Collaboration between academics and activists is essential to the promotion of pluralism in practice.

Discussions on religion in the Dutch context center around individual freedom, which we consider to be the result of liberation from religious pressures. Liberal policies on abortion, euthanasia, same-sex marriage and soft drugs have given the Dutch the feeling that they live in the most progressive country in the world whose example will, sooner or later, be followed by others. Even though the political parties that initiated most liberal policies – forming the ‘Purple’ cabinet [3] from 1994 to 2002 - currently do not represent the majority of the population, ‘freedom’ is still seen as a cornerstone of Dutch society. Religion, or more specifically a significant role of religion in politics, is looked at by many with discomfort. Humanist values, such as individual self-determination and an aversion to dogma, shape many people’s perception of religion and its negative impact on women and sexual minorities.

Hivos [4] and Kosmopolis [5], initiators of the Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme [6], both have their roots in Humanist traditions [7]. We understand these traditions in different ways. Within Hivos I would argue that it is primarily the Dutch context that frames our view of the struggles about values that are going on in many countries in which we support human rights movements. And quite often, we see religious dogma as the key source of problems. We see Islamic conservatives having a considerable impact on Indonesian politics [8]. We see Ugandan Pentecostals stirring up homophobia [9]. Or Hindu fundamentalists acting as moral police [10] for young women behaving in an ‘un-Indian’ way. Perhaps the most discouraging realization is that a large percentage of the population does not seem to care.

In discussing these developments with human rights defenders in these countries one comment seemed to sum up the situation: “We human rights activists need to run as fast as we can to stay at the point we are now”. How is it possible that not only governments, but public opinion, too, seems to take recourse to conservative religious and cultural values – dismissing human rights as a Western agenda? Human rights activists working in the women’s movement and the LGBT-community, together with artists and media activists feel an increasing sense of urgency that fresh ideas are necessary about how to reclaim the public space.

There is no lack of academic research on religious fundamentalism. The concept was analyzed in depth by Martin Marty and Scott Appleby of the Chicago Fundamentalism Project [11] which produced 5 volumes in the 1990s. Karen Armstrong is known for her comparative studies of religions, including fundamentalisms in her book The Battle for God [12]. Driven by 9/11, there is a whole range of books trying to explain the root causes of fundamentalism including Malise Ruthven’s Fundamentalism. The Search for Meaning [13], and Peter Herriot's Religious Fundamentalism and Social Identity [14]. However, these kind of reflections did not shed much light on why women or sexual minorities face such difficulties in mobilizing support for their plea for the equality of all human beings in for example India or Uganda. More policy-related knowledge is needed, but we also need to reflect on how we can look beyond the immediate boundaries of secular social action.

This led Hivos to believe that it can help generate that specific policy-related knowledge by bringing together social scientists and practitioners in a joint project to formulate ‘Alternatives to Fundamentalisms’. In a series of workshops in 2007 we tried to identify which question could
reasonably be raised by this unusual mix of ‘campaign-oriented’ human rights activists and deliberating academics. While from an ‘action’ point of view the questions are ‘why’ and ‘what to do about it’, good academic research locates itself at a reflexive distance to the analyzed object.

The workshops produced different responses - some of which were rather critical; the choice of ‘fundamentalism’ as an entry point was seen as particularly problematic. Partners in Indonesia, for instance, agreed that their country’s unity was challenged by Islamic ‘fundamentalists’ but did not want to take part in a project that had this loaded term in its title. The institution felt that it would have to chose its language carefully in order to be able to enter into a dialogue with the more radical Islamic organizations. As a result of these discussions the title of the programme was changed to the ‘Promoting Pluralism Knowledge Programme’ - which we are now running as an experiment. The programme consists of mixed teams of researchers and practitioners in India, Indonesia and Uganda who jointly determine the local research agenda, carry out the research and translate it into policy recommendations. This structure locates the responsibility for content and methodology - and basically the rhythm of working - in the location in which the problem is diagnosed. The Kosmopolis Institute and Hivos stimulate the exchange between the regional teams, their concepts and experiences.

We feel this approach may work. It provides practitioners with a space in terms of location, time and money where difficult matters can be thought through. At the same time, academic research is being drawn closer to practical societal dilemmas. Yet bridging the two worlds does not happen automatically by setting up a joint programme. We are in continuous negotiation about what constitutes relevant knowledge, who the author of the knowledge agenda is, and who the audience is.

In terms of the relevance of the knowledge generated, Hivos and Kosmopolis agreed that the purpose of the programme is much more than contributing ideas to the understanding of a social phenomenon. The programme is expected to develop recommendations on how to promote pluralism in practice – a goal that is itself highly normative and therefore easily dismissed as un-academic. Furthermore, for knowledge to be relevant in practice it needs to be shared widely and at an early stage. Yet academic research has a different modus operandi. It is often an activity of relative seclusion - work in progress is hardly visible to the outsider. Experimenting with different approaches requires the involved academics to become lobbyists within their academic homes for rethinking their criteria of what counts as ‘real’ research.

The question of who owns the knowledge agenda is as much a debate between academics and practitioners, as it is between the local teams in the three countries and the organisations initiating the programme. The original focus on ‘Alternatives to Fundamentalism’ as a title, as well as the choice of countries (selected from the places where Hivos works), stemmed from the deliberations of Hivos and Kosmopolis, both external actors to the social settings in India, Indonesia and Uganda. With the best of intentions this departure point puts a donor on the defense: Who are you to come and ask us to do research on pluralism? What is your hidden agenda? Why don’t you invest that same energy in addressing intolerance in the Netherlands? It also raises another set of dilemmas. As an organization with a back donor itself (Hivos is largely funded by the Dutch government), we are also part of the ‘account-for-your-money’ chain. Formulating the core of the programme was necessary at the outset to acquire funding. Now the funds are provided, showing results at regular intervals is a requirement of the project cycle. This not only entails reports but also a judgment about the extent to which the initiative has achieved the envisaged outcomes. It produces the much criticized donor mentality of wanting to frame, steer and if necessary, interfere. It is also a role that is at loggerheads with the knowledge programme idea of ‘equal partnership’.

The decision about who the audience is that we are trying to reach is also contentious. The programme’s goal is to help develop new strategies for civil society organisations in the respective countries. Some of them perceive a big gap between their work and the academic world. Style and terminology are an issue. Is it secularism we are concerned about? Is it sexual rights? How much simplification is allowed in order to communicate the findings of the research to a wider audience?

Perhaps one of the core achievements of the programme in the future will be to have found adequate terminologies that are understood and easily used in the local context. A phrasing that
provides room for local interpretations rather than prescribing a uniform meaning from a liberal - and thereby largely western - perspective. A phrasing which, at the same time, can be ‘translated back’ into the Dutch public debate. The debate on religious fundamentalism in India or Indonesia is no longer a national debate, but linked to political events in the Western world. The in-between knowledge gained from academic-practitioner collaboration can feed into a re-think of Hivos' role as a civic actor with its own ‘local challenges’.

The polarization of societies, often with a religious component, and the struggles over values which often place women at the centre of the debate, seems to be spreading. At the same time, the Freedom House Index indicates that human rights and liberal values are loosing ground globally. If we are to understand what is happening it is vital that we pursue collaboration between academics and practitioners to increase our knowledge base.

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