis on KM and learning through prescribing appropriate HRM measures and encouraging intensified face-to-face communication and social processes.

My findings indicate a need for strengthening lateral information flows and for fostering processes that better facilitate the exchange of tacit knowledge. Further I would recommend establishing a monitoring system that provides learning about the effects of IM strategies.

8. ***To what extent have the seven SIMToNs been considered in the strategy formation process?***

Concern for all seven SIMToNs (although not always explicitly) is reflected in the recent IM/KM strategy formation process as elaborated in depth in Section 7.4.

I suggest exploring the possibility of using the SIMToNs for guiding and structuring IM strategy formation and implementation as well as for monitoring the effects on the organisation (Section 8.4).

9. ***To what extent have the potential benefits and problems of ICTs been considered in the strategy formation process?***

It appears that the potential benefits of ICTs as outlined in Chapter three, subsection 3.2.1 for the seven SIMToNs have all been considered to some extent in the strategy formation. The benefit of better linking HO and field through robust Internet technology seems to have featured strongest together with the possibility of providing a better platform for communication (CoPs). Of the potential problems that ICTs can create, also many have been addressed. The potential for data overload has been addressed by implementing information

on demand and proposing new reporting styles. Differences in the external environment between HO and field (with weak ICT infrastructure) have been addressed by using robust Internet technology and building off-line usability into the KM system. The disparity in internal environment (stages in information age reform) of core and periphery have been considered by implementing the back-end of the KM system at HO (outsourced) and leaving it up to the periphery to manage their front-end appropriately according to their capacity and context.

Since strategy formation is based on assumptions about the effects of strategies on the future of the organisation, it is important to monitor to what extent these assumptions (potential benefits, potential problems) have become realities.

10. To what extent have present patterns of IM strategy been identified (e.g. through mapping of IM processes)?

I have not come across a systematic effort to identify IM strategy patterns in <h>. However, I am aware of one very important pattern at the periphery level, which was recognised by the <WGKM> and strongly affected the IM strategy formation: The learning that local collaborators' input as well as their orientation was hampered by prevailing IM practices, where expatriates seemed to control too much of the access to information. Recognising this pattern, which had formed over the years, prompted the IM strategy formation efforts to address the situation by creating a more open and universally accessible platform for communication (the Intranet and CoPs). Another important strategy pattern at the periphery was not (sufficiently) recognised: The invaluable and effective <LTM> concept of <h> Nepal (which touches IM in almost all the SIMToNs) was not recognised as a strategy pattern with the potential to align IM processes (Country programme-project-field; among Country programmes) and to guide strategy formation at field level.

In order to facilitate better recognition of such strategy patterns in the future, more efforts seem required in the mapping of significant IM processes across the organisation. This would also help understand those IM processes better, monitoring them and making them transparent for learning and improvement. HO should map IM processes at the core while the periphery should map their IM processes, making them explicit and sharing them. The periphery (departments, country programmes, projects) as well as the core could then

examine how their IM processes and existing IM strategy patterns fit and interface with the ones of other parts of the organisation.

11. Is the IM strategy formation guided more by planning or by existing pattern? More planned or more emergent?

I believe both. But to find this out one has first to identify those strategy patterns, which definitely exist and probably continue to emerge without much planning. Strategy patterns emerge and guide IM practices in various parts of the organisation. Right now there is a stronger flow of strategies from core to periphery. This causes strategy patterns at the periphery to be influenced by planned strategies from the core, while little of the strategy patterns from the periphery, which could creatively influence centrally planned strategies, seem to flow upwards.

I recommend monitoring how far the new KM concept (aiming to enhance upward information and knowledge flows), is actually going to change this.

12. What has been the contribution to IM strategy formation, by core and by periphery?

The contribution of HO focussed on the creation of a holistic KM concept, which is concerned with improving information management and shaping a new information culture, as well as harnessing the advantages of ICT. <h> Nepal contributed by developing a concept for monitoring qualitative information that provides valuable knowledge about the reality at the grass roots and the effects of <h>'s development efforts. It facilitates IM for learning and planning and links, integrates and aligns <h>'s projects in Nepal.

I encourage HO to work on recognising valuable IM strategy patterns from the periphery and I encourage the periphery to share their IM strategy products more assertively.

13. How have organisational structures, processes and systems affected the planning as well as the learning, at the core as well as at the periphery?

Structures influence the flows of information and knowledge between field and HO. The flow in both directions used to be channelled mainly via the <PD> or other expatriates. Such structures do not well transmit the learning (individual's tacit knowledge) from both ends but merely the (explicit) concepts and plans. And the dissemination and sharing still depends on the goodwill and interpretation of the person at the gateway.

IM strategy formation at the periphery seems very much a result of learning by continuous informal processes, solidarity in action and the exchange of tacit knowledge, which Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995)[1] call socialisation, producing sympathised knowledge (Figure 2-4). At HO more formal processes of concept-development and exchange of explicit knowledge in form of written information (called combination in Figure 2-4 and producing systemic knowledge) seem to drive IM strategy formation. The tacit knowledge of the field seems not to find its way easily into HO, thus also hindering the creation of organisational knowledge through the spiral proposed in Figure 2-4.

Systems that affect the learning and planning processes include exchange between HO and field that happens mostly in explicit form through reports, emails, telephone calls (mainly between HO and <PD>). Exchange of tacit knowledge between HO and field seems effectively to take place during visits and formal face-to-face learning events like the <PD> seminars. Here again, since local collaborators are not participating in the <PD> seminars, their valuable tacit knowledge does not directly feed into those events. (See Section 7.3.)

I see that Helvetas' present KM strategy is addressing many of those issues raised here by providing better platforms for information exchange, which will help improving structures, processes and systems in the long run, through facilitating better IM strategy formation.

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[1] See Nonaka, I. and Takeuchi, H. (1995) in the list of references.

14. How have people and organisational culture affected the planning as well as the learning, at the core as well as at the periphery?

The organisational culture of <h> Nepal features a strong concern for solidarity in action, which focuses on learning about, with and from the underprivileged people it wants to help. It seems to attach great value to the maintenance of relationships and the practice of informal information sharing. The learning focus as well as the planning process and respective strategy products are affected by the values carried by <h> Nepal's members, which are influenced by Nepali culture, Swiss culture, the HO's culture (advocating solidarity with the underprivileged) and the <PD>'s ideology. All those influences have contributed to creating the <LTM> concept.

Organisational culture at HO is affected by Swiss culture as well as the NGO culture of solidarity with the South. It is influenced by many years of experience in working with colleagues and partners in DCs. The values of western culture, which favours more formal information flows and exchange of explicit knowledge have resulted in striving for new ways of capturing organisational knowledge in explicit form (e.g. KM concept, CoPs, knowledge maps, etc.). The values of fostering equality have influenced the recent IM strategy towards enhancing the role of local collaborators, and thus opening <h> more up for learning from the South.

Helvetas' latest IM/KM strategy seems quite appropriate to facilitate better communication between core and periphery and to enhance integration of local collaborators thus fostering cross-cultural learning, which will strengthen the overall organisational culture.

15. How has the leadership affected the planning as well as the learning, at the core as well as at the periphery?

Leadership at the core as well as at the periphery is crucial for influencing the IM strategy formation. <PD> <Walton>'s clear priorities, which are solidarity in action, and less the piloting of new ICT enabled information systems affect organisational values and culture of <h> Nepal. At HO, the vision of <Oettli> regarding strengthening the role of local collaborators has been very much driving the IM strategy process. And the concerns of <Külling> (quotation at beginning of Chapter seven) seem to balance the innovation agenda of <h> with the development agenda. (See Section 7.3.)

Leadership needs to monitor the effects of IM strategy formation and hence requires appropriate monitoring tools. My proposed framework for navigating NNGOs' transformation (Section 8.3, 8.4) might be useful for developing such tools.

16. How has the technology affected the planning as well as the learning, at the core as well as at the periphery?

Technology has had influence on the exchange of learning and planning products. Internet technology creates almost the same information access conditions at the field and the centre. It provides reality-supporting tools, like email and information on demand via the web. Although technology cannot transmit tacit knowledge, email enables lateral exchanges between field and HO for both better learning and planning. Yet, despite the fact that email has been available to the field for quite some time, potentially enabling lateral information flows, this seems not to have happened as much as it could. This shows that the way in which technology is actually used depends a lot on organisational culture, structure and established information processes. (See Section 7.3.)

Here again, hybrid facilitators across the organisation could play an important role to harness the strength of technology as well as to prevent overemphasis on technology.

17. How has the external environment affected the planning as well as the learning, at the core as well as at the periphery?

Changes in environment, like increased competition, have resulted in a need for more effective exchange of learning and planning between field and HO, for better integration, better use of knowledge, human and financial resources. Those changes have been identified and interpreted at HO and field, and contributed to the shaping of their specific IM strategies (KM at HO; <LTM> at <h> Nepal). (See Section 7.3.)

I recommend shopping around a bit more at other organisations for good ideas, best practices and relevant experiences. TearFund for example restructured IA first internally at HO level only. They were particularly keen to see how colleagues would respond to the new IA as well as to slowly influence the culture before actually implementing their Intranet.

Such prototyping is useful for testing and fine tuning IM strategies before making major investments and transformational changes.

18. How has IM strategy formation been affected by IS and ICT strategies?

ICTs and ISs currently used in <h> surely influence how IM strategy is formed. The IS 'Email' for example favours involvement only of *selected individuals* (private networks) while the IS 'CoPs' favours involvement of *interested individuals* (public network) in the process. However, on the other hand, the abstract nature of ICT enabled IM strategy formation attracts more the ICT enthusiasts among colleagues to participate in the strategy formation and thus reflects the influence of ICT strategies on IM strategies. (See Section 7.5.)

I clearly see a role here for hybrid facilitators at various levels in the organisation to align business, IM, IS and ICT strategies. Also a closer cooperation between <WGKM> and the ICT department might contribute to a greater synergy.

19. How have ICT strategies been affected by IM and IS strategies?

ICT strategies mostly resulted from the requirements of IM strategies. This is very much in line with <h>'s understanding at HO and in <h> Nepal that ICTs enable IM strategies (and are a means not an end). However sometimes new IM strategies become only feasible or new IM requirements get stimulated with developments in the field of ICT (e.g. requirement to have permanent access to the Internet, boosted by availability/affordability of ADSL technology). (See Section 7.5.)

See recommendation for Question 18 above.

20. Have core, umbrella strategies been formed? How?

The <WGKM> is aware of the fact that contexts, conditions, needs and priorities are quite different in the various <h> country programmes. The IM strategy has as core element the creation of an enabling KM infrastructure, providing opportunities for better IM/KM. How these opportunities will be used will depend very much on the local contexts at the periphery, which will bring out appropriate local strategy patterns under the HO's umbrella strategy. Also in regard to shaping organisational culture, the recent KM strategy can be no more than an umbrella strategy. A new information culture is likely to emerge as a pattern under the explicit IM strategy umbrella.

It seems important to monitor how and what kind of strategy patterns emerge under these umbrella strategies, in order to learn about the cause-effect relation ships between umbrella strategies and emerging strategy patters and to be able to fine tune those umbrella strategies.

21. Who has been involved in IM strategy formation and implementation at the core and periphery?

At the core: The Working Group on Knowledge Management (which also has one hybrid facilitator) has engaged a selected group of people mainly consisting of <PDs> of the category innovators and early adopters. Also the ICT department has been involved in some phases with some issues.

At the periphery: Different IM strategy elements are initiated, facilitated and implemented by different members of the country programme. <LTM> for example was very much facilitated and coordinated by the Senior Programme Officer of <h> Nepal's country programme office. But mostly the <PD> and project leaders are involved in order to ensure integration and cross fertilisation across the projects, while the Computer Services and MIS Officer is available as a resource person.

The wider the active participation is, the greater the awareness will grow (1) among colleagues about ongoing efforts and relevant issues and (2) among the <WGKM> team about the organisational reality.

22. Who is involved in facilitation of IM strategy formation processes?

The IM strategy formation process is currently facilitated by the Programme Coordinator Knowledge Sharing (a hybrid facilitator) and the <WGKM>. It was however the Head of Foreign Department who initiated the present initiative with the intention to improve the linking between core and periphery. At the periphery, <PDs> play an important role in facilitation of IM strategy formation processes which are relevant and appropriate to the field's context.

KM is a hybrid discipline, requiring hybrid facilitators. Helvetas could train and coach interested colleagues at various levels in all parts of the organisation as hybrid facilitators. They could be staff members in any position, with an interest and respective training in IM, IS and ICTs, who would function as resource persons for <WGKM> and for their immediate colleagues. Those 'hybrids' need not only a good insight about organisational processes and organisational reality but also about the opportunities and threats pertaining to the use of ICTs in the local context. They would be expected to generate new strategic suggestions, appropriate to improve the IM processes within the umbrella strategies. Having such 'hybrids' operating throughout the organisation and at all levels, and linked through appropriate IM and KM processes, should help the core to keep a finger on the pulse of reality and to effectively disseminate awareness of and operationalise the current IM strategies.

23. How have the local IM needs (e.g. at FO, Programme, Project level) been taken into consideration?

During the current IM/KM strategy formation effort of the HO selected individuals from the field were consulted and asked for input (mostly innovator <PDs>). At the field level in <h> Nepal, the <LTM> concept has been developed with participation from the projects. And, the <PD> has played an integrating and linking role between the HO and projects. The new KM system will provide colleagues from the FO, programme- and project-level better access to <h> resources and offer a new communication platform. This should stimulate lateral information flows and learning and also boost upward flows of crucial information (provided by <LTM>) about the reality at the grass roots.

As mentioned already under Question 22, hybrid facilitators would have a role in communicating the IM needs from all over the organisation to the <WGKM>.

24. To what extent have OL, KM and IM strategy formation been institutionalised?

The new KM strategy in <h> is concerned with establishing new structures, systems, procedures, and above all a new organisational culture. The strategy and resulting policies (e.g. performance appraisal) can formally persuade and make colleagues comply, but only when a healthy new organisational culture evolves, which embraces those transformational changes as opportunities for learning and as a means for personal development, will institutionalisation have happened.

Helvetas is engaged in a process of institutionalising organisational learning. This complex and very dynamic process, which is affected by many factors would probably benefit considerably from an appropriate monitoring approach. Here my proposed framework for navigating NNGOs' transformation (Section 8.3, 8.4) might become useful.