

Knowledge sharing for good in a Europe-Latin American perspective: the VIT@LIS experience

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Since the very concept of development appeared in the late 1950s, the paradigm underneath international development cooperation (IDC) policies and programmes has been continuously changing, adapting to the new societal visions and aiming to learn from mistakes. The main trend has been from a macroeconomic and infrastructure-oriented model (in the 1960s) to a more human-centric model (in the 1970s), moving back again to a macroeconomic model based on state aid in the last 20 years (Black, 2002).

An interesting (and often disregarded) perspective is to look at what role ‘knowledge’ – considered as a valuable good central to international development cooperation – is playing in the sector, and at how this role has been changing. When cooperation concentrated primarily on infrastructure and economic restructuring, the role of knowledge was mostly ancillary and mainly linked to training interventions that were conducted to improve the skills of aid beneficiaries. With the rise of the ‘human development’ concept, issues like education or health became cornerstones of any development process, bringing knowledge and knowledge sharing at the centre of the process. The impact that ICT and the Internet have had on the importance of knowledge in international development cooperation is paramount. Many observers agree that ICT has the potential to uncap the potential of knowledge for development, by making it storable, replicable, easily sharable: it is often claimed that ICT can offer the developing world the opportunity to ‘leapfrog’ several stages of development by use of frontier technologies that are more practical, environmentally sound and less expensive than undergoing the traditional stages and cycles of progress to the Information Society (Panos Institute 1995, 1998; Heeks 1999, 2005; Roman-Colle 2001; Prada 2005).

To summarize, one could say that knowledge sharing is getting a more and more central role in international development cooperation policies and programmes, thanks to a new approach to networking, a more participatory and multi-stakeholder vision of international cooperation, and the introduction of ICT.

But is this really the case or is reality somehow different? Has this rise of the importance of knowledge contributed to solving well-known problems of international development cooperation or has it only presented the possibility of making old mistakes in a new way? The urgency of giving an answer to these questions relates to the fact that this is not merely an academic discussion, but rather a way to improve aid to developing countries, thereby improving the quality of life of people in need.

The above question can be explored along a number of dimensions, each relating to particular, well-known problems of international development cooperation:

- Sustainability: exploring how better policy in terms of sharing existing knowledge can contribute to sustainability of international development cooperation projects. This also involves ensuring that successful programmes and results are brought to the attention of potential supporters and funding agencies, and that programme knowledge is shared within the development community.
- Atomisation: identifying how effective knowledge sharing can help to move beyond the classical project-based logic, towards a logic made of integrated programmes and umbrella actions. This contributes to overcoming the well-known syndrome of “reinventing the wheel” among so many international development cooperation projects.
- Overlapping: enabling a real dialogue, through a distributed and shared knowledge-base, on existing priorities, actions and results produced by different agencies and stakeholders. This helps avoid the classic problem of having two or more actors working on the same problem in very similar contexts, and sometime competing for funds.
- ‘Transculturality’: supporting the creation of real transcultural environments through knowledge sharing, where projects can be implemented, but also frankly discussed and evaluated, and where the ownership of project results can be smoothly transferred to end users.

These dimensions form the background to the following case study.

Knowledge sharing at work in IDC: the @LIS experience

A clear example of how knowledge sharing can increase the impact of international development cooperation actions is the European Commission’s @LIS Programme. @LIS stands for Alliance in the Information Society between Europe and Latin America, and was conceived as a multilateral cooperation Programme. It aims at promoting economic and social development of Latin America and the participation of the region in the global Information Society. With a total budget of 77.5 million Euro, @LIS wanted to extend the benefits of the information society to all citizens in Latin-America and to reduce the digital divide by supporting dialogue and cooperation amongst the two regions. The @LIS Programme was articulated into networks, dialogues and demonstration projects, supporting such themes as local e-governance, e-education and cultural diversity, e-public health and e-inclusion, comprising 19 projects and involving more than 220 actors from the two regions. Further, five horizontal networks cover a Policy and Regulatory Dialogue, a Dialogue on Open and Global standards, an Exchange and Support Platform for Latin-American Regulators, an Infrastructure Network reinforcing the interconnection between research centres across Europe and Latin-America, and an International Stakeholders Network (ISN). These are all aimed at stimulating dialogue and knowledge sharing amongst policy makers, civil society and research communities.

Many innovative aspects can be observed in the way the Programme has been constructed. First, in comparison with other cooperation programmes, @LIS presented a sector-based approach to development cooperation, therewith addressing the development of the Information Society as a whole. Second, @LIS is a regional

programme, rather than a bilateral one, as it covers both the European Union and Latin America Regions. Third, the programme gives great importance to the three main aspects of Information Society: transfer and sharing of knowledge among practitioners and users; political and regulatory dialogue; and increased connectivity between the two continents. These considerations make @LIS an innovative cooperation programme and reflect the manner in which the programme was conceived and the many ambitious levels at which it is deploying its objectives.

Considering the cooperation approach adopted, @LIS addresses in an integrated way the diverse contexts in Latin America and the use of standard models and theories to interpret these situations. In this sense, the @LIS model is different from that of, for example, the World Bank or other international financial institutions which prioritise or advocate a case-by-case and country-focused approach. The @LIS approach is more in-line with those conceptual frameworks that accommodate widely diverse situations, while helping to identify common features and allowing learning both from mistakes and successes. The diversity and richness of the different actions and projects within @LIS also seem to fit into Dahrendorf's (1988) concept of 'vital opportunities' and Sen's (1999) criticisms of utility theory, which led him to introduce the concepts of 'functionings', 'capabilities', and 'entitlements'. Furthermore, the many actions and projects articulated by the @LIS Programme and the very nature of their breadth and depth were able to give and guarantee adequate importance to the equilibrium of institutional factors, such as formal rules and regulations, organisations, knowledge sharing and social relations; which lately, with growing recognition of validity, are being acknowledged as being amongst the most important factors for successful development cooperation.

However, the most important consideration in terms of policy innovation has to do with the knowledge sharing component of @LIS. Differently from many European Commission Programmes, where specific knowledge sharing actions are either completely absent, or present only in a limited way (for instance in the form of stand-alone 'support actions'), @LIS decided to devote a relevant part of its budget to a specific multi-stakeholder knowledge sharing network, the @LIS International Stakeholders Network (ISN), which represents one of the most crucial components of the whole operation. @LIS ISN supports the @LIS programme development in terms of its sustainability, dissemination strategy, coherence, results exchange and validation, and at the same time aims to become the public entrance to the @LIS programme for all interested actors in Europe and in Latin America, enlarging the @LIS community to include diverse stakeholders, whether directly linked with the Programme or not. In other words, the @LIS International Stakeholders Network constitutes the core of the 'knowledge connecting web' that the @LIS Programme aimed to establish between the organisations directly participating in the @LIS projects, and the group of external actors that by definition have a stake in the project activities: from the policy maker wanting to adopt @LIS project outcomes to the community of users that intending to take advantage of a specific result.

The network has faced three key challenges: the first relates to the collaboration between all stakeholders; the second, to the motivation of all @LIS actors to both transform @LIS from a monolithic cooperation Programme, starting with some funding and ending up with some results, into a community of stakeholders from EU and Latin America, which is, moreover, able to survive beyond the end of the

Programme. Third, ensuring the validation, usage, exchange and improvement of programme results, ultimately leading to increased community membership, has proven challenging.

To realize these ambitious goals, knowledge-oriented activities have been given a prominent place: fostering knowledge sharing and networking, increasing information sharing, supporting collaborative work and transfer of know-how, and especially establishing networks of stakeholders between the two continents around the @LIS Programme and projects. Concretely, this has involved intensive usage of the tools and approaches core to the Information Society.

Overall, knowledge sharing has been an essential component of the @LIS ISN work in three ways. First, @LIS ISN has worked towards *distributing the right knowledge to the right stakeholder*. An example for this is the mapping effort, coordinated by the @LIS ISN, of all the many @LIS results – from a telemedicine software prototype, to a network of schools, to an on-line training course for farmers. This enabled the visualization and comparison of existing results for policymakers interested in specific thematic innovations. Although this work encountered some resistance, it proved extremely useful to both facilitate a reflexion of the @LIS actors on what the community had produced beyond single projects, and to enable a learning process on how to improve outcomes in a collaborative manner.

Second, ISN has worked towards *articulating knowledge communities*. This followed a number of reflections and attempts to start on-line collaboration activities, based on the concept that a virtual community can only exist when some individuals/organisations decide to work together on a specific set of problems. The ISN consortium reached the conclusion that building a single and broad community across the two continents and on the four @LIS sectors – eLearning, eInclusion, eHealth, eGovernment – was not feasible, and moreover would have been redundant with many existing initiatives. The more than 3000 actors registered on the ISN site all belonged to different sectors and to different society groups (policy makers, research, civil society, industry, etc.), therefore collaboration in a single network was unrealistic. Instead, ISN built a meta-community, composed of both the people directly involved in the @LIS Programme and the people participating in other communities on the @LIS subjects in Europe and Latin America. The strength of this gathering was the joint presence of civil society, research and policy actors from different sectors, and the fact that it was not based on building a new community, but rather on the articulation of existing and working communities.

Third, knowledge sharing and open collaboration have represented the key concept on which the future development of the @LIS community has been built: the development of *social and relational capital*, in terms of expertise, networks, and contacts. Responding to a clear mandate of the community, this resulted in a stable international association called VIT@LIS.

The VIT@LIS network: managing and articulating knowledge

VIT@LIS is an association of European and Latin American and Caribbean institutions and individuals active in subjects related to the Information Society (e-

learning, e-health, e-government, e-inclusion, etc.), committed to sharing information and results and to collaborating towards the creation of a more inclusive and open Information Society for all. In its first ten months of activity, VIT@LIS has been generating much interest and has been constantly growing: at the moment of writing it comprises almost 300 members (both institutions and individuals), including key actors from research, policy, and practice¹.

Due to its nature as ‘network of networks’, VIT@LIS intends to facilitate processes of cooperation and exploitation of existing results without overlapping with its members’ objectives. It focuses on knowledge sharing and articulation and on adding value to existing information through cooperation. VIT@LIS can be regarded as a knowledge network, understood as “a group of experts and institutions working together on a common concern, to strengthen each other’s research and communications capacity, to share knowledge bases and develop solutions that meet the needs of target decision-makers at the national and international level” (Creech and Willard (2001: 19). Accordingly, it aims not to produce new information or to aggregate knowledge, but rather to facilitate, articulate and add dynamism to knowledge fluxes, and, following the @LIS ISN successful experience, to distribute the right knowledge to the right stakeholder while articulating knowledge communities.

Vast and complex issues related to knowledge management have to be taken into account in such an operation, in terms of the different stakeholders, sectors and geographical regions:

- Managing different expectations, visions, priorities, and working styles of the network members; for instance, a small NGO has a very different set of values than a Ministry, as well as a very different logic in deciding what knowledge is most relevant to its work. Nonetheless, mutuality in working styles, administrative approaches, conceptual constructs and technologies are pertinent to any knowledge-related activities aimed at regional cooperation for development.
- Overcoming barriers to effective cooperation. This has to do with the resistance that often emerges where innovative knowledge-based e-practices are introduced, especially in consolidated collaboration schemes. E-collaboration and knowledge sharing, as proposed by VIT@LIS, calls for a change of mind-set.
- Acknowledging local-global dynamics. Each knowledge flux that VIT@LIS supports has the double nature of being at the same time global and local: what shows to be useful at a specific local level can be transferred in a global perspective and into other contexts only by ‘standardizing’ certain parts of the knowledge creation and documentation process; however, only by localizing global knowledge practices we can be sure that the local needs are respected and taken into account.
- Balancing the tension between excellence and inclusion. One of the main challenges of VIT@LIS is to expose excellence, while at the same time improving institutions and practices, and encouraging learning. As such, different values co-

¹ Including RedCLARA (the Latin-American group of advanced research and education national networks), Regulatel (the forum of Latin-American telecom regulators), the National Office for Information Technology of Argentina, the City of Sao Paulo, the National Programme e-Mexico, many prestigious universities such as the Universidad Autonoma Metropolitana from Mexico, the Pontificia Universidad Católica from Peru, the Universidades Politécnicas of Madrid and of Catalunya, as well as many important NGOs such as RITS from Brazil and the Association for Progressive Communication.

exist, and it takes careful balancing and nurturing for these to add value to each other.

To adequately tackle these issues, VIT@LIS has been provided with a very flat and non-hierarchical structure: all members of the association can (either directly or through the mediation of a thematic or geographic pole) share knowledge through the system, and/or respond to any proposal coming from the network or from one of its members. To make this process possible within such a broad association, a number of transversal issues are continuously taken into account: multi-culturalism and multi-linguism, intellectual property rights, reciprocity, relation among policy, practice and research, multi-disciplinarity and problem-based logic.

What value for knowledge sharing?

A common criticism of @LIS ISN and VIT@LIS has to do with the intangible nature of the activity of knowledge sharing and community articulation: many stakeholders of international development cooperation consider this type of activities as legitimate only as long as they are ancillary to a classic development project; as a result, a certain resistance is encountered when these activities represent the core of a development project.

Therefore, a key issue for the very existence and sustainability of VIT@LIS is the possibility to measure the added value provided by the network to its members in terms of knowledge sharing and articulation. This is done by following five principal areas for network assessments (Creech 2004), adapted to cover the *whole of the activities* of knowledge sharing and articulation (KSA) of the network. As a result, we obtain the following set of questions and analyses:

1. Effectiveness of KSA

Is the network strategy of knowledge sharing clear in terms of objectives and expected results? Is the network fully realizing the advantages of sharing knowledge and articulating communities? Is the knowledge being produced relevant to the needs of decision-makers and to the other network stakeholders?

Experience shows that the strategy of knowledge sharing changes along with the network life and has to be continuously fine-tuned to the changing needs of the network. In terms of tools, for example, in the first years of its life the @LIS community relied on mailing lists and on small seminars, while recently – in order to properly involve policy actors – it has had to organise high level policy events to enable discussion and knowledge sharing.

2. Structure and governance of KSA

How is the network knowledge sharing organized? How is the network taking decisions on its knowledge related processes? Are structural and governance issues impeding its effectiveness?

Experience and research shows that only decentralised networks can support genuine knowledge sharing in the long run. In terms of structure and governance of KSA, a clear decentralisation process could be observed: initially, most network inputs came

from the central secretariat, but already in early stages some peripheral nodes started to produce knowledge and to input it into the system. This is a significant process which has to do with the decision-making process of the network and its knowledge related processes.

3. *Efficiency of KSA*

Are the transactional costs of knowledge sharing a significant barrier to success? Is capacity being built across the network to strengthen members' ability to collaborate on knowledge articulation issues?

4. *Resources and sustainability of KSA*

Does the network have the required resources to guarantee continuous knowledge sharing among its members?

In terms of efficiency, use of resources and sustainability, the @LIS experience shows that in a development context like Latin America, the most significant barrier to success is not so much the transactional cost of knowledge sharing (in this specific case resources were available for this), but rather the need to strengthen the network members' ability to collaborate on knowledge articulation issues. This in turn affects the life-cycle of the network.

5. *Life-cycle of KSA*

How is the network performing in comparison to other networks at similar stages in development? What is the continuum of growth of the network in terms of knowledge sharing and articulation?

Continuous motivation and capacity building work is needed in order to keep the energy of the knowledge sharing process high and stable: in the case of @LIS this was achieved through training sessions, brokering events managed by the members of the network themselves, and on-line collaborative work.

Looking at these five dimensions overall and taking into account the continuous changes in the knowledge base of the network, we can monitor whether the network is achieving one of the core intended advantages of collaborative work, namely joint value creation:

Knowledge networks create new knowledge and insights for use beyond the immediate membership, but knowledge can be created without working in a network. The network advantage is the collaboration of members on work, and the value gained from peer review and debate. Joint value creation is the creation of new insights and knowledge through the collaboration of members on research, on field projects and other activities (Creech 2004: 4).

The issue remains on how to measure the value created by the process of knowledge sharing and articulation among the network members; two main approaches can be adopted in this direction. The first involves looking at the *process* of KSA, and deals with both quantitative indicators (number of email exchanges, existence of joint working groups and effective participation, etc.) and qualitative indicators (number of projects collaboratively created by the network that are actually funded, joint papers published, etc.). The second approach looks at the *results* of the KSA process, and

deals mainly with output indicators such as number of results that have been transferred to different contexts, policy adoption of projects and methods developed by the network, etc. A balanced assessment should take these two approaches into account, aiming in particular to link the processes with the results.

By combining this twofold assessment with the five areas adapted from Creech (2004) can provide a comprehensive vision of the joint value produced by the activities of knowledge management, articulation and knowledge sharing within the network; repeating this exercise at different moments can provide a diachronic vision of the network dynamics.

Conclusions: which desirable future(s)?

The experiences of @LIS and of VIT@LIS show that knowledge can generate a real value in the context of international development cooperation. At the same time they illustrate that working on knowledge sharing and articulation, especially within the framework of large and multi-stakeholder networks, cannot be regarded as an ancillary activity but should rather be considered a central pillar of successful development cooperation programmes.

First, supporting knowledge sharing takes time and energy, which calls for careful accountability. Second, the role of community facilitator should be included in any knowledge intensive cooperation programme. Finally, during the whole process attention should be paid to the complexity of knowledge sharing and articulation activities: many of the most important if sometimes intangible results of international cooperation –such as social change, mind-set adaptation, governance of the dynamic between funding and motivation, and between excellence and inclusion – are based on knowledge sharing, articulation and documentation processes.

Knowledge sharing and articulation, if properly funded and supported, can build bridges (Heeks 2005): between on the one hand the ‘classic’ approach to international development cooperation, characterised by un-articulated projects, occasional conferences and publications, by the prevalence of donor interests donors and by a conflictual attitude between NGOs and government agencies; and on the other hand international development cooperation characterised by articulated actions, based on existing and evolving knowledge bases, and intense dialogue between donors, private sector and civil society.

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Abstract

This paper presents and reflects upon the importance of knowledge sharing and articulation in the frame of the @LIS Programme and of the resulting VIT@LIS network, focusing on knowledge-based networking across Europe and Latin America. VIT@LIS is an association of European and Latin American and Caribbean institutions and individuals active on subjects related to the Information Society (e-learning, e-health, e-government, e-inclusion, etc.), committed to sharing information and results and to collaborate towards the creation of a more inclusive and open Information Society for all.

Born out of the European Commission @LIS Programme, VIT@LIS was launched in September 2006, and counts today more than 300 active members from Europe and Latin America, including all the categories of stakeholders of the Information Society: universities, civil society actors, governments, development agencies, international networks, local companies and authorities. The paper presents the experiences of @LIS and VIT@LIS in the context of international development cooperation and analyses the relation between information sharing, collaborative knowledge building and networking, with specific attention on the process of joint value building through knowledge sharing and on the impact of knowledge articulation activities on international networks.

About the author



Fabio Nascimbeni has a Degree in Economics, with an international business management specialization, and is finalizing a PhD on ICT for Development in the Knowledge Society. In his current position of Research and Development Manager in the MENON Network [www.menon.org], he is in charge of research coordination, business development, coordination of international working groups, policy advisory and strategic consultancy. In the last nine years, he conducted research, management and coordination activities in the frame of a number of trans-national projects in the field of e-learning and lifelong learning. He has actively participated in

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