

BACKGROUND NOTE

Knowledge for Development in Africa: Challenges and Opportunities¹

1. Introduction

In the current age of improved information and communication technologies, organisations are increasingly inundated with information and knowledge which, in some instances, threatens to overwhelm them. Yet, such information and knowledge can play a vital role in improving the efficiency, effectiveness, competitiveness and impact of such organisations. The question then is: *how can such organizations manage information and knowledge, particularly the latter, to best achieve their development objectives?* Furthermore, managing knowledge is set to assume increasing and vital importance as developing countries are exhorted to adopt “knowledge economies” that are based on their intellectual and human resources as opposed to development pathways that are based solely on the exploitation of natural resources.

2. What is knowledge?

There are as many definitions of knowledge as there are enthusiasts and practitioners in the field. The definition of knowledge as “*justified, true belief*” is usually attributed to Plato and the major branch of philosophy dealing with the nature and scope of knowledge – epistemology – continues to be a fertile one. While most of the debates in epistemology are of little interest to knowledge management specialists, philosophers commonly make a useful distinction between three categories of knowledge. Firstly, “know-how”, the ability to do something; secondly, knowledge by first person acquaintance (including ideas, experiences, insights and awareness); and thirdly knowledge of objectively verifiable facts.

It is however generally agreed that an understanding of knowledge requires some grasp of its relationship to information. In everyday language, it has long been the practice to distinguish between information (data arranged on meaningful patterns) and knowledge which has historically been regarded as something that is believed, that is true (for pragmatic knowledge that works) and that is reliable. It includes information, ideas, experience, insights and awareness, and is a synthesis of information or what we know or the state of knowing in-depth.

According to the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) knowledge is defined as “(i) expertise, and skills acquired by a person through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject, (ii) what is known in a particular field or in total; facts and information or (iii) awareness or familiarity gained by experience of a fact or situation.”

Other definitions in the knowledge management literature are generally variants of the above formulations. Davenport and Prusak (2000) provide a more comprehensive definition of knowledge as:

“a fluid mix of framed experiences, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organisations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents and repositories, but also as organizational routines, processes, practices and norms.”

¹ Sections 1-3 draw heavily on the CTA Discussion Paper prepared by J. Woodend and K. Painting, 2009

In knowledge management terminology, knowledge can be either **tacit** (in people's heads) or **explicit** (codified and expressed as information in databases, documents, etc.). An effective knowledge management strategy should of course address the management of both tacit and explicit knowledge so that it can draw on the vast "knowledge assets" available in the organisation. The capture, codification and use of tacit knowledge represents perhaps the greatest challenge to any knowledge management system and remains the subject of much discussion.

In a nutshell, both tacit and explicit knowledge constitute the very essence and being of an organisation, and, if properly and systematically exploited, can confer upon it numerous and varied advantages that are particularly relevant in the current environment in which information and knowledge are pervasive. Small wonder then that the 16th century world-renowned philosopher Sir Francis Bacon proclaimed: *Scientia potentia est* (paraphrased 'knowledge is power').

3. What is knowledge management?

Knowledge management (KM) is a rather protean concept and as such touches on virtually all activities within an organisation. Not surprisingly, and as in the case of knowledge, there are many definitions of KM. However, at its heart, knowledge management is concerned with building mutually supporting and sustaining communities of expertise in pursuit of a common good, and using shared knowledge and learning to deliver results. While such communities inevitably vary in their technical composition according to the subject area, there are a number of general principles in knowledge management which enable communities and organisations to become better equipped and agile to respond to an ever changing environment.

According to Wikipedia, KM comprises "a range of [practices](#) used in an organisation to identify, create, represent, distribute and enable adoption of [insights](#) and [experiences](#). Such insights and experiences comprise [knowledge](#), either embodied in individuals or embedded in organisational [processes](#) or practice.. This is more or less the standard definition of KM.

Collison and Parcell (2004) describe the atmosphere of knowledge management thus:

'Knowledge management is about capturing, creating, distilling, sharing and using know-how. That know-how includes explicit and tacit knowledge and embraces know-how, know-what, know-who, know-why and know-when ... It is not about books of wisdom and best practices, it's more about the communities that keep know-how of a topic alive by sharing what they know, building on it and adapting it to their own use ... Call it 'performance through learning', 'shared knowledge' or simply 'working smarter'.

Their definition shifts the emphasis from the creation of vast knowledge repositories, and places the higher value on the knowledge in people's heads and finding ways to increase its mobility. An important insight from both Wilson (2002) and Collison and Parcell (2004) is that one cannot strictly speak about managing knowledge *sensu stricto*; all that one can do is strive to manage the environment in which knowledge can be created, discovered, captured, shared, distilled, validated, transferred, adopted, adapted and applied. Creating the right environment means creating the right conditions, right means, right actions and right leadership. This requires careful consideration in the development of any knowledge strategy.

Knowledge management is not a passing fad as some have argued (Wilson, 2002): it is assuming increasing importance in organisations, particularly large corporations, as they struggle to maintain a competitive edge and make the best use of their human resources and social capital. It was essentially born out of the need to achieve better productivity and effectiveness from the intangible assets or "intellectual capital" of the organisations.

From the 1990s onwards, KM has increasingly been introduced in the development sector where it has caught the attention of agencies such as the [World Bank](#), [USAID](#), [ODI](#), [CGIAR](#), a notable recent example being [IFAD](#) (IFAD, 2007). Based on analysis of existing approaches undertaken in 2008, knowledge management for development has been defined as:

'knowledge management should be considered as relating primarily to the social processes and practices of knowledge creation, acquisition, capture, sharing and use of knowledge, skills and expertise, and not to the technological component of this which needs to support the social process and practices. Based on this generic definition of knowledge management, knowledge management for development thus involves processes and practices concerned with the use of knowledge, skills and expertise within the development field. (Ferguson, Mchombu and Cummings, 2008)

Knowledge management has genuine claims to form a distinct field of knowledge and expertise and, as with any other field, there are competing views on how best it can be understood or applied. It is not a recipe which has to be applied blindly to achieve culinary success. Instead, people employing knowledge management approaches need to apply them to their own local challenges, focusing on their own specific *development* objectives and context. Thus, knowledge management should be employed to support organisations and communities in achieving their wider goals. In the context of this workshop the purpose of 'managing knowledges' is to better manage development itself.

4. Emerging KM issues in developing countries

In developing countries, KM initiatives remain widely unseen and fragmented, and the potential benefits largely unrecognised. To add to this, Northern development agencies often ignore the knowledge and realities of their Southern partners serving to undermine the results of development interventions. Picture, for example, locally produced research responding to local priorities which are not seen and therefore not used or incorporated into programmes supported by development organisations in the North. Common challenges which therefore need to be addressed include:

- Lack of awareness of the importance of knowledge management for development, and what it entails
- Lack of awareness of developments within the field in the region (and further afield)
- KM being poorly developed within institutions
- Fragmentation of regional approaches to KM

It is against this backdrop that the Working Group 3 of IKM Emergent, the University of Namibia and CTA will be collaborating to host a workshop on Knowledge Management in southern and east Africa in Namibia, during November 9-13, 2009. IKM Emergent believes that historically the development sector has adopted a too linear and simplistic approach to understanding how development takes place and therefore of how it needs to act to try to make change happen. The University of Namibia has also been proactive in promoting KM within southern Africa. CTA, on the other hand, is concerned with knowledge sharing and building capacities of ACP organisations to produce, acquire, exchange and utilise information for agriculture and rural development with a view to improving interventions at the community level.

In particular this workshop will focus on multiple knowledges within development. This means not only appreciating the importance of scientific or technical knowledge to development initiatives but also recognising the importance of many other sorts of knowledge, including, for example, indigenous, local and spatial knowledges.

References

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The Knowledge Management Co-seminar

The co-seminar will take place alongside two CTA workshops, one on ICM policy and the other on the Smart toolkit training workshop. It is envisaged that the 3 workshops will run parallel to each other with a common opening session, and under the general theme Information and Knowledge for Development (InK4Dev).

The main purpose of the co-seminar will be to bring national, regional and key experts in the field of KM together to raise the profile of KM and provide a platform for presenting ongoing research, approaches and outputs with the view to learning more about methodologies for KM within the region and farther afield and their applicability.

Objectives

The specific objectives of the seminar are to:

- Sensitise key stakeholders on the importance of knowledge management for development and what it entails
- Sensitise agricultural and rural development organisations in Southern and Eastern Africa as to the relevance and importance of KM in improving the efficiency, effectiveness and impact of their organisations and institutions
- Raise awareness on key developments in the field of KM in the region and beyond
- Increase the level of collaboration and networking within the field, with a view to building a coherent approach
- Develop essential elements or outline strategies to improve and strengthen KM in the region

Collaborators

The main organisations collaborating in this initiative include CTA, IKM Emergent, the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI), University of Namibia, the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry and partners from the region.

Workshop activities will focus on:

- Presentation and discussion of papers on the state-of-the art in Knowledge Management (KM)
- Presentation and discussion of papers on national and regional initiatives in KM
- Discussion – in panel format - of key issues relevant to the topic
- Discussion (moderated) on key topics
- Development of elements of strategies to initiate, improve and strengthen KM in the region
- Formulation of mechanisms for networking amongst institutions in the region
- Identification of key areas for future research in KM
- Preparation of Participant Action Plans by participants

Participants will consist of:

- Researchers/practitioners in the field of knowledge management
- Heads of knowledge management/information in key development organisations in southern and eastern Africa
- Key Ministry officials in Namibia

Approximately forty (40) participants will be drawn primarily from Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, other African countries, Europe and North America

Workshop dates

The workshop will be held during 9-13 November 2009.

Location

Hotel Safari, Windhoek, Namibia

Contact persons

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