

Editorial

On knowledge divides and joined up thinking – anybody interested?

Many development actors, comprising individuals, organizations and networks, are concerned with the knowledge gaps or divides within development. These divides exist between North and South, illustrated by the digital divide, but there are many more. These include the gaps in understanding of development and the perception of the reality between researchers in their ‘ivory towers’, practitioners working on the ground, and the policymakers in large organizations or in government. But there are also knowledge divides between researchers, extension workers and the farmers themselves, as demonstrated by a number of papers in this issue, and between indigenous communities at a local level and national and international organizations and bureaucracies.

Why should these divides be addressed? These divides result in lack of coherence and in - what the Brits so quaintly and aptly call - ‘joined up thinking’ all-round. But perhaps more importantly, people need access to knowledge to make decisions pertaining to their rights, their opportunities and their futures – and for millions of people the world over, all kinds of barriers prevent them from being able to do so. Poverty is not just a lack of economic independence; it is a lack of knowledge. Without access to knowledge, we remain at the mercy of others to tell us about our rights, opportunities, and ways of alleviating suffering. And as such, millions of marginalized people feel the effects of ‘knowledge divides’ every day of their life.

By addressing knowledge divides, we fight these inequalities. These are big problems, bigger than individuals or organizations can tackle by themselves; therefore it makes sense to join forces in partnership, addressing the challenges in a systematic manner, rather than leaving people to fight for access to knowledge as an individual pursuit. And as such, knowledge management for development tools and approaches can play an important part in bridging these divides, as the contributions in this issue demonstrate..

In a discussion on the KM4Dev discussion list which took place from December 2006, the concerns of knowledge management practitioners and researchers on this subject were again demonstrated. Indeed, the initial mail to the discussion list, entitled ‘Linking research and development communities to academia: Anybody interested?’ from Huyen Tran, a consultant for the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome, sparked a lively debate, demonstrating the many people think that this is an important issue.

This December issue of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* addresses the partnerships and other cross-cutting initiatives which are attempting to bridge or better understand knowledge divides. The emphasis is on the lessons from both successful and less successful experiences. It includes papers from practitioners, researchers and policymakers who have been involved with ‘out of the box’ thinking with partnerships and initiatives which have aimed to cross one or more knowledge divides.

Why knowledge divides?

Over the past decade, many international development agencies have broadened their activity

portfolios beyond financial support of development projects or programmes, focusing increasingly on capacity development and knowledge sharing. This trend is a response to the need for enhancing development understanding, expressed both within these agencies as well as amongst their constituents and partners. Reflecting a complementary development, academic institutes are responding to this need by expanding their scope beyond the research community, and are progressively including stakeholders such as policymakers and practitioners in the process of knowledge generation.

Despite this convergence of focus between development policy, research and practice, a wide gap still exists: knowledge transfer between the three is limited, collaboration is restricted, and there is still a dearth of relevant knowledge reaching Southern stakeholders. Many efforts to bridge this gap have been initiated; almost as many have failed. The main factors standing in the way of effective partnership between policy, research and practice might be roughly categorised as *institutional*, *communicative* and *philosophical* differences.

The challenge of bringing together research and practice towards the achievement of mutual development objectives is fascinating. It is a field much explored, but an adequate response is rare. Initially motivated by diminishing public extension services available to counterparts in the South, especially in the field of agriculture and health, and augmented by the ongoing demands of the ‘Information Society’ in which access to information has become an increasingly important condition for personal development, the logical step forward would be for the development of knowledge partnerships between practitioners, researchers and policymakers. The elaboration of such partnerships is not yet common practice. There is a lack of literature exploring why this is. What are the challenges? What are the opportunities? What can be learnt from past efforts, successes or failures? Is it worth pursuing such partnerships? Or are the differences simply too overwhelming to be overcome?

The current issue

This issue of the journal contains 9 papers, 3 case studies, one story and one community notes. When we issued the ‘Call for papers’ on this topic in September, we received an unprecedented level of submissions, leading to a rejection rate of some 75%. The contributions that are included address the conception of knowledge divides from a variety of different perspectives.

Papers

The first paper by Caroline Wiedenhof and Henk Molenaar of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS) considers ‘Research policy and knowledge management in Dutch development cooperation.’ The paper describes how knowledge management and research policy are becoming intertwined within DGIS. It analyses this process and the logic behind it, and describes some initiatives designed to bridge the divide between researchers and policy makers. We are particularly pleased to be able to include this paper in the journal as it one of the first which presents this perspective on DGIS to an international audience.

William Boateng of the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, and the University of Cape Coast, Ghana, addresses ‘Knowledge management working tool for agricultural extension practice: the case of Ghana.’ In this thorough research paper, based on a study of 160 farmers in Ghana, Boateng adopts the knowledge conversion model of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), and the codification-personalization knowledge management strategies of Hansen et al.

(1999) as the benchmark for proposing a circular knowledge management model for agricultural extension practice. Through this model, he introduces an interesting approach to bridging knowledge divides between researchers and the farming community in Ghana.

Afio Zannou, Paul Richards and Paul Struik of Wageningen University, The Netherlands, examine ‘Knowledge on yam variety development: insights from farmers’ and researchers’ practice’, highlighting the divides between three different types of actors involved in improving yam varieties in Benin: farmers, researchers at national level and researchers at international level. One of the diverse objectives of this journal is to bridge the gap between the agricultural knowledge information systems (AKIS) perspective in the tradition of Niels Röling, Paul Engel and others, and the more mainstream knowledge management with its origin in the business sector. In their paper, Zannou and colleagues refer to both of these intellectual traditions, concluding that communities of practice might be a way of bridging knowledge divides between these groups of stakeholders.

The next paper is ‘Online knowledge sharing tools: any use in Africa?’ by Margreet van Doodeward, a development practitioner working at Hivos in the Netherlands. Van Doodeward argues that even though the Internet holds significant promise as a knowledge sharing tool, it is not always the most appropriate tool for civil society organizations in Africa. Local solutions, including ‘*Africanization*’ of the Internet, need to be encouraged.

The paper by Cheryl Brown, Louise Daniel and Catherine Fisher, ‘From knowledge transfer to a learning-based approach: perspectives from IDS’ information services’, provides a review of the Information Department of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, over the past 10 years. The information services include ELDIS, the development information gateway; id21, the development research reporting service; BRIDGE, the gender briefing service; and the British Library for Development Studies (BLDS). It describes not what these services do but how they have evolved and the developing thinking that drives them.

In ‘Multi-stakeholder deliberation on dialectical divides: an operational principle of the systems of innovation’, Laxmi Prasad Pant and Helen Hambly Odame of the University of Guelph, Canada, investigate three types of public-private partnerships (PPP) from the perspective of Systems of Innovation. They argue that multi-stakeholder deliberation on ‘dialectical divides’ such as flexible and rigid working styles, institutional and competitive funding, corporate interest and social responsibility, and public and private good nature of knowledge contribute towards a smoother maintenance and, if necessary, natural dissolution of relationships in agricultural research and development.

Next, ‘Access to scholarly literature via a free knowledge management enabler: an opportunity for scientists in developing countries’ by Enrique Canessa, Carlo Fonda, Marco Zennaro and Katepalli R. Sreenivasan provides an overview of the goals and achievements of the electronic Journals Delivery Service (eJDS), provided freely to scientists in developing countries by the Abdus Salam International Centre for Theoretical Physics (ICTP), Italy.

Case studies

The first case study is by Julius Court, Enrique Mendizabal, David Osborne, John Young and Harry Jones of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), UK, in ‘Civil society, research-based knowledge, and policy’, focus on the role of evidence-based knowledge in improving

civil society engagement in international development policy processes. They argue that better use of evidence by civil society organizations would increase their policy influence and pro-poor impact.

Next, Anindita Bhattacharyya of the Centre for Environment Education, Kolkata, on the subject of ‘Using participatory GIS to bridge knowledge divides among the Onge of Little Andaman Island, India.’ This case study demonstrates how GIS techniques can contribute to empirical understanding of indigenous knowledge systems in natural resources management processes and techniques. Furthermore, GIS techniques also illustrate the apparent knowledge divide and anomalies between indigenous and scientific knowledge systems and the Onge community.

In ‘Managing local and external knowledge in a development research project in Uzbekistan’, Caleb Wall draws on field research conducted in rural areas, under the aegis of a natural science project. He reflects on the meaning of ‘development research’ and makes a case for combining external scientific research with practical development interventions as a means of bridging the global knowledge divide.

In the final case study, Nicoline de Haan, Dannie Romney, Peter Bezkorowajnyj and Olusoji Olufajo of the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) examine ‘Feeding livestock through partnerships’, based on research in Nigeria. They argue that better understanding of the role of partnerships and bridging divides through capacity building will address fodder scarcity more successfully than simple technical solutions.

Story

The story in this issue is ‘Rolling back malaria through the Malaria Competence Network’ by Ibrahim Kamara of Plan International and Komlan Toulassi Blaise Sedoh of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), Togo. It charts the path of a facilitation team known as the Mombasa Group which was formed in the summer of 2005. Its goal was to develop malaria-competent societies where vulnerable people stop seeing malaria as a fact of life, and take the lead in fighting the disease.

Community notes

In ‘Leadership and knowledge into the hands of those who care’, Lou Compennolle of the World Health Organization (WHO) reviews the experience of the Global Alliance for Nursing and Midwifery Communities of Practice (GANM), a collaborative partnership which aims to raise the bar for nurses and midwives globally, give them a voice, and enhance their access to resources and people.

We are pleased to introduce to you this diverse issue, filled with many inspiring examples of initiatives designed to bridge knowledge divides of all kinds. We hope these contributions will fuel the debate and inspire readers to continue fighting poverty and inequality by making knowledge more accessible.

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with co-Chief Editors, Julie Ferguson and Sarah Cummings
Guest Editors, Bridging knowledge divides: the role of partnerships and cross-cutting initiatives