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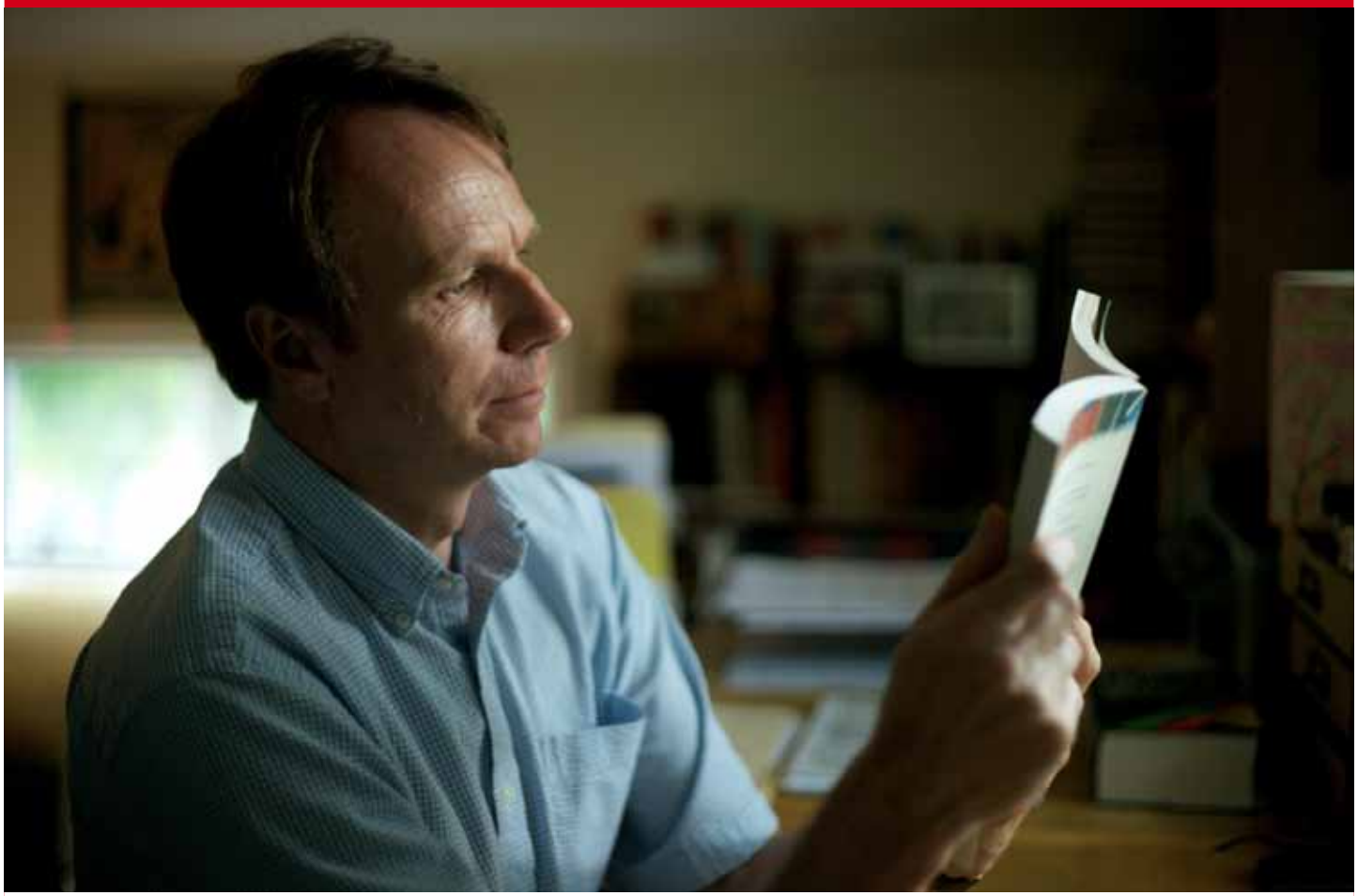

'KNOW-HOW', 'KNOW-WHAT' AND THE POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE FOR DEVELOPMENT

Speech by Michael Edwards

Knowledge and Change
Theory and practice of development dilemmas

Hivos
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Michael Edwards is widely recognized as one of the world's leading authorities on civil society, philanthropy, and social change. For the past thirty years, he has worked to strengthen the contributions of ordinary citizens to their communities as a grant giver, writer, advocate, organizer, and activist across five continents, and has lived and worked in Zambia, Malawi, Colombia, India, the UK, and the United States.

Michael graduated from Oxford University with a "congratulatory" first-class honors degree in geography, and was awarded a Ph.D. by the University of London for his work on housing the urban poor in Latin America. Dissatisfied with academic research, he entered the world of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in 1982 and spent the next fifteen years as a senior manager in international relief and development NGOs, including Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, the Prasad Foundation, and Voluntary Service Overseas. During this time, Michael became known for his innovative thinking about NGOs and development, and in 1998 he was invited to join the World Bank in Washington, D.C., as a senior adviser on civil society, where he led a program to improve the agency's engagement with a wide range of nongovernmental groups.

Two years later, he was appointed as director of the Ford Foundation's Governance and Civil Society Program in New York, overseeing grants totaling more than $900 million between 1999 and 2008, when he left to become a Distinguished Senior Fellow at Demos, a Network for Ideas and Action, in New York; a senior visiting scholar at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service; and a senior visiting fellow at the Brooks World Poverty Institute at Manchester University in the UK. Michael also cofounded the Seasons Fund for Social Transformation, which makes grants to voluntary organizations that combine their work for social justice with spiritual principles.

Michael is the author of thirteen books and hundreds of articles and op-ed pieces, and his writings have changed the way we think about voluntary action and the transformation of society. He writes regularly for openDemocracy, the Financial Times, the Chronicle of Philanthropy, and many other newspapers and magazines, and is a featured speaker at literary festivals and other events around the world. He lives with his wife, Cora, a nonprofit–fund-raising consultant who also teaches at New York University, in Swan Lake, a small community in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains of New York, where they have painstakingly rebuilt and renovated one of the first houses built by settlers who arrived in the 1830s to establish a tanning industry in Sullivan County.

Michael's latest book is Small Change: Why Business Won't Save the World (Berrett-Koehler), a provocative look at the trend to rely on business in solving social problems. You can follow Michael's writings on Twitter @edwarmi or visit his website at http://www.futurepositive.org.

‘Know-How’, ‘Know-What’ and the Politics of Knowledge for Development

Thanks to Hivos, and for the invitation to join you today. I’m delighted to be here, and I know this conference takes place against the background of a lively debate in the Netherlands about the future of development assistance, sparked off by the recent WRR report which - while it has some serious gaps and inconsistencies - is usefully-focused on development as a learning system in the context of global relationships that increasingly influence the drivers of social and economic change.

However, I don’t think it is learning or knowledge per se that makes the difference but rather the *politics* of knowledge, which determine how thinking is translated into action of various kinds and which ideas are considered legitimate. These political factors are, I think, going to become even more important in the future, and they add yet another layer to the complicated questions you are already struggling with, namely “how do citizens engage with power, which change agents really matter, and how does knowledge trigger social change?”

My answer to those questions, and it’s going to be very brief given that I only have 25 minutes to explore it, is that the politics of knowledge can be altered for the better by re-balancing ‘know-what’ (meaning technical knowledge in the form of information and ideas), and ‘know-how’ (meaning knowledge-making capacities and the power to use them in practice). At present, the balance is heavily weighted towards ‘know-what’ in ways that skew the politics of knowledge towards the interests of elites and away from the decisions that promote development as social transformation.

When I was a PhD student in London in the late 1970s I lived in a truly horrible house on the Archway Road just south of Highgate, damp, freezing cold, falling to pieces and full of people who were even lazier than I was. So as a form of light relief I used to take myself off to Highgate Cemetery nearby to look at the graves of all the famous Victorians who were buried there, including Karl Marx, who was one of my favorites, me being someone of a Leftist in my younger days. You probably know the first half of the inscription that is written on Marx’s gravestone, which reads “Workers of all lands unite,” but it was the other half that really grabbed my attention: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways”, it says, “the point is to change it.”

That phrase spoke to me very powerfully, in fact it was the reason I left academia after submitting my thesis and joined the world of NGOs, but I was also worried by it, because I couldn’t see how one could change the world successfully unless one also understood what made it work. And that feeling of dissatisfaction has shaped my thinking ever since as I’ve sought and tried many different ways of combining knowledge with social action. I used to think that somewhere in the universe, maybe here in a sensible country like the Netherlands, there would be a perfect synthesis waiting to be discovered and channeled into new methodologies and institutions, but now I think that’s naive. Now I feel that ‘know-what’ and ‘know-how’ are in permanent and necessary tension with each-other, so the task is finding ways of managing those tensions creatively. Let me explain what I mean by starting with a concrete example.

In the United States today, one of the most contentious debates centers around the reform of secondary education, where a powerful network of business-oriented philanthropists and the non-profits and think-tanks they fund, all with close contacts and connections with senior figures in city and federal government, are engaged in a systematic effort to introduce private (or charter) schools and market salaries at the top of the tree, weaken the power of the teachers' unions on the grounds that 'bad teachers' are the root of the problem, increase top-down control to protect reforms from the electoral cycle, and promote the use of standardized test scores in mathematics and English to close schools and fire teachers who don't measure up. This entire movement is built around reams of data and wagon-loads of research studies that support its prescriptions, and indeed one of its prime selling points has been that it is 'knowledge-based' or 'data-driven' rather than ideological, which has been very effective in building cross-partisan support.

However, when one digs a little more deeply into the 'know-what' of education, one finds that there are just as many reams of data and wagon-loads of research studies that support the opposite conclusions. Across the board, charter schools don't perform any better than regular schools; standardized tests are unreliable as measures of educational achievement because they screen out things like civic education, music and languages, and are biased against the learning characteristics of black and Latino kids; top-down control does protect reforms but only by excluding the voices of teachers, kids and parents; even great teachers struggle in schools that have lots of pupils from poor socio-economic backgrounds (which a lot of research fails to control for); and rising inequalities in salaries contribute to low morale.

Even more disturbing is the fact that the backers of these reforms have been able to manipulate democracy in favor of agendas that are supposed to be objective by helping to elect their political allies, as Bill Gates did when he gave $4 million through an NGO called 'Learn-New York' to Mayor Michael Bloomberg's campaign to abolish term limits in New York City, and who, once re-elected, promptly reinforced official support for the school reforms that Gates was already funding. "The new game in town", says the Washington Monthly, "is to dominate the *entire intellectual environment* in which decisions are made, which means funding everything from think tanks to issue ads to phony grassroots pressure groups." Once that is accomplished, ideology can be turned into knowledge, and knowledge that challenges ideology can be discounted. And if that example is too far removed from the issues you are working on, then you can use the same frame to interpret current debates for and against the second Green Revolution in Africa, for example, or the limits and potential of market-based strategies for poverty-reduction. The truth is that any significant question in the development field takes us into disputed territory that is increasingly enveloped by the fog of ideology and interest group contestation.

Outside the science laboratory, there are no universally accepted data to guide decisions, only different views of which data to collect, what they mean, and how they should be used – there is, in other words, no unambiguous 'know-what' to underpin policy and practice. In fact studies undertaken in 2005 and 2006 by researchers at the University of Michigan found that people rarely change their minds when exposed to corrected facts in news stories – and many actually become even more attached to their pre-existing views, especially on controversial issues, a problem that is heightened by the increasing glut of information that confronts us, and which harbors both new insights *and* new myths, rumors and downright fabrications. And given that globalization is throwing differences over religion, economics and the meaning of development itself into even sharper relief - not eradicating them as some thought would happen - we can expect contests over knowledge to continue, and perhaps even deepen. So what should we do?

I think there are two possible answers to this question, and they lead in different directions. The first is to recognize that technical knowledge declines into technocracy unless we also invest in the knowledge-making and interpretive capacities of the broadest range possible of the

population, especially among disadvantaged or excluded groups who can then provide more accountability and feedback, challenge accepted notions of what is needed or effective, and bring their own ideas to the table.

"*Agency* is a major missing element of the agenda on 'making markets work for the poor'" I read in yesterday's seminar agenda; "creating the cultural bases for *public reason*" is vital in addressing the challenges of pluralism, notes one of your Working Papers on NGOs in Indonesia, and both are absolutely right. We are co-creators of knowledge, not practitioners of detached scholarship in a world divided between producers and consumers. Our aim is not to strengthen pockets of knowledge connected to decision-making elites, but to help build know-how throughout society in order to underpin democratic processes of problem-solving and public policy formulation. Knowledge should not be produced and owned only by credentialed experts because there are many legitimate ways of knowing and many different mechanisms that facilitate their sharing.

Knowledge has a social purpose in animating the public sphere – it isn't just a private activity that produces insights, increasingly on a commercial basis, for others in academia, or the sponsors of research in government and business. We know that active social learning writ large is the only basis for democratic governance through deliberation, consensus-building and accountability, so that - like rocks in a stream - the sharp edges of people's differences can be softened over time as they knock against each-other in the rough-and-tumble of debate, where 'know-what' meets 'know-how' in conditions of equality and freedom.

But – and here's the second part of my answer, 'know what' remains very important to development and social change, because not all forms of knowledge can or should be democratically-created and controlled, either because the processes involved are too slow, or too subject to interest-group manipulation even among well-intentioned donors and other agencies, or because there really are scientific questions which have answers that are not simply matters of opinion. I've changed my mind on this issue over the years as a result of hard experience, and now I'm convinced that the traditional virtues of academic rigor and independence are essential to the success of any knowledge venture, especially in highly-politicized environments.

Rigor – the painstaking parsing out of problems and solutions; the interrogation of all the evidence about costs and benefits, winners and losers; the ability to identify both the individual pieces of a puzzle and put them back together again into an accurate and coherent picture; the skills of presenting and comparing different theories of change; the depth of understanding built up by studying the same phenomena over long periods of time; the potential for accountability that results from a deliberate distancing of oneself from a pre-determined position; and the freedom to stand apart and shout "no, I don't agree, this emperor has no clothes" - all these are crucial elements of the knowledge-making we need, though it is also true that rigor is not, and should not be, the exclusive property of universities, especially when increasing amounts of academic research are sponsored by governments, corporations and NGOs. In fact, distributing rigor throughout civil society is a task that stands at the intersection of 'know-what' and 'know-how.'

So we need to find a better balance between these different approaches if we want to re-orient the politics of knowledge in constructive and liberating ways, but how? It's important to recognize that one can't resolve the dilemmas involved in answering this question in any absolute sense – we can only manage them more or less effectively. And once you look at them as management questions rather than existential anxieties, it's surprising how quickly you can move to partial solutions. But they will always be partial, since 'know-what' and 'know-how' inhabit different daily life-worlds, and they impose different sets of choices, incentives, and timeframes on us, as I'm sure you have already experienced in the collaborations you've embarked on.

The important thing is to keep experimenting and learning from experience, to keep trying things out and edging forward, and from what I've read this is already happening in the Hivos program, which is being developed around a strong commitment to international co-production; distributed capacities for knowledge-creation and debate; and a focus on controversial issues: how civil society, for example, can occupy the new spaces that are opening up in multi-layered regimes of local-global governance; how difference and pluralism can be celebrated and protected rather than eradicated in some deluded search to avoid healthy confrontation; whether markets can genuinely 'work for the poor' as we explore new avenues for the future trajectories of capitalism; and how the emerging agency of information technology can be blended with more traditional forms of activism. In fact if you added climate change, aging and social protection to this list, you'd have pretty much the complete list of topics that matter in both North and South. As those of you who know me can attest, I don't give out praise lightly, but your program strikes me as one of the best and the bravest, and I salute you for it, I really do. But any human endeavor is going to have some weaknesses, and to close, I want to mention three.

The first is public communication, or rather the lack of it, which we know is a crucial driver of changes in the politics of knowledge. How many people outside the magic circle of your own making know about the path-breaking work you are doing?'Not many, if the newspapers, websites and blogs I regularly read are a guide. Perhaps we think that more interesting outputs will automatically be embraced in development policy debates, but those debates are embedded in political processes that are relatively unresponsive to 'know-what,' unless these ideas are supported by 'know-how' in a systematic way – think of the movement to end doubts about the safety and acceptability of smoking which took at least forty years to achieve its goal. Effective communications and civic and political muscle are the keys to the success of any social movement that wants to have a broad-based impact.

The second weakness relates to our view of knowledge-making institutions, and particularly how to re-imagine those institutions if we accept that the ones we have already – like conventional universities and NGOs – are simply not be up to the challenges that lie ahead. Conventionally this question has been answered through the language of partnerships, and that kind of academic-practitioner collaboration is already a strong feature of your work. Institutions of higher education are crucial because they credential knowledge, legitimize certain ways of knowing, generate and diffuse conceptual frameworks that structure practices of different kinds, socialize professionals, and protect the rigor and independence that I spoke about earlier, while NGOs and other civil society groups are usually closer to the action and embedded in the all-important processes of change and transformation around which new knowledge is generated, tested and implemented in practice.

A key lesson from experiments in co-creation among NGOs and universities is that success is more likely to be achieved when the participants agree to accompany each-other over a substantial period of time so that they can develop trust, mutual understanding, and collaborative skills and commitments, and when they make *more* of their different skills and experiences, not less. Once that happens you can usually sort out any problems that arise along the way, and have enough collective strength and maturity to face up to the deep prejudices and limitations that often block learning from each-other at the cutting edge of social change.

But the financial and political realities of these existing institutions also impose limits on their reformability, which can only be surpassed through new structures that are neither research groups nor NGOs, but some mixture of the two - "distributed networks for knowledge and action" for want of a better phrase, or new 'knowledge ecologies' that bring 'know-what' and 'know-how' together in creative ways. Maybe your networks already look like this – the one I work for in New York, called Demos, is trying to develop in this way and I can think of others,

like the New Economics Foundation in London, and maybe the Kabarole Research Center in Uganda which I read about in one of your Working Papers. I think this is an area where we can and should go much further.

The third issue is independence, which, to be blunt, starts and finishes with financial independence, and obviously that's a huge challenge for all of us at a time of increasingly scarce resources. Command over resources gives you command over knowledge, and eventually victory in the battle for ideas, which is one reason I've become so worried about trends in international philanthropy over the last few years (the topic of my new book "Small Change" which I hope you'll take with you before you leave). It's no coincidence that the school reform movement I described earlier, for example, is financed by billionaire philanthropists and hedge fund managers on Wall Street. So fostering the financial independence and sustainability of new knowledge networks is vital, and that requires us to be much more energetic in coming up with solutions, whether they are based around endowments, financial diversification, commercial revenue generation or simply longer-term grant funding.

To conclude, in an age when privilege and authority wear a more diffuse and benign face, the soft power of knowledge is ever more important as a force for development and social change. That's why the politics of knowledge – how ideas are created, used and disseminated – represents a key issue for our community. I've argued that the best way to improve the politics of knowledge is to re-combine 'know-what' and 'know-how' in a variety of ways which challenge existing institutions and approaches. And that involves a tremendous amount of work.

But rather than worrying about the difficulties involved or obsessing about the perfect way to address them, my parting advice is simply to enjoy the ride. Because this is exciting work, important work, and you're doing it well, and you'll do it even better in the future so that, when we're dead and gone and buried in Highgate Cemetery or wherever else, and some spotty and underfed PHD student or NGO activist comes visiting our grave for inspiration, they'll be able to read a different inscription on *our* headstones that speaks of the work we did to interpret *and* change the world together as one messy, conjoined and transformative process. I'd be very happy to leave a legacy like that, and I hope you would too. So I want to wish you the very best in your own journeys and thank you for your attention. I'm looking forward very much to the rest of our discussion.

Mike Edwards (Future Positive)

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