



## KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING STRATEGY 2015–2019

### Impact through reflection and exchange

The Helvetas Knowledge and Learning (K&L) Strategy 2015–2019 strives to leverage the rich and diverse knowledge of our staff and partners by fostering critical reflection and exchange. This increases the effectiveness of our work, through improved learning, engagement and knowledge flow.

In order to do this, our K&L Strategy supports Shared Learning, Innovation and Continuously Adapting the way we work. It is particularly through direct experience that we learn, but such learning can be leveraged by sharing and discussing our reflections and observations with others, leading to more robust planning and implementation. Our K&L Strategy is aimed at creating the conditions where the value of such sharing is widely recognised, and it becomes a core part of our working culture.

## COMPLEX CONTEXTS

The world is increasingly interconnected, and the effects of human behaviour on climate, economy and society are resulting in more complex and intractable challenges. In this context, the knowledge in people's heads – based on their experience, their observations, their collaborative work, their interpretations of what they see – is by far the most important strategic knowledge asset we have.

## OUR APPROACH

**THE CHALLENGE:** Knowledge sharing, learning and innovation already occur regularly in our projects and programmes. We want to systematize them, and tap into good practices in one context for the benefit of others. Perhaps the biggest hurdle is finding opportunities for individual and collective reflection, which contribute to learning and improved practice.

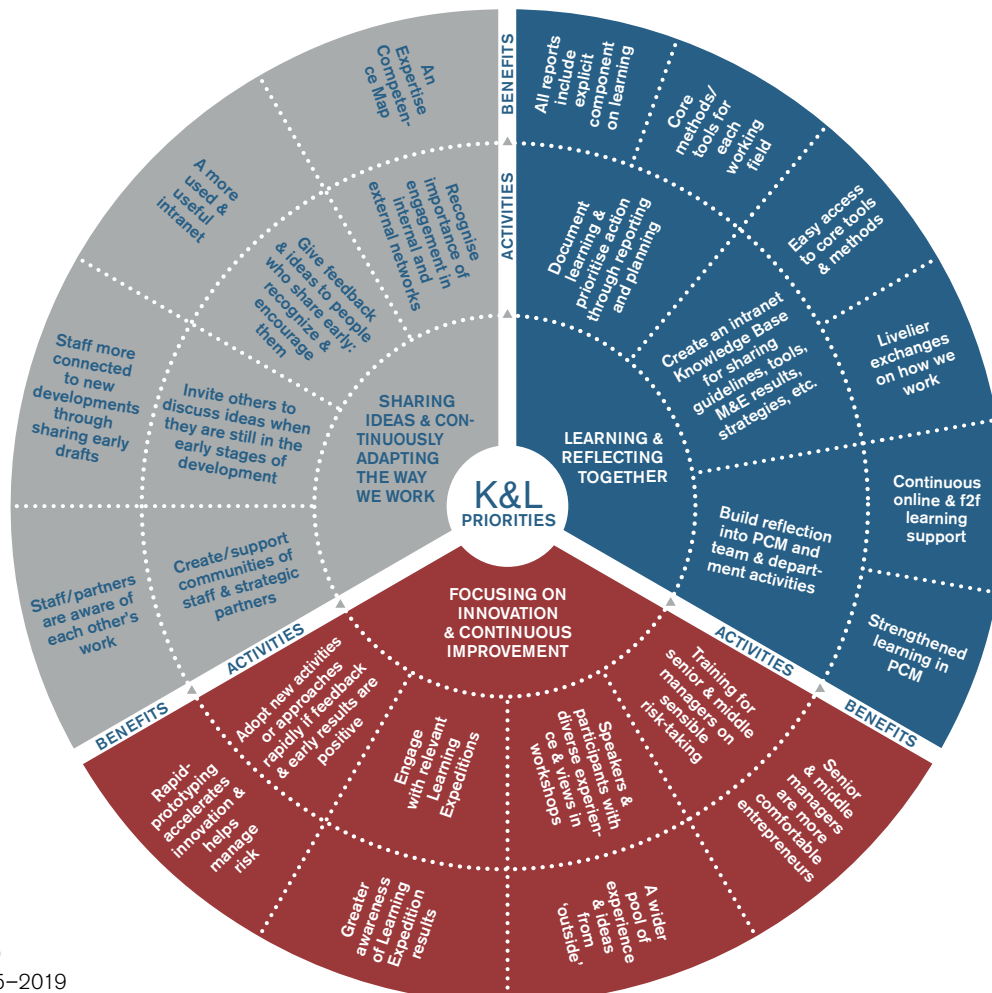
**THE RESPONSE:** The K&L Strategy 2015–2019 is aimed at making it easier for staff and partners to share their knowledge so they can engage with key stakeholders to create practical solutions for the concrete challenges they face.

Our focus is on people, and how they can work more effectively together. The figure below shows the three main elements of our strategy (Shared Learning, Innovation and Continuously Adapting), as well as the mutually reinforcing connections amongst them:

## SHARED LEARNING

We work to provide space for meaningful reflective practice, which helps close the loop from analysis and learning to incorporation of knowledge into improved practice. We also create the conditions for greater collaboration through systematic management of information and knowledge outputs, thereby making them more accessible and available both internally and externally, and providing further opportunities for shared learning.

What do we mean by reflective practice? The simple answer is taking time out of our busy day-to-day work to think about and discuss how the projects and programmes with which we are involved are going, and feeding it back into practice. By ensuring periodic reflection and dialogue amongst project staff, partners and other stakeholders, we can be more aware of critical challenges, adjust what we do as we go along, and ensure that we continue to keep the overall goals of our work in mind.





## SHARED LEARNING

### Learning through joint reflection

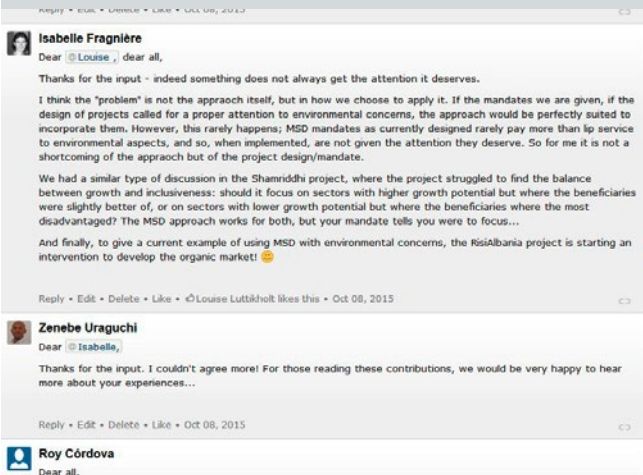


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The biennial Shareweek brings together representatives of Helvetas programmes and departments for a week of strategic thinking and discussion. In 2014, field- and Switzerland-based staff put their heads together to reflect on what the key topics of our new organisational strategy meant in their respective contexts, and on what they could learn from each other and concretely apply moving forward. Through this, participants gained a deeper understanding of the organisation and of how they can tangibly improve their work.

## SHARED LEARNING

### Bringing Market Systems Development (MSD) resources together



Various Helvetas staff in different projects and countries recognized that sharing resources more systematically in the thematic area of MSD would be really useful for all of them. They created an extranet space where staff and partners could discuss issues of common concern and share relevant resources. The MSD space was set up to share key manuals, templates and good MSD examples from different contexts, so all could benefit from the wealth of existing materials being collected and produced.

When it comes to effective management of information and knowledge outputs, it sounds simple, but it is often difficult to ensure that those who would benefit from existing resources can easily have access to them. Our staff and partners have an immense variety of experiences and ways of working, so we need to provide some common tools to facilitate the availability of their main outputs. This is done largely through our intranet and internet sites, but also through targeted distribution and discussion of key resources in order to improve them further.

## INNOVATION

We support innovation by fostering the development of entrepreneurship in our project and programme contexts, and by conducting targeted research on key topics. We take a two-pronged approach: first is careful risk assessment by all levels of management and cultivation of a culture of experimentation; second is building capacity within the organisation and amongst partners to take an iterative approach to innovation, by prototyping solutions, testing them, and redesigning as appropriate before fully rolling them out.

One way our research on key topics is organised is through our Learning Expeditions, where we link our thematic and field expertise, bring in academic partners, and develop targeted research activities that are anchored in project and programme realities.

## INNOVATION

### South-South entrepreneurship



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The Helvetas Ethiopia team knew of many places in Ethiopia with limited road and market access due to poor rural infrastructure and often dangerous river crossings. They invited Nepali colleagues with decades long experience in trail bridge construction to come and share their experiences with project and government staff. From this, a pilot project started with Nepal playing a central capacity development support role. Soon a vibrant bridge building programme was enthusiastically undertaken in collaboration with the Ethiopian Roads Authority.

## INNOVATION

### A Learning Expedition



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Along with recognition that water quality projects were not achieving desired levels of impact, the Helvetas Water and Infrastructure team realised that broader behaviour change around hygiene was required for success. Helvetas decided to embark on a Behaviour Change Learning Expedition including the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology, staff in several affected projects, and partners. Although it took some time to get off the ground, in the end the organisation was ahead of the curve in finding effective ways to grapple with the challenges of water quality in its affected programmes.

## CONTINUOUSLY ADAPTING

We recognize that more and more the effectiveness of our projects and programmes does not depend on talented individuals. It is due to the degree to which we are all able to work collaboratively, to pull in others with specific skills, expertise or contextual knowledge, in order to achieve truly appropriate and sustainable impact.

We do this by encouraging all of our staff to engage with formal and informal networks, both inside and outside the organisation, as well as to work transparently, providing others with insight into how we work, not just what we are working on. In this way, we cultivate transformational change in our organizational culture.



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## CONTINUOUSLY ADAPTING

### An organisational-wide strategic dialogue



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The current K&L Strategy was itself elaborated in a networked way. First, staff from around the world were invited to share their thoughts and experiences on knowledge, learning and innovation, and to comment on the resulting first draft of the strategy. A further draft was taken into the formal process of an interdepartmental Programme Commission, resulting in its final form. In this way, perspectives from various locations, disciplines and positions in the organisation were integrated by weaving formal and informal processes together.

## WHERE WILL THE K&L STRATEGY LEAD?

Due to both the complex nature of the contexts in which we work and the fact that successful results of our K&L Strategy depend to a certain extent on the independent actions of a wide variety of individuals within and outside the organisation, we cannot fully predict all of the results.

However, we are convinced that creating more opportunities for development actors to understand their challenges, and to co-develop and collaboratively implement solutions, is a powerful way to realise appropriate and sustainable development, with those who are most deeply affected playing a pivotal role.

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