"KM4dev: a community of development practitioners sharing experiences on Knowledge Management approaches"

Interview with Lucie Lamoureux

For the first issue of KM4D Journal, whom better to interview than Lucie Lamoureux, the moderator of the journal's home base *Knowledge Management for Development community* (KM4Dev)?
KM4Dev – think you know the community? Test your knowledge as Lucie unveils the background and development of KM4Dev, and reveals what we can expect from it in the next few months.

How would you describe the focus of the KM4dev-community?
Members seek to exchange thoughts and experiences on issues they face in their work related to knowledge management (KM) and knowledge sharing (KS); they ask each other for advice and obtain quick responses from their peers: development practitioners dealing with similar challenges.

It originated at a time when there was no other forum like it, so it was easy to carve out its own niche.

> *"Just letting me keep track of some of the current thinking and keeping me alert to the fact that others are working (and struggling) with similar issues"*
> Catherine Kenyatta, International Centre for Research in Agroforestry, Kenya

So how did it come about?
The community came about quite organically, following the first two KM workshops that Bellanet co-organized back in 2000, at the demand of the participants who wanted to keep on discussing and sharing experiences around these issues. The KM4dev community continues to grow through word of mouth, face-to-face workshops, even Internet searches. It still amazes me that people find out about us and join every week. There are currently about 3 new members per week.

> *"Being a member of the community has helped me gain a greater understanding of knowledge management in the context of a development-oriented organization such as ours, and has offered me some insight into tools and techniques to promote knowledge management and sharing"*
> Paul Neate, International Plant Genetic Resources Institute, Italy

Can you describe what kind of members the community comprises? How many members are there?
When it first started out, the members were the participants from the first workshops, mainly from Northern-based, large bilateral and multi-lateral agencies or big non-governmental organizations. They were also primarily people who had the responsibility for KM or KS in their institution. The trend over the last couple of years has been to see new members coming from programme sections of different organisations, so less 'process' people and more 'content' people, making it even more interesting because there is less 'preaching to the converted'.

Nowadays KM4dev members are also more geographically dispersed (about 65% Northern versus 35% Southern–based) and range from large UN agencies to small NGOs, although there is still a predominance of larger organizations. The member profiles have also diversified: nowadays the community includes academics, development consultants, students, and even KM specialists from outside international development, who have a personal interest in the field. There are currently approximately 300 members on the mailing list and 500 users registered on the **www.km4dev.org** website.

> *"I have learnt a lot about KM which I had no idea of before, also become friends with colleagues working in KM through attending the KM workshop in Nepal last year and through the listserv. It is very helpful for me in my work and increases my knowledge"*
> Tanya Huq Shahriar, Marie Stopes Clinic Society, Bangladesh

So those are KM4dev's main communication tools?
Yes, the KM4dev mailing list is the ongoing discussion forum. The KM4dev.org website is a repository of documents, links, news, as well as member profiles, all of which the community can post themselves. You can also find all the outputs and photos from prior face-to-face workshops. The annual face-to-face workshop is – of course – an important communication tool as well! Those meetings are really important for developing relationships between members of the community and build trust.

> *"Through this community, I have discovered some of the most compelling and meaningful KM discussions, examples, and stories that exist in the whole world. I have been involved in the planning stages of a couple of local U.S. projects devoted to infrastructure needs in development, and many members of this list have been generous advisors and contributors to my knowledge base and capabilities"*
> Barbara Weaver Smith. Smith Weaver Smith Inc.. USA

What do you think are the benefits of being part of this community?
I think that KM4dev members really value learning from their peers and are eager to ask for assistance in solving problems. This is especially true in face-to-face workshops but also occurs a lot online. The trust level is actually quite high online, which I find amazing as many people have never met face-to-face. I think that there is a general consensus that dealing with knowledge management/knowledge sharing in international development is rather complex, so belonging to such a community can be quite useful in making your way around the challenges.

> *"It makes my life easier by giving a lot of legitimacy to things I'm doing. Time and again, I get the benediction from Helvetas thanks to the fact that I have an inestimable community of professionals backing me, whose expertise and opinion I can refer to"*
> Marc Steinlin, Helvetas, Switzerland

What have been the main challenges for the community, and what (creative) solutions have been found to deal with these?
Until May 2004, I was the sole facilitator of KM4dev and found it quite a challenge as I am basically doing it on a (very) part-time basis. I asked for volunteers who wanted to become actively involved and 7-8 people came forward. We set up a core group and those interested have come up with what they want to do to support KM4dev, including helping

facilitate, writing case studies, do interviews with well-known KM people, etc. Their input has been wonderful for the growth of the community.

Also, a big challenge is to engage members who can only participate online, who have not been to any workshops and won't be able to, for example due to financial restrictions. We have tried to get members to provide input into the development of workshop agendas online, as well as sending draft notes at the end of each day during the events so everyone can feel at least a bit more a part of them.

> *"There's a pretty big gap between those members of the group who have met face-to-face and communicate through the list as a means to continue such face-to-face communications and those, including myself, who are interested in the issues but not directly involved in KM programs/initiatives, acting more like lurkers than engaged members of a community of practice"* - Barbara Filip, Knowledge for Development, LLC, USA

We've also tried having online events such as electronic Peer Assists but it is difficult to avoid that two-tiered feeling between those who know each other in person and those who don't. The face-to-face events do have higher "bandwidth", so to speak.

Lucie, if you were to choose a title for the community now, would it still be KM4dev?
That's a good question, and it tends to come up regularly! Back in 2000, KM was the term that was used to refer to the type of approaches, methods and tools that we are (still) talking about. Of course, KM is both very much associated with the business world *and* is somewhat of a misnomer, as it is questionable as to whether knowledge *can* be managed!

If we had to choose today, I think I would suggest using KS4dev instead, as much of our focus is on knowledge sharing processes and approaches. But we are in a sense stuck with the name, as it has become a 'brand' in a way.

What have recently been the most active discussion topics in the community?
It's funny - there seem to be two strands of questions: those that are more theoretical and/or philosophical, and those that are very practical and concrete. We've seen very lively discussions within both. For the former, an example is a discussion around KS culture within organizations, which has come up a couple of times; or, recently, a fascinating one on *know*ledge or *know*-how, versus 'making things happen' – dubbed '*do*ledge' by the community. As for the latter, more concrete type of discussions, there just was a very interesting and active thread on where to best locate KM responsibility within an organization. Any topic around KM/KS strategy is usually often quite popular.

What's coming up for KM4dev?
Well, this Journal is very exciting for the future of KM4dev, as I think it will allow us to deepen our collective knowledge. There is also a project to revisit the FAQ by mining the mailing list archives, which will broaden the community's knowledge base. I'm also looking forward to the next face-to-face workshop, taking place in Geneva in June. One idea that was raised was to use the self-assessment methodology to measure strengths and

weaknesses in key KM competencies, offering the community a concrete way of helping each other based on these strengths and weaknesses. I think that has the potential to be a really useful tool for KM4dev.

Do you have any anecdotes to share?
I find it amusing that certain topics almost systematically bring out some community members! For example, some people are really into the technology, while others very much on the KS culture side, and – after a few years of doing this – I can now anticipate who will participate in each of these specific discussion threads! Of course, it sounds like I'm stereotyping but it's great that people are passionate about certain issues. I'm also often surprised at who is subscribed to KM4Dev… I see a contribution go by and say, "wow, this person is on the list!", or "cool, (name of organization) is now actively interested in KS approaches". That really makes my day!

To join the KM4Dev mailing list, send a blank message to:
subscribe-km4dev-l@lyris.bellanet.org

Visit the website: **http://www.km4dev.org**

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