

A joint donor training approach to knowledge sharing

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Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, knowledge sharing and knowledge management have been part of the development agenda, especially in the World Bank. Donor agencies have embarked on becoming knowledge centres instead of merely funding agencies – an organisational development similar to that of some private companies and based on the recognition that knowledge is a valuable asset. In the same period, many donor agencies have undergone organisational changes and moved towards a more decentralised arrangement, under which decisions are taken at the country level, often in collaboration with other donors and in alignment with national partner frameworks. This trend has been stressed in the joint donor declarations: the Rome Declaration on Harmonisation 2003, the Joint Marrakech Memorandum in 2004 (OECD 2004) and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness in 2005.

In a parallel development, satellite telecommunication technology has helped improve access to vast amounts of information available globally through intranets and the Internet to the extent of risking information overload of staff. The need to compare notes on how donor agencies are facing the knowledge sharing challenge, on procedures as well as on tools, is becoming evident as donor agencies proceed further down this path.

The Joint Donors Competence Development Network, known as the Train4dev forum, is a loosely defined donor collaboration established in Glasgow in 2003 to support donor harmonisation. It now consists of more than 17 donor agencies meeting once a year. Activities are organised in sub-groups and include development of joint training events, staff exchanges and e-learning. The work presented here has been developed in the Train4dev sub-group on Technology-Based Learning¹. For more information see www.train4dev.net.

In recent years, there has been a convergence of knowledge management and training in donor organisations. The aim of this joint donor approach for improved knowledge sharing is to explore how the Train4dev network can create synergies between knowledge management, knowledge sharing and training. The intent is to present key knowledge sharing issues related to the core business of funding and implementation of development projects and programmes. The target group of this strategy is primarily donor agency staff working with the transfer of best practices or involved in training and competence development. Hopefully, it will also be inspiring for policy departments engaged in overall knowledge management at a corporate level.

It has not been possible for the agencies participating in Train4dev to make strategic commitments to the loosely defined collaborative initiative. Furthermore, each agency has its own organisational set-up, leading to multiple ways of dealing with knowledge sharing. Therefore, this document will attempt to take stock and outline trends and

ways forward, as discussed in the Train4dev sub-group on Technology-Based Learning (TBL Group).

Knowledge sharing challenges

From industry, and especially from large private corporations, we know that good knowledge management increases the speed of production cycles, enhances product quality and the application of results from innovation and testing and lowers costs by eliminating unnecessary processes. For the purposes of knowledge management in the context of donor agencies and development assistance, knowledge management and sharing can be defined as follows:

Knowledge management is the process of managing accrued experience in order to create value for the organisation and its partners. Knowledge sharing can be seen as the practical application of knowledge management.

This paper mainly deals with knowledge sharing and not so much with knowledge management in the development context, while acknowledging that they are part of the same process.

The shared vision among donor agencies is that knowledge sharing can help improve the effectiveness of development assistance. Our goal is to improve knowledge sharing between donor agencies and development partners to promote ownership, harmonisation, alignment, results and mutual accountability. From the extensive literature on knowledge sharing, it is clear that knowledge sharing is much more than the use of different media. However, the TBL Group decided to focus on knowledge sharing through closed intranets and the Internet, emphasising the latter in particular as it operates more openly and transparently, and involves more and more partners in development.

In light of recent developments in European donor agencies, the TBL Group identified the following important challenges:

- How to support and accelerate donor harmonisation and wider knowledge sharing between agencies and development partners?
- How to ensure common standards and high quality in decentralised development agencies?
- How to capture lessons learned rapidly from implementation of programmes in the field and to ensure that they are applied in new programmes and activities across organisations?
- How to facilitate professional dialogue between peers involved in testing different approaches (embassy or agency staff in a region, sector advisers, national counterparts)?
- How to avoid information overload and achieve easier, more systematic access?

The Group decided to concentrate its joint activities on approaches to knowledge sharing, using open Internet-based systems to support decentralisation and harmonisation priorities set by the Train4dev forum of donors.

Status and analysis of knowledge sharing practices in donor agencies

The status of knowledge sharing in 11 donor agencies² was assessed through a four-page survey. A rough picture emerged from the responses, although this methodology had its shortfalls and limitations.

Three quarters of the respondents stated that knowledge sharing is frequently used and that their organisations have knowledge-sharing policies. Knowledge sharing is considered to be a crosscutting method by all except one respondent. Reasons for engaging in knowledge sharing varied considerably, and a large number of justifications were presented:

- Knowledge sharing helps us learn from experience and do it better the next time.
- Improves the quality of the products and enhances performance.
- Access to knowledge of best practices improves impact.
- Enhances development effectiveness.
- Improves efficiency of workflow (reduces search costs and time; finds content, sources, information; finds persons with special knowledge and experience; creates networks)
- Helps achieve a more cost-efficient administration.
- Enables the organisation to stay competitive during rapid changes, e.g., modernisation processes related to product information and the development of new products.
- Prevents loss of critical knowledge due to high rotation of employees.
- Develops synergy and supports better networking.
- Brings greater coherence to policy formulation and enables a more evidence-based policy approach.
- Opens up new perspectives by looking wider than one's own technical topics.
- Enables a more holistic approach in government and harmonisation processes.
- Helps build a sense of team, increases confidence and contributes to a more attractive workplace.

Only one agency is engaged in training in knowledge sharing systems, although all are busy working out how to do this.

Responsibility for knowledge sharing is either anchored in various places in donor organisations – from personnel departments to training units – or completely mainstreamed into all departments. In several cases, the initiative comes from top management or the policy division.

It was difficult for respondents to explain how knowledge sharing leads to concrete recognition and rewards, but all considered it a big advantage.

The scope of knowledge sharing varies. Some people look only at their intranet, whereas others try to tap the advantages of working digitally in a number of ways. Obviously, the main focus is within the organisations, though in many cases knowledge sharing is carried out in collaboration with other technical organisations. Unfortunately, agencies have not yet reached the stage at which national authorities/partner organisations are regularly participating directly in web-based knowledge sharing.

According to survey results, the most important knowledge sharing relates to technical and operational experience, followed by regional and country-specific knowledge and development theories. General political knowledge and socio-cultural knowledge rank lowest.

The tools used for knowledge sharing vary according to the target group. For internal knowledge sharing, e-mails, web logging and intranet are commonly used. For external knowledge sharing, e-mail is still most popular, but other tools, such as communities of practise, are becoming more important. Traditional means of dissemination dominate in communication with users far from the donor organisation; i.e., reports and evaluations are more important than networks in the dialogue with national partners in developing countries.

Numerous concrete examples of successful knowledge sharing are cited in the survey results. But in most cases respondents did not specify the criteria of success (e.g., cutting costs, reducing preparation time or reducing errors in consultancy contracts). Here are three examples of successful knowledge sharing:

- Knowledge platforms designed for knowledge exchange in communities of practice. 120 platforms for our thematic products. All relevant in-house experts form communities of practice (product teams). One responsible product manager coordinates platform activities and product team.
- The peer review process has been highlighted as a successful tool for knowledge sharing in the agency. A review of the process has shown that it is a useful learning activity. It promotes transparent decision-making, greater corporate ownership of decisions and outcomes, and accountability for aid expenditures. In addition, peer reviews provide a more structured feedback loop between corporate lessons learned and new proposals coming through the pipelines. Peer reviews were designed in AusAID to extend and formalise existing good practice. They are successful because they have senior management support and build on a naturally occurring practice in the agency.
- The lessons learned workshop after the Renewable Conference 2004. When staff retires, a lot of knowledge and experience leave the organisation. Therefore, a 'knowledge bridge' was developed to retain knowledge.

Some of the main obstacles for good knowledge sharing were identified as:

- An ad-hoc approach to sharing knowledge;
- Knowledge sharing initiatives not directly related to existing workflows. Instead of reducing work, knowledge sharing often leads to work overload;
- Weak incentives to share, reliance on 'good will' and an awareness of who else may value particular knowledge;
- Internal marketing of a tangible picture of the benefits of knowledge sharing is needed to overcome low staff discipline and low commitment by management;
- IT solutions which were not user-orientated, and poorly integrated information management systems and processes; and
- No appraisal of knowledge sharing.

The survey results clearly demonstrate that many issues remain to be resolved before donor agencies can fully reap the benefits of knowledge sharing.

Knowledge sharing approaches and strategic options

This section of the paper looks at various elements of knowledge sharing approaches taken by donor organisations, and the strategic options that are available to them.

Institutional aspects, anchorage, ownership and resources

Under the new public management wave affecting most governmental institutions in the 21st century, the convergence of training and knowledge sharing is seen as important for achieving the goals of improved effectiveness and higher efficiency. Donor agencies are knowledge-based organisations. Many have been involved in organisational learning for several years, acknowledging that valuable knowledge is created everywhere in the organisation. Various learning activities and training events involving staff training each other take place on a regular basis within most agencies. In fact, training and knowledge sharing overlap in what some call ‘action learning techniques’, and both contribute to organisational learning, which is seen as a constructive way to achieve better performance.

Knowledge sharing depends on the mandate, mission and goal of the organisation. Engagement in knowledge sharing also depends on organisational values and ways of working. National and cultural contexts prevail in bilateral donor agencies. For instance, the culture of openness in the public administration and the recent political drives in Scandinavia towards a fully transparent digital public administration influence knowledge sharing. When a donor agency is part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this represents a particular challenge to knowledge sharing. In these circumstances there may be internal obstacles, especially if documents are classified.

The capacity of the organisation is also important. If the business is well documented, engaging in knowledge sharing will be much easier. In general, the organisation must be able to deal with rather complex issues before being able to handle knowledge as illustrated in the upper end of the decision making pyramid (see annex). If this is not the case from the outset, a learning experience with mutual knowledge build-up is probably most appropriate, with an emphasis on self-development rather than development created externally.

Knowledge sharing should be aligned and mainstreamed with the core business of the organisation. The participating entities should have a clear vision of how knowledge sharing relates to the goals of the organisation. Donor support for knowledge sharing and web-based networks involving local and international researchers engaged in creating knowledge for innovation in development assistance require significant follow-up to ensure that this knowledge influences actual practice.

Resources available for knowledge sharing should be stated and related to expected outcomes in terms of cost savings, reduced production time and improved quality.

What knowledge?

Content matters. In the definition mentioned earlier, knowledge is the accrued experience in each donor’s field of operation. The most interesting knowledge from this point of view is that which leads to more effective and efficient delivery of aid and positive impacts to the benefit of poor people in the partner country. Knowing what works and what doesn’t is important for partners in development, both from a local and a global point of view. A key prerequisite for knowledge sharing is a

comprehensive needs analysis. Mapping out where in the organisation to find the desired knowledge is useful for the process.

Knowledge sharing should be focused on core donor business goals and functional objectives (funding and implementation of development projects and programmes to alleviate poverty). The primary objective of managing knowledge in donor organisations is to enhance the impact of development activities. There may be other secondary objectives linked to improved quality, improved productivity, information flow, etc. Different entities and individuals participating in knowledge sharing may do so for different reasons.

Which processes?

The model generally accepted is that knowledge comes from analysis of information being derived from processing data. Wisdom builds on knowledge and represents the highest level of a decision-making pyramid. Knowledge is much more valuable than information. Data are almost without value if not processed.

Above all, knowledge management has been described as the process of capturing, distilling, validating, storing, applying and recycling knowledge. In daily work, knowledge management is about how to obtain, use and learn from knowledge and to make people contribute further to the generation of knowledge. In the longer term, it will be necessary to assess which knowledge is necessary for the organisation to meet future challenges, to sustain the sources of knowledge, to develop new knowledge and to get rid of knowledge not important for the future.

Which actors?

The knowledge of good development assistance is often spread among a number of stakeholders, such as the technical advisory unit of a donor agency, the country representation, consultants and international advisers from the private sector, staff from local and international NGOs, and officials from the partner government in the South. Knowledge management often begins in the organisation as a consequence of a quest for improved performance and work processes. The general trend, as seen, for instance, in the World Bank, is to start with introverted knowledge sharing, which is task and budget oriented, and after some years, to open up to more extroverted knowledge sharing with a much wider group of collaborators, both goal and network oriented.

People are often regarded as the most important asset in any organisation. Knowledge sharing should be incorporated into the human resource practices of the organisation. If maintenance of systems is embedded in core staff responsibilities, sustainability will be high. Management will be committed, because the exercise is related to producing better results, but individual staff member motivation for knowledge sharing should also be considered.

Internal marketing of the benefits may facilitate acceptance of new ways of working. The fact that sharing will translate into receiving is simply not enough. Recognition by peers and by the organisation is important, as well as rewards for outstanding achievements in knowledge sharing. Staff competencies and learning opportunities must accompany the process. Knowledge sharing should be part of the agenda in staff appraisals, personal development plans and learning plans. Also, knowledge sharing indicators should be developed for each individual.

Tools and approaches

Mainstreamed holistic and integrated systems for knowledge sharing are in demand in donor agencies. Organisations can form informal or formal teams, depending on the job at hand. Tools include communities of practice, Peer Assists, After Action Reviews, story telling and many more.

Communities of practice for transfer of best practices may be sector based, thematic based or regional/country based. Even though communities of practice can be vibrant in the beginning, they need events and continuous facilitation by somebody from the organisation if they are to survive. Mere document repositories, not embedded in day-to-day activities, will eventually become stagnant.

Peer Assists are meetings with peers to discuss an assignment and to draw on experience and knowledge. An After Action Review is a way of summarising lessons learned. Story telling is an ancient way of transferring knowledge; its experience translated into personal stories lived and told by people.

Another well-established option for personalised knowledge sharing is simply to connect people through an expert locator system, a competency catalogue or electronic yellow pages, which enhance knowledge sharing and networking. Again, without updates and inclusion in daily work, systems will fade out slowly.

Every approach in knowledge sharing will have to take into account the background of the participants. Are they international or are they local staff? Language is an issue of paramount importance.

Technology, open/closed systems for knowledge sharing

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are evolving at a high speed, and new technological services and products continue to become available for knowledge sharing. Therefore, organisations and their ICT departments should regularly check out possibilities for improved performance.

For computer-based sharing of information, a number of international standards apply, such as the International Development Mark-up Language (IDML). An International Network for Development Information Exchange (INDIX) is attempting to follow up on norms and standards with regard to database access and exchanges.

In practice, donor organisations have mainly worked on their own intranets and the Internet. Open knowledge networks or extranets are open-access Internet solutions to knowledge sharing, which are globally available. These have the advantage that they are accessible to all partners in development.

Other technology-based media are content management systems for large websites for multiple downloads; learning content management systems for e-learning; and other systems based on the international SCORM standard. Additional technology-based media for knowledge sharing includes simple HTML websites, e-mail, web-logging and Internet based video-conferencing. With more than 12 years in development, business e-mail is the oldest and still by far the most used media to share codified knowledge in the form of messages, documents and files.

A recent trend among donors is a move towards open-access extranets with full access to all partners. Another trend is towards more interactive interfaces. Nevertheless,

both hosts and participants have realised that more interactive interfaces require more hardware capacity, maintenance and supervision. Therefore, in the context of collaboration with developing countries, a more basic and gradual approach should be applied.

Measuring impacts of knowledge sharing

Successful knowledge sharing should be measured by criteria related to business objectives: cutting costs, reduced preparation time, and reduced numbers of errors in contracts. The focus should be on tangible gains from knowledge sharing from the very start. Different stakeholders may need different measures. Senior management is interested in outcomes, sponsors are interested in rate of participation, and the participants themselves are interested in measures that affect their ability to do the job.

Experience in some donor agencies shows that the commitment and perseverance of management is critical to success after the initial establishment of a knowledge sharing strategy and pilot implementation of various elements. Establishing knowledge sharing mechanisms directly or indirectly linked to the core business objectives and measuring progress using closely related indicators are also ways of securing interest from decision makers in the organisation. The interest of top management can ensure that the various departments involved in knowledge sharing will continue to work together, particularly training, IT and technical advisory staff.

Linking knowledge sharing to organisational learning processes

An interesting roadmap of the steps and stages of introducing knowledge management has been developed by American Productivity and Quality Centre (APQC 2000), as well as methods for benchmarking, which could also be inspiring for donor organisations. Over time and in a phased development, the roadmap demonstrates that the knowledge management process eventually will lead to mainstreaming knowledge sharing into all work processes of the organisation.

In a learning organisation, knowledge networks, lessons learned and dissemination of good practices should become integral parts of implementation. However, the importance of eliminating and replacing work procedures and routines remains. In many larger corporations, knowledge management/ knowledge sharing have merged with organisational learning processes, and most likely this will happen in donor organisations as well. This means an increased focus on training, on enabling communities of practice and on distance learning, involving the Human Resource Departments and Training Units deeply in the process. The main motivation for all this is the famous British Telecom slogan ‘Work smarter, not harder’.

Ways forward and action plans for future donor cooperation

Knowledge sharing is a mainstreamed activity closely linked to knowledge management, organisational learning and institutional capacities. Staff training units are mostly involved with capacity building, and the recommendations are a mixture of actions to improve systems and dissemination of lessons learned in a learning organisation. When the joint donor group was asked what it could do to improve knowledge sharing, several proposals were made for joint action:

- Promoting knowledge sharing widely amongst donors through joint initiatives, joint lessons learned, joint training courses, etc;
- Identifying champions, sharing examples and experience of knowledge sharing in the regions or donor embassies, for instance, through a more in-depth joint review of knowledge sharing practices;
- Helping to develop better protocols by sharing experience and tools and benchmarking knowledge management procedures, systems and policies amongst the donor organisations;
- Exchange of best practices: learning about practical instruments in use, improving direct knowledge exchange in the field, preparing good practise papers and documenting success stories;
- Improving access to information and knowledge that can be used by individual agencies, to improve the quality of their own aid activities and programme strategies, promote donor harmonisation of activities and provide the basis for a more considered response by both donors and recipients to emerging development issues; and
- Addressing information overload: how to prioritise and how to divest unnecessary knowledge.

These proposals were further discussed in June 2005 at the Train4dev meeting in Berlin, Germany, which was attended by representatives from 13 donor organisations. The workshop resulted in a number of additional proposals and comments:

- Use the Train4dev website for simple sharing of knowledge and tools, including a selection of best practise cases and stories;
- Stick to English as the only network language;
- Learn from large private companies like Accenture, Apple, Siemens, Nokia etc;
- Don't work on standards and protocols: they are already being dealt with in other fora;
- Don't work on general knowledge management training. Instead, be more specific and focussed;
- Link knowledge sharing tools with the products of the Train4dev collaboration, such as joint training on poverty reduction strategy papers and sector-wide approaches;
- Initiate dialogue fora on certain topics and invite knowledge management champions; and
- Establish links with the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) Community and the Global Development Learning Network (GDLN) for information exchange and knowledge sharing to the benefit of members.

In order to keep the focus, prioritise and keep up the momentum, it was decided to limit the number of tasks for the coming year to five. These will constitute the main elements of the work plan for the TBL Group:

1. Promote open-access networks;
2. Identify knowledge sharing champions and prepare success stories;
3. Apply knowledge sharing tools in joint training activities;
4. Publish useful knowledge sharing tools on the train4dev website; and
5. Liase with networks like KM4Dev and GDLN to extract relevant lessons learned.

Concluding remarks

Knowledge sharing does not stop at the boundaries of our organisations. Donors are involved in capacity building, and the benefits of knowledge sharing should accrue not only in the offices of our organisations but where development aid is being implemented. This means we will have to involve more and more partners in the South, and it means that we have to go beyond our own organisations to fully capitalise on better knowledge management and knowledge sharing through open networks and communities of practice.

References

APQC (2000) *Road map to knowledge management results* American Productivity and Quality Centre: Houston, USA

OECD (2004) *Second International Roundtable on 'Managing for development results', 4-5 February 2004, Marrakech, Morocco* Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development: Paris, 13pp.
<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/40/16/31526893.pdf>

Examples of open-access Internet links on knowledge sharing

Gateways and specific knowledge management/ knowledge sharing sites:

Development Gateway Foundation: <http://aida.developmentgateway.org>

American Productivity and Quality Centre: <http://www.apqc.org>

Bellanet: <http://www.bellanet.org>

Internationale Weiterbildung und Entwicklung: <http://www.it-inwent.net>

Knowledge Management for Development forum: <http://www.km4dev.org>

EU Information Society Technologies KM programme:

<http://www.knowledgeboard.com>

World Bank: <http://www.worldbank.org/ks>

Global Development Learning Network: <http://www.gdln.org>

Australian Development Gateway: <http://www.developmentgateway.com.au>

AKWa – AusAID Knowledge Warehouse: <http://aaaid-as01.ausaid.gov.au/akw.nsf>

Swiss Development Cooperation Knowledge sharing forum: www.daretoshare.ch

Train4dev: www.train4dev.net

Danida's professional networks: www.danida-networks.dk

SIDA's Partner Point: www.sida.se

General donor sites

AusAid internet site: <http://www.ausaid.gov.au>

DFID UK Department for International Development: www.dfid.gov.uk

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH:
www.gtz.de/en/

German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development:
<http://www.bmz.de/de/english.html>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Development Cooperation, Finland:
<http://global.finland.fi>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Netherlands: <http://www.minbuza.nl/>

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark: www.um.dk

Netherlands Development Organisation: www.snvworld.org

Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation: www.norad.no

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC): www.deza.ch

Swedish International Development Agency: www.sida.se

Abstract

Training and knowledge sharing and the concept of a learning organisation are key elements in donor agencies' endeavours to improve effectiveness and efficiency. In this context, the paper discusses the challenges ahead and briefly presents the status of knowledge sharing in 11 agencies, based on a survey carried out during February-March 2005. The paper discusses the foundations of knowledge sharing, as seen from a competence development point of view, and it examines how knowledge sharing is connected to the work processes and training efforts of our organisations. There is a general trend among donor agencies to move from restricted intranet solutions only towards Internet-based knowledge sharing, accessible to all development partners. Finally, the paper points to five priority areas for further work by donor agencies.

About the author



Andreas Jensen is Chief Consultant at Danida's Centre for Competence Development (DCCD). His main responsibilities are professional competence development and pre-departure training for Danida advisers and Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs staff. His specialisations include knowledge management, web-based professional networks, thematic courses in Danida aid management guidelines, public sector reforms, good governance, human rights, environment and sustainable development, monitoring systems and indicators. His employment history comprises: 2002-2004, Technical Adviser (environment and natural resources), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Copenhagen; 1999-2001, Danida Senior Adviser Malawi; 1995-1999, Director, Fjord & Bæltcentre Kerteminde, Denmark; 1993-1994, Associate Professional Officer, FAO, Madagascar; 1991-1993, Associate Professional Officer, FAO Zambia; 1990-1991, Research Associate, University of Copenhagen. In 1990 Andreas earned a M.Sc. in Biology from the University of Copenhagen.

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Endnotes

¹ The group members were Isobel Simonsen and Thore Hem (Norad), Maria Melbing (Sida), Renate Mengler (Inwent), Kirstine Schjermer (Danida) and Stephane Phong (Europe Aid), among others.

² AusAid, DFID, BMZ, GTZ, SDC, Sida, MFA Norway, NORAD, MFA Denmark (Danida), MFA Finland, MFA The Netherlands.

Annex

DECISION MAKING PYRAMID

