

Summary

Change through Exchange: Exploring the role of international exchange in organisational development of care organisations



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Introduction

In a time where rapid demographic changes in population build-up are taking place on a global scale, one of the most important contemporary challenges is to adapt the organisation and delivery of care for vulnerable people in such a way that it ensures a good, humane, quality of life for all those involved. The context of ageing calls for innovative solutions to adapt current ways of organising and delivering care, and requires an environment that enables and allows for such changes to take place.

This study was set up to explore and explain organisational change through international exchange in the elderly and community based care sector for the first time. The main premise was to explore whether, given the presumed transformational potential of international exchanges on individuals, this transformational potential could also be found when the exchange involved experienced care professionals, and whether there would also be effects on a higher, organisational, level. The main research question is:

How and why does international exchange between two care organisations lead to individual and organisational change?

Methods

In order to answer the research question, a preparatory study on previous international work visits by the Dutch elderly care organisation Stichting Zorgcombinatie Marga Klompé (SZMK) and a case study on an international exchange between SZMK and the Malawian care department of the Archdiocese of Blantyre (MAL-NL exchange) was conducted. Table 1 gives an overview of the methods employed.

Table 1: Methods and timing in chronological order:

Method	Timing
<i>Preparatory study on previous international exchange at SZMK</i>	
Retrospective interviews with 12 participants of previous SZMK exchanges	November 2013
<i>Case study on MAL-NL exchange</i>	
Survey among the six Dutch exchange participants	January 2015
Focus group discussion with the six Dutch exchange participants	January 2015
Survey among all 991 SZMK care professionals	February 2015
Participant observation during MAL-NL exchange	May 2015 and October 2015
Survey among the six Malawi exchange participants	October 2015
Retrospective interviews with pairs of the six Malawi exchange participants	October 2015
Survey among the six Dutch exchange participants	January 2017
Retrospective interviews with the six individual Dutch exchange participants	February 2017

The preparatory process leading up to the design of the case study started with a round of interviews with previous participants of international work visits organised by SZMK. This study on previous exchanges played an important part in establishing the topic and approach of the case study. The data collection for the case study started with the use of a survey. This pre-exchange *survey* on personal and organisational values and culture was sent out to all care and managing personnel at SZMK, including the exchange participants for the MAL-NL exchange, in order to assess the organisational context and conditions of the exchange. The results were discussed in a focus group discussion with the exchange participants.

During the MAL-NL exchange itself, *participant observation* was carried out and *interviews* with Malawian exchange participants were held, with the purpose to determine what type of individual or organisational level changes took place as a result of the exchange, and to examine the process and conditions under which these occurred. Immediately after the exchange, the same *survey* which was held among the Dutch SZMK employees before the exchange was filled in by the Malawian participants, with the purpose to help determine differences and similarities between the Malawian and the Dutch exchange participants and their organisations.

One year after the exchange, the same *survey* was again held under the Dutch participant in order to serve as a basis for follow-up interviews. These retrospective follow-up *interviews* were intended to assess long-term individual and organisational change as a result of the exchange, as well as the process and conditions under which these changes took place.

Theoretical framework

Since the premise of the international exchange is built around the introduction to a new, unknown, reality or context, a thorough awareness of that context is essential when attempting to understand the relation between the exchange and change. At the same time, any type of (organisational) change in real life will be set in and dependent on context. In order to capture the complex conditions for organisational change –concerning the *why* part of the research question– I will draw from policy change literature, using Kingdon's (1984) three-streams-model to understand how an exchange may create conditions for change by opening up a "policy window". Kingdon proposes that three kinds of processes or streams are important before a new policy can be formulated: the problem stream involving problem recognition, the policy stream involving the producing of alternatives, and the political stream involving the context in which it all takes place. A policy window, i.e. the chance for change to take place, opens up when the three streams converge. In the theoretical framework for this study, an international exchange can be viewed as an intervention that causes the three streams to converge.

In order to explain the process of change on a higher than individual level –concerning the *how* part of the research question–, I draw from the organisational change literature, using Kim's (1993) Observe, Assess, Design, Implement-Shared Mental Model (OADI-SMM) of organisational change. In this model, Kim combines both experiential learning theory and the concept of Individual and Shared Mental Models, in order to conceptualise the relation between individual and organisational learning.

Figure 1: Theoretical framework explaining organisational change through exchange:

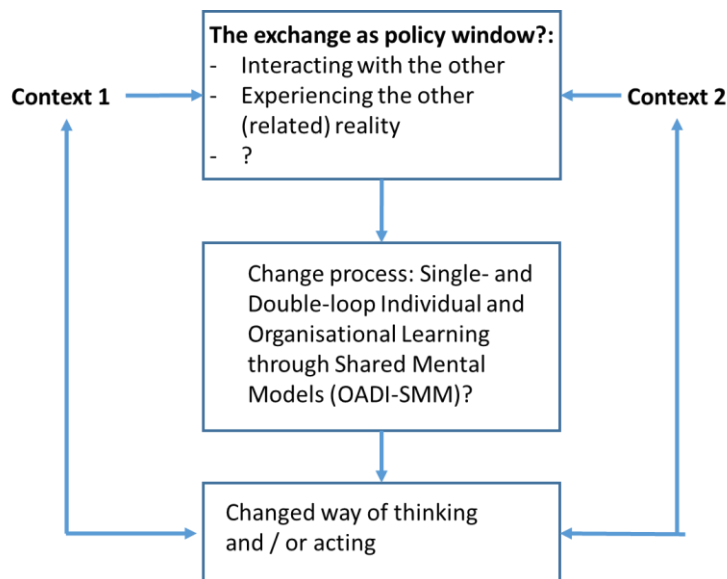


Figure 1 presents the theoretical framework adopted to explain organisational change through exchange. In the theoretical framework the question is raised whether an exchange can be seen as a policy window in the way it was conceptualised by Kingdon (1984), and whether Kim's (1993) OADI-SMM model can be used to understand the process from an exchange taking place to a changed way of thinking and / or acting, which may be at the individual or collective level. The context, which is part of the change conditions and can thereby be analysed using Kingdon's (1984) three-streams model, influences both the exchange, and the possible change directly, but may also be influenced by change resulting from exchange in turn. The question mark in the exchange / policy window box also leaves room for possible other exchange conditions besides interacting and experiencing "the other".

Findings from the preparatory study on previous international work visits

Individual effects stimulating organisational development:

- stimulating out-of-the-box thinking, increasing flexibility in day-to-day work;
- larger motivation through gaining new energy and new ideas, especially if these ideas could be put into practice;
- increased feelings of self-worth and pride (feeling honoured to be chosen by MT to participate in such a work visit);
- stimulating reflection on own position at SZMK, acting and context (latent beliefs are often re-affirmed and made explicit through concrete examples, improving individual's grasp of their position vis-à-vis important care themes);

- close, lasting, relationships between work visit participants.

Organisational effects stimulating organisational development:

- introduction of new ideas and concepts or affirmation thereof (e.g. small-scale care, hospitality) in the organisation;
- introduction of new practical initiatives (e.g. Fingerfood, Employee of the Quarter);
- increased commitment and efforts by the participants for the organisation;
- improved cooperation between employees involved in same work visit;
- more flexible and positive attitude from employees that have participated in the work visit.

Initial findings from the case study on the MAL-NL exchange

Individual effects stimulating organisational development:

The following categories of examples of individual learning were found in the field notes and retrospective interviews with exchange participants. While they consider instances where individual frameworks and/or routines changed as a result of the exchange, these individual changes can also be considered beneficial for the own organisation through the “added value” the individual offers its organisation:

- practicing new professional skills;
- developing ideas concerning good quality of care;
- developing personal skills benefitting the organisation;
- developing teamwork skills through the group process and;
- gaining an increased appreciation for one’s own life and work situation.

Having analysed the instances of individual development taking place as a result of the exchange, the developments can be divided in two broad types. The first broad type of developments are initiated through being exposed to a completely different context during the visit abroad, making observations and experiencing a completely new reality, which is primarily related to the own reality in its essence (care delivery). The experience of being in another context, with care being the main bridging element, causes constant and spontaneous comparisons to take place within and between individuals. Some of these comparisons evoke strong emotions, causing these assessments to have a strong and long-term impact on one’s thoughts. Dutch participants all experienced a sense of gaining a broader perspective, which made them feel like they had grown from the experience in a positive way. They also became more appreciative and positive about their own context, life and work, as they believed the other context to present much more difficulties than their own. The confrontation with a different reality also created a sense of the relativity of realities and how these can change, positively influencing participants’ adaptability. The comparisons also led to the development of more explanatory models in participants’ minds: how can

some of the large differences be explained, and which elements from either context are desirable or undesirable. It thus helped participants in developing a clearer image of the essence of care as well as their responsibility in delivering good quality care. This first type of individual development is a more passive form of development, whereby immersion in another context is the main initiator.

The second type of individual development taking place as a result of the exchange involves a much more active experience serving as the initiator for individual development. These active experiences are part of the activities that need to be undertaken as a part of the exchange, which can be very different from participants' normal day to day work. The setting of the exchange influenced participants' motivation to undertake these activities, as they were largely self-motivated, through a supportive and stimulating within-group dynamic, and the feeling of responsibility and reciprocity towards the other group to offer them a comparably positive exchange experience (conducive cross-group dynamic). This motivating setting formed an especially conducive environment for development to take place, as it was experienced as very "safe" compared to more common educational environments that are more interlaced with the own organisational setting.

Organisational effects stimulating organisational development:

The examples of group or organisational development as a result of the exchange consisted of:

- both teams getting to know their own organisation better after hosting;
- both teams realising the importance of family participation in care, after comparing both contexts: how this is an important asset in Malawi that needs continuing support, and an important improvement area in the Netherlands;
- both teams realising the importance of community involvement in care, after comparing both contexts: how this is an important asset and something to be admired and supported in Malawi, as well as an important improvement area in the Netherlands ;
- Malawian team wanting to involve physiotherapists to support clients with disabilities through their existing community based care structure, after seeing needs of clients and volunteers during field visits and after visiting Dutch rehabilitation facilities and meeting a SZMK physiotherapist;
- Malawians wanting to focus more on prevention, after seeing how this is done at SZMK and realising its potential in their own setting;
- Malawian team wanting to include an increased focus on elderly in policy-making, including ideas on group care as witnessed at SZMK, and sensitisation of their communities on dementia, after learning about dementia and elderly care through the Netherlands visit;
- Malawians wanting to improve cooperation between care providers, after seeing how this is done in the Netherlands;

- The Dutch team building intra- and interorganisational bridges through hosting.

Planning and acknowledgement

The expected completion date of the dissertation is the end of 2018.

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Annex – Volunteers at work and exchange pictures



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