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Progress to date of the IKM Emergent Research Programme: synthesis, understandings and lessons learned

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IKM Emergent

This article reviews the progress to date of the Emergent Issues in Information and Knowledge Management and International Development as it approaches its last year in 2011. Programme activities in terms of articulating specific issues, constructing a narrative and engaging more widely with the development sector are reviewed. What we have learned from the programme's activities in terms of key signposts are described: multiple knowledges; knowledge landscapes and the bridges between them; the importance of local content; implications of non-linearity; critiques of research for development; and the need to handle multiple knowledges. In a number of text boxes, different groups of work are described in more detail.

Background

In April 2007, a 5-year research programme was approved for funding by the Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS), part of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The programme Emergent Issues in Information and Knowledge Management and International Development is known as IKM Emergent.[1] IKM Emergent is based on an international network of hybrid practitioners-cum-researchers, challenging current practice of information and knowledge management in the development sector through its focus on multiple knowledges. More explanation of our conception of 'multiple knowledges' will be provided below.

The programme was created under the auspices of the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI),[2] the professional, largely academic network for individuals and institutions involved in development studies and regional studies in Europe. EADI was the logical home for the programme given that IKM was developed with support of the EADI Information Management Working Group, unique in being a non-academic working group.

In this article, we reflect on what has been attempted in the programme to date and how that can shape the rest of the programme that runs until 2011. We try to identify emergent connections between the various programme activities and to consider how these might be presented as coherent and actionable messages to the development sector. We offer new thoughts on our understanding of what it is that the programme is trying to do.

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An introduction to IKM Emergent

The programme's initial analysis of current practice in the development sector contended that, rather than being a service industry in which the challenge is to deliver well-defined services in a predictable and cost-effective manner, the development sector is in fact a knowledge industry in which what is wanted and how it can be delivered constantly change over place and time (see Powell 2006, 2007 for more background). This analysis has gradually widened over the past 3 years to the point where we would argue that the knowledge foundations of current practice are fundamentally inconsistent with what is actually needed if development is to take place. Key elements of this analysis include the following:

(1) In our understanding, development represents transformative change: there is no template or master plan to follow. It may include areas of traditional service delivery – the construction of roads or clinics, for example – but always involves innovation and risk. Beyond the inevitable unpredictability of life, the process of change will invariably uncover new insights and possibilities within the human environment being changed. To plan on the basis of certainty, current practice in the development sector is wildly unrealistic. It is also profoundly pessimistic, wilfully ignoring emerging drivers of transformation on the grounds that they spoil the plan.

(2) Development always takes place in a context of time and place, which involves people, history, culture and politics. Power relationships, usually of a variety of forms and dynamics, are always present. For these reasons, no two development processes are ever identical. Any external intervention needs to be based on detailed knowledge of and continuous engagement with the environment that it is intended to influence, an engagement that needs to take place within the relevant language and culture. External prescriptions simply do not work in the long term. Indeed, respect for local knowledges and their capacity to adapt to and lead change is a key element in the sustainability of that change.

(3) Development is taking place in the context of many different types of knowledge and differing perceptions, depending on professional discipline, personal experience, culture and language or individual role. This diversity is what the programme calls multiple knowledges. The existence of multiple knowledges offers both conceptual and practical information-handling challenges to any type of cross-cutting, multi-sectoral, multidisciplinary endeavour. This is particularly crucial to the development sector, which needs to communicate and collaborate across boundaries of culture, gender, space and status, often in a context of highly unequal power relationships.

(4) Development discourse has many forms and takes place at many levels. Given its multiple locations, languages and disciplines, crossing bridges of understanding is far from easy. There is inadequate support for the role of intermediaries and for both conceptual and linguistic translation. Many of the artefacts used to support development discourse – information communication technology (ICT) systems, consultancy reports, journals, web 2 tools – have intrinsic characteristics that conflict with their developmental purpose.

Core purposes

The main purpose of IKM Emergent has been to explore the realities behind these arguments and to look at emerging new practices, both within and outside the programme,

which might be of value to work in the development sector. Its second main purpose is to promote improvements in the working practice of development organisations in line with the arguments of the programme and the new ideas that it describes. This takes the form of encouraging organisations to think about these issues themselves. The programme intends to support change processes in development organisations, not prescribe them. The programme itself is also part of the reality it seeks to change, consisting largely of people who work or have worked within development organisations and who also learn from them.

IKM Emergent could not hope to consider every theoretical and practical aspect of the 'understanding, exchange and use of relevant knowledges' in the development sector. Instead, it opted for a series of illustrative research activities aimed at showing the range of issues and exploring some of the detail of the strategic necessity of effective information and knowledge management within the development sector. Descriptions of different strands of work can be found in the text boxes throughout this article.

IKM's approach

Working arrangements

The programme is explicitly based on supporting people to do work they wanted to do themselves, rather than commissioning work on a purely commercial basis. The idea was that this would not only offer the likelihood of good motivation and quality but also bring into the programme resources and learning opportunities from other work with which programme members are associated. Thus, for example, by supporting one part of a programme, such as the visualisation of the Young Lives data, we are able to use for our purpose the research output of a programme that is massively larger. Our associations with EADI and with the Diplo Foundation create the possibility of interactive engagement with far bigger and more prestigious international events than we could possibly organise ourselves. Engaging with ourselves also involves the way the programme can create opportunities for learning and change for individuals and groups of members. Wangui wa Goro's work on traducture, Kingo Mchombo's new knowledge management programme at the University of Namibia and Michael David's work with digital storytelling and Telradio in Sri Lanka, all represent initiatives based on the pre-existing expertise of the individuals concerned. However, in some way IKM provided the stimulus or support (of a variety of kinds, not just financial) to enable these potentially very significant projects to happen.

The working structure of IKM evolved through a series of discussions with people who wanted to become involved to allow some distributed ownership and control of the programme and its development. There was no grand plan, and we do not suggest that anyone thinks the resultant structure is perfect. It is also clear that we are in a very privileged position with regard to how we are able to operate. In fact, there is hardly anything we are doing that does not relate to a purpose expressed in the original plan. However, we have made considerable use, both in rethinking how best to do things and in responding to new opportunities, of the unusual freedom we have to iterate. We would argue that this freedom, and the very flexible structure we have developed with which to deliver and develop our work, has been central to whatever success we may have achieved. The question thus arises as to what extent is the way we work one of the potential research outputs of the programme? Are there elements in how we work that could or should be of wider interest to a development sector that should itself be thinking of ways of reforming its working practice?

However, in focusing on the programme's achievements and also in beginning to consider our modus operandi as a possible model for one form of cross-organisational collaboration, we have no wish to hide the fact that not everything in IKM has worked.

A couple of significant pieces of work that featured in the original programme ran into difficulties. More unhappily, one of the working groups originally established is no longer able to work as a group due to a level of misunderstanding and mistrust between two of its members, which the programme management has failed to overcome. Regrettable as these failings are, their impact is limited by the flexibility of the programme's arrangements.

The inability to pursue some subject areas has created opportunities to direct more resources at new emerging issues or at topics around which the response and the potential has proved far greater than originally anticipated. The failure of some of the original working arrangements has led us to reorganise in ways that we believe will work and which take account of the current agendas within the programme. We are helped in this by the fact that the various elements of the programme are designed to be mutually supportive rather than mutually dependent. It also helps a lot that considerable flexibility of detail is, subject to internal management approval and feedback from regular if infrequent reporting, built into the arrangements made with our donor. This, in keeping with the conclusions of one of our major lines of work, allows us to concentrate on – and feel accountable for – progress towards our goals, rather than be held to details of plan and structure that made sense 4 years ago.

Activities

IKM carries out pieces of work to articulate specific issues related to information and knowledge management in the development sector, which it has identified. As a result, it produces either an object or a report in some form. To date, some 40 such pieces of work of varying size and complexity have been commissioned, of which 18 have been completed. These represent more traditional research practice within the programme. Although they are all designed with the overall narrative of the programme in mind, some of these pieces of work are significant and important in their own field in their own right. It is inevitable that, for part of our intended audience, IKM will always be represented by the particular piece of work that has attracted their interest rather than the bigger picture.

Although each piece of work has its own rationale and purpose, it should also make sense on the wider canvas of the overall programme. This wider picture needs to be clear at all times but it is also constantly changing – in relation to what is being learnt from activities within the programme and elsewhere, and in relation to the issues faced by our audiences in the development sector. The aim is for the narrative to be much clearer and richer at the end of the programme than it was at the beginning.

Links between practitioners and academic researchers

The programme's research has largely – but not always – been undertaken by practitioners rather than by researchers. This has two objectives: firstly, to try to make the research more relevant to development practice than usual 'for development' research but also that it could be more focused on practical implications of developing new understandings of the information and knowledge systems of development. IKM Emergent is not the only space where such research is being undertaken, indeed it is a feature of the work of a number of development research organisations based in the South, but such spaces are few and far between.

The programme also represents a space where practitioners interested in research and academics who are concerned with the relevance of their research to practice have been able to meet and negotiate meaning. At the same time, as the programme includes both

practitioners and academic researchers, it is also undertaking research on the links between practice, policy and research; so in this, as in many other ways, it is intertwined itself in the limitations that it is investigating (see Box 5: Bridging knowledge divides). Given the disconnection between policy and practice, this is, not surprisingly, not always an easy relationship because translation is needed between both domains. Seeing the differences between these two groups being lived out in the context of IKM Emergent has emphasised the reliance that the programme has on a small number of individuals who are able to speak both the language of the academic and that of the practitioners and who are able to translate between these two groups. This internal experience in turn reinforces the importance that our external enquiry accords the roles of translators and other intermediaries.

Role of communications

Communications have always had an important part in the development of the IKM programme. Similar to the research programme itself, the Communications Strategy (2008) is also designed to be experimental and iterative, responding to changes in the wider environment and also being amended as our understanding of the audiences, messages and related communications grows. From 2007 onwards, communication has taken place through a wide range of channels, online, face-to-face and in publications, including IKM's own series of working papers (see Box 6).

The programme has always aimed to interact with the rest of the sector and encourage innovation and change in IKM practice. One channel for this is the engagement of programme managers and members in development sector networks. At the moment, this is done on a fairly ad hoc basis, but those of us who live in a constantly connected environment do report occasional take up of IKM ideas and events on blogs and tweets. It is planned to put more deliberate effort into such work in future.

We also engage with development actors directly through jointly organised events and by involving them directly in programme research projects. Many international development organisations, governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that have taken part in IKM research, participated in our workshops or listened to the presentations that have been made at conferences. Generally, and especially where the involvement has involved real dialogue as happens more easily in small workshops, the feedback we have had from such engagement has been very positive. The challenge the programme still faces is to build on the enthusiasm of the individuals concerned or the organisational interest in the subject of the small project or meeting to achieve wider interest in the programme as a whole and the prospects for more fundamental change that it offers. This takes us beyond the still common, old-style default position of seeing development communication as dissemination, and demands far more thought as to what development communications mean for the programme as well as for development (see below).

The iterative nature of the communications strategy is that it has also been strongly influenced by research undertaken both inside and outside the programme. Research that has had a strong influence on the communications strategy is reviewed below under different headings:

(1) How to make friends and influence people

IKM's first Communication Strategy emphasised the importance of influencing different stakeholders in development. One of the icons at this time was the idea of meeting an important person in the lift and, in 60 seconds, being able to tell him/her what IKM

is about. This was the so-called elevator pitch that provided us with IKM with quite a challenge – what to say and how to influence people met by chance?

Research conducted by Harry Jones on the relationship between knowledge and policy, published as a joint IKM and Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Working Paper, has fundamentally changed our thinking about the elevator pitch and how to communicate IKM's key messages. In particular, his findings about the need for simple messages made us lose confidence in the value of the elevator pitch. For example:

> . . . emphasising simple messages and easily-actionable recommendations runs the risk of leading to policy being blind to the complexity of change in development, and mistakenly promoting 'blueprints' irrespective of local context. (Crewe and Young 2003 cited in Jones 2009, p. 25)

> . . . it is important to recognise the contextual nature of knowledge and the complexities of its 'use'. (Jones 2009, p. 25)

For understanding complex messages, we would argue that interaction and collaboration are necessary and that an elevator pitch is not appropriate.

(2) The role of learning networks in bridging development divides

The IKM Working Paper by Laxmi Pant of the University of Guelph, Canada, provides a wealth of interesting analysis that is of relevance to IKM's communication (2009). First, if one approaches the difference between IKM thinking and more traditional approaches to knowledge management as one sort of knowledge divide, this paper offers some insights on how it might be possible to bridge this divide. Second, Laxmi Pant argues that practitioners are more effective innovators than scientists for a number of reasons, vindicating IKM's emphasis on practitioners and practice:

> This leads to a proposition that practitioners are likely to be more effective innovators than paradigm-based scientists, though customarily unacknowledged, since their knowledge is mostly tacit, contextual, untold and acquired through situated learning, learning that happens in a context. (Lave and Wenger 1991) (2009, p. 11)

Third, if one sees that development of information and knowledge management as a form of innovation, innovation systems thinking proposed by Pant challenges linear approaches:

> All in all, the conceptual shift from linear thinking to systems thinking in knowledge and innovation management is considered to be an inherently social process where stakeholder groups learn and innovate through negotiation over actor structures, resources, processes and values (Engel 1997). (2009, p. 13)

Laxmi Pant also emphasises the importance of boundary work, namely boundary actors, boundary objects, boundary spanners (p. 28). Fourth, Laxmi Pant argues that the learning networks are at the centre of innovation and in convergence between different knowledges. He reaches the following conclusions about facilitating this process that provides important lessons for IKM, namely

- focusing on individual actors rather than their organisations,
- observing 'deviant' behaviour among the network members,
- fostering interaction outside the group of like-minded people,

- looking for individuals in academia and research organisations who are members (potential members) of learning networks,
- involving donors and elite groups with caution and
- engaging policymakers and government officers in learning networks.

(3) The promise of positive deviants

A 2009 paper 'The promise of positive deviants: bridging divides between scientific research and local practices in smallholder agriculture', again by Laxmi Pant but, this time, with Helen Odame, argues that knowledge is managed in highly contested environments where uncertainty characterises stakeholder interactions. One dimension of this disorder is so-called positive deviants who act against the structures and 'rules of the game' in knowledge creation, application and regeneration. Pant and Odame argue that these positive deviants help introduce new approaches to organisational structures and institutional set-ups, challenge the status quo and harness individual creativity and innovations in spite of constraining social structures and institutional set-ups (Amabile et al. 1996; Ekvall and Ryhammar 1999). Against this background, social structures impose constraints to individual agency or action so that structure and agency are a duality that cannot be conceived separately from one another (Giddens 1984). This resonates with IKM Emergent, which, on the one hand, is trying to bring about change within development but, at the same time, is part of the structure that it is trying to change.

We would argue that the members of IKM Emergent – and those interested in IKM Emergent – can largely be identified as positive deviants. This may be a hunch more than hard facts. But:

> Somewhere in your community or organisation, groups of people already doing things differently and better. To create lasting change, find these areas of positive deviants and fan their flames.

Thus working with positive deviants may be a more appropriate strategy than the more traditional idea of working with 'champions', developed in the previous version of the Communications Strategy. We would also argue that other groups of positive deviants might be IKM Emergent's natural allies.

(4) The new enlightenment: A potential objective for the KM4Dev community?

A paper by Sebastiao Mendonça Ferreira (2009) studies another development knowledge community, one with which both IKM as a programme and many of its members have been involved over the years. It argues that the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) community has, over the last 10 years, become a global network of development agents who share the idea that knowledge can contribute to the development of poor countries and groups in a disadvantaged situation. In this sense, KM4Dev is acting as a 'cognitive bridge' for development actors internationally in which methodologies and tools are shared with a high level of efficiency.

Sebastiao Ferreira argues that to become more effective, programmatic innovation, namely innovation in development programmes, requires what he calls 'technical' resources, such as methodologies, cognitive tools and software, but that it will also need to get access to all kind of experiences, reflections and conceptual approaches (propositional knowledge) that already exist and are being created to address the causes of poverty and

invent possible solutions. He argues that KM4Dev can become an engine of programmatic innovation by channelling reflections on programmatic approaches informed by thousands of experiences. By playing that role, it can contribute to change the process of design of development programms from the current predominantly top-down approaches, inside a small number of institutions, towards a phenomenon of collective innovation by a global network of practitioners, communities and scholars who are experimenting on the ground.

KM4Dev, he suggests, can be thought of as an initial expression of the new trends of development work in the twenty-first century, when programmatic innovation has migrated to the South, led by a new generation of institutions and development practitioners connected by the Internet. By supporting local spaces of innovation, by enabling knowledge access to innovative initiatives, by channelling knowledge sharing among innovative programmatic approaches and by reflecting on its own experience, KM4Dev can make a distinctive contribution to the creation of a new Enlightenment oriented to solving the complex problems of poverty and inequity and the impacts of climate change.

We would argue that in a context where decisions on the financial resources available for investment remain firmly rooted in the North and are subject to ever more bureaucratic systems of control, such a vision may appear utopian. What it illustrates, however, is that new patterns of communication and of generating and sharing knowledge do not belong in any 'knowledge management' silo but can contribute to re-engineering what we understand by development and how it is done. This does not, of course, excuse IKM from thinking how best to incorporate such thinking into the more mundane issues of the programme's own communications practice.

Evaluation

IKM Emergent has presented Chris Mowles of Red Kite Partners and the Complexity and Management Centre, University of Hertfordshire, UK, with the challenge of evaluating the programme. Chris Mowles was asked to develop an evaluation methodology appropriate for the iterative nature of the programme and its interest in emergent issues. The evaluation thus has the potential to contribute to the programme's exploration of new knowledge- and learning-related methodologies for the development sector as well as fulfil its internal function. The programme intends to make its evaluations public so the 'Interim evaluation' (Mowles 2009) was published on the IKM website in November 2009. The evaluation is being undertaken from the perspective of complexity and, given that the development field is grappling with the significance of complexity and emergence for evaluation, the approach being taken has implications for a new sort of evaluative practice. In fact, IKM's evaluation appears to be one of the few existing examples where complexity and emergence are at the centre of a long-term evaluation.

In a new departure, Anita Gurumurthy of IT for Change (IT4Change) has been invited to join the evaluation team. Anita's fresh pair of eyes, as well as the politically interpreted 'southern' perspective she brings, should make for a richer evaluation process.

Key signposts

What are we learning from the programme? Of course, there is much to be discovered in each of its component parts. However, if we think of what is most important to the arguments of the programme overall, there have been significant developments relating to

the following. These are thus IKM's key signposts, namely dynamic pointers in a particular direction, and not messages as such.

Multiple knowledges

Although always implicit, there has been considerable development in our understanding of the nature and importance of the concept of 'multiple knowledges' or 'epistemic diversity'. At one level, this is almost a common sense response to the daily negotiations across disciplines and ways of life that take place within the development sector. Valerie Brown (Brown 2008, 2010) has further helped our understanding of this with her demonstration of how types of knowledge are so often linked to roles. We perhaps have more to do to make our notions of other forms of intelligence – spatial, temporal, visual – equally explicit and recognised as other knowledges.

Although the concept of multiple knowledges flowed so naturally from daily experience in the sector, it is becoming increasingly clear that, as had been argued by some from the start, this involves confrontation with other conceptions of knowledge. Within the multiple knowledges domain, there is little need or indeed point in defining what is meant by knowledge as it is accepted that there can be more than one definition. Outside it, however, we encounter the vision of knowledge as fixed, unalterable and replicable truth, a vision that retains very powerful individual and institutional support, a vision that would deny the entire work and purpose of IKM. We therefore need to be clear in arguing the case for our approach, for what is our knowledge, if it is not theirs? A working definition, arrived at with help from our evaluator, would be of knowledge as 'shared meaning' which, one might argue, is as close to truth as we are ever likely to get working across multiple boundaries where development represents a series of interlinked 'wicked problems'.

We also need to further develop ideas as to how individuals and organisations can practically incorporate the concept of multiple knowledges into their daily work. What needs to be done differently? In promoting such new practice, we should not downplay the fact that multiple knowledges by no means come together calmly. Working in an environment of multiple knowledges implies the possibility of conflict, conflict that can perhaps be handled in a way that generates new understandings but which can also be entirely negative.

Knowledge landscapes and bridges between them

IKM Emergent has been working on the conception of multiple knowledges in the context of the disconnection between policy, practice and academic research in the development sector. One part of this has involved using the techniques of scientometrics to map this disconnection, and in particular the position of academic development journals within this. Another strand has involved a developing series of workshops, undertaken with Hivos and others, to discuss, map and develop understanding of the current situation with groups of researchers and practitioners. From understanding to action, we are planning a number of activities to address these issues and make efforts to bridge these knowledge domains and cultures.

One aspect of using multiple knowledges in practice is the importance of the bridges, human, organisational and technical, which need to exist if gaps between knowledges are to be crossed. Most significant in this regard is the idea of traducture, namely translation across barriers of power and status as well as of language.

There are also important organisational management issues here, regarding both internal issues and the extent to which organisations are able to identify and work with appropriate intermediaries for the two-way (but especially bottom-up) information flows on which their organisational health depends. The case studies on what happens to information derived from the use of participatory methodologies are very interesting in this regard (see Box 2).

Local content, local knowledge

Local content is important and needs to be valued by both local communities and development organisations. We say this in two contexts. First, the process of generating and validating local content is, at a local level, an important contribution to development in itself (see Box 1). If people do not have some confidence in their own knowledge base, they do not have the capacity to act in a deliberate fashion. This goes far beyond the possible instrumental value of such knowledges. It roots local development discourse within the history and knowledge of local communities, as well as supporting processes of reflection and debate on current issues. The IT4Change report on the Bangalore workshop on digital storytelling in India gives examples of local digital stories being made about perceived problems within the community with the explicit purpose of stimulating first recognition of the problem, then discussion and finally action.

Box 1.   Local content, local knowledge

IKM has supported a range of work, including work with local communities, use of new media and workshops, to demonstrate the importance of local content, local knowledge to development.

Telradio in Sri Lanka

M.J.R. David has set up an Internet radio service, Telradio,[3] for digital storytelling in Sri Lanka. Telradio broadcasts digital stories and discusses them from different geographical locations (David, 2010). The possibility for different groups to interact with each other to build a common body of knowledge is the prime objective of this service.

Costa Rica and Nicaragua

Kemly Camacho and the Sula Batsu cooperative[4] in Costa Rica have been working with a number of communities in Costa Rica and Nicaragua to explore community knowledge of issues related to water. They have been writing about their experiences in a series of blogs (in Spanish and English), which are brought together in our project: exploring local knowledge.[5] This work has explored local and ancestral knowledge within diverse communities.

Local knowledge workshops

Pete Cranston and Peter Ballantyne organised a workshop in Tervuren, Belgium, in October 2009 as part of a continuing project aimed at better understanding, supporting and promoting the use of locally produced information content. The importance of local knowledge processes, the role of knowledge in development at local level and the value and nature of locally produced content were discussed. This brought work on local processes in Sri Lanka and Costa Rica/Nicaragua together with work from Eastern and Southern Africa on local use of information artefacts. The full report[6] of the workshop

is available on the IKM workspace. Notes[7] from this workshop are also available, as are Pete Cranston's personal reflections[8] on the process.

A further workshop on local knowledge took place at the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) campus in Nairobi, Kenya, on 7–9 July 2010 that aimed at the promotion of participatory local content-focused approaches in the wider development community.

These strands of work will continue to develop over 2010 with further workshops in Africa and plans for a book articulating the value of local knowledge processes to sustainable development.

Box 2.   How wide are the ripples?

On 18–19 March 2010, a workshop was held in London, UK, as part of a larger process of reflection and research, supported by IKM Emergent and called 'how wide are the ripples?' The process, organised by Hannah Beardon and Kate Newman, explored how international non-governmental organisations (iNGOs) use and manage the information, knowledge and perspectives generated through the participatory processes they initiate or fund.

The initial research was built on a literature review and case studies from five iNGOs (ActionAid, Concern, Healthlink, Panos and Plan), identifying challenges and opportunities to good bottom-up information and learning flows (Beardon and Newman 2009). This was complemented by a further study, jointly published with the Participatory Methodologies Forum of Kenya (PAMFORK) that reports on the use of information derived from participatory methodologies by development agencies in Kenya (Kirimi and Wakwabubi, 2009).

Box 3.   IKM Labs

IKM Interactive Labs are exploring the intersection of knowledge, technology and media and their relevance to development. They are interactive spaces and events where IKM-allied colleagues (Olivier Sagna, Pete Cranston, Dejan Dincic, Chris Addison, Peter Ballantyne and Hugo Besemer) explore, with different audiences, the opportunities and challenges offered by new technologies, and particularly social media, for development.

The first IKM Interactive Lab was held in Dakar, Senegal, on 2–3 June 2009, organised by Olivier Sagna of Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), and which was reported on in a blog post[9] by Hugo Besemer. In addition to this, Digital Diving sessions[10] were held in November 2009 as part of Diplo Foundation's[11] Internet Governance programme at Internet Governance Forum 09[12] in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt. This was followed, in May 2010, by the Metropolib workshop organised with the EADI Information Management Working Group[13] in Delft, the Netherlands. A workshop report is available online.[14]

More of these events will follow in 2010 and 2011. Two IKM Interactive Labs took place in Nairobi in July 2010, one as part of the lead up to the AgKnowledge ShareFair to be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, on 18–21 October 2010.

IKM Labs has also been exploring the implications of the emerging semantic web, particularly linked data and visualisation, for how development-related information can be connected, analysed and presented. This exploration[15] involves both practical and policy issues and considers not just what may be done with new technologies but the implications of how it is done for other development processes – access to information, openness, inclusivity and so on. IKM is seeking to make links with others pioneering this technology within the development sector, with a view to organising a workshop on this subject in November 2010.

Box 4.   Knowledge for Development in Namibia

The largest IKM event of 2009 was the Knowledge for Development international workshop jointly organised with the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) and the University of Namibia in Windhoek during 9–13 November 2009. The goal of the workshop was to raise awareness of the importance of understanding the role of knowledge in development and to discuss what understandings of knowledges were most relevant to contemporary challenges in Eastern and Southern Africa. The conference received considerable attention in the local media, including an hour-long debate on the main current affairs TV show.

Box 5.   Bridging knowledge divides

In July and October 2009 and again in June 2010, a series of events have been organised on by Josine Stremmelaar (Hivos), Wenny Ho in collaboration with IKM Emergent. These events – supported by ongoing research – are based on the understanding that the domains of research, policy and practice in development are still acting too much from hypothetical ivory towers, unable to break free from domain-related dynamics and interests, and unable to work together. Not only are interactions between these different domains important from the perspective of efficiency but also because, if you see development as a series of interlinked 'wicked problems', the only way of tackling them is through their resolution. In addition to this, the interlinks between these different domains is where innovation takes place.

Using semantics to map knowledge divides

To gain another perspective of the gaps between the different knowledge domains, Iina Hellsten of the Organisational Science Department of the VU University, Amsterdam, and Sarah Cummings have been using bibliometrics and semantic maps to try to reveal the hidden structures of development knowledge.

The first preliminary paper from this approach has now been published (Hellsten and Cummings 2010). Follow-up to this strand of research is to apply bibliometric analysis to development journals.

Second, as the programme has always argued, local content, especially that created independently from the sometimes forced dynamics of funded development projects, can provide extremely valuable information to development organisations. Issues of how to support such work, and how to synthesise it and learn from it in a way that is accurate and fair, is vital to improved understanding and improved relationships between development organisations and the local communities, the development of which they exist to support (see Box 2).

Implications of non-linearity

Without yet engaging with the finer points of complexity theory as it relates to social change, IKM is clear that notions of development practice that envisage direct cause and effect relationships between input and output are entirely hallucinatory. Unanticipated external events, the unpredictability of life (health, family, change) and the possibility – we would say desirability – that new factors and opportunities will emerge out of the experience of doing whatever is planned, coming into contact and relating with the other actors involved, mean that the lifespan of any firm plan is always limited. It is thus absurd that most of the work of the development sector is still planned and managed on the basis of the known falsehood of predictability. There have now been a number of events looking at the implications of complexity theory for the evaluation of development work. Examples and acceptance of new practice remain rare. IKM welcomes this interest but believes that the discourse has not gone nearly far enough. Some of the 'new' approaches still try to construct complex systems in which, after some effort, everything can still be nicely ordered. This, in our view, misses the point which is that we need to recognise the limits that exist on our understandings of reality and the sense we can make of it and learn to act intelligently within those limits. This has to go beyond evaluation and inform the whole process of our action from investigation, through planning, managing and evaluating development interventions. We need to develop and test new procedures that retain accountability and the possibility of direction without tying them to rigid frameworks that can neither work nor allow a creative response to what actually happens. We would argue that such an approach, grounded as it is on responding to observed realities, is far more hard-headed and business-like than the fantasies of certainty offered by the (often ideologically or commercially driven) current norms.

Box 6.   IKM Working papers to date

The programme produces a range of material in various formats. Contributions that relate specifically to the development of our thinking on the issues that the programme hopes to address or that have been commissioned to contribute to this development are published as working papers. Some 11 papers have been published to date.

(1) Meta-review and scoping study by Julie Ferguson, Kingo Mchombu and Sarah Cummings, March 2008
(2) Communicating information and knowledge management: challenges and approaches by Deepthi Wickremasinghe, April 2008
(3) Monitoring and evaluation in knowledge management for development by Serafin Talisayon, August 2009
(4) Learning networks for bridging development divides by Laxmi Pant, August 2009
(5) Policy-making as discourse: a review of recent knowledge-to-policy literature by Harry Jones, September 2009
(6) Learning from, promoting and using participation: The case of international development organisations in Kenya by Stephen Kirimi and Eliud Wakwabubi, October 2009
(7) How wide are the ripples? by Hannah Beardon and Kate Newman, October 2009

(8) Knowledge management and multiple knowledges: a multi-case study within the development sector by Paula Zirschky, December 2009

(9) Good planning or benign imposition? Innovation, emergence and risk in developmental research: Learning from ICTD by Adnan Rafiq and Nazish Gulzar, February 2010

(10) 'Things can be other than they are.' Understanding the limitations of current management thinking and knowledge practice for work in the development sector by Julian Jenkins, July 2010

(11) Power and interests in developing knowledge societies: exogenous and endogenous discourses in contention by Robin Mansell, August 2010

There are also important implications of non-linearity in the domain of research methodology (see below).

Critique of research 'for development'

Problems with research/policy or research practice links had already been well documented before IKM came into being. However, we would argue that the problems lie very much deeper than simple failures to communicate. In saying this, we are not referring to research on many issues related to development within the priorities and challenges of the academic world. We respect the importance of work within such a space and recognise that, by the terms of many of the disciplines involved, we are not qualified to judge the quality of the output. Our concerns rest with that work, much of it still carried out within academic institutions, that is 'for development': that is, that it is funded out of development budgets and is supposed to make sense (and therefore be accountable) to the research needs of development actors. This work is not insignificant in scale. It accounts for £200 million of government spending in the United Kingdom alone. However, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the entire structure of research 'for development' is seriously dysfunctional. Key issues include the following:

(1) The visibility of Southern researchers and intellectuals, not only when it comes to the development of relevant theoretical contexts and to the setting of research agendas but also when it comes to citations relating to empirical work, is disgracefully small (Kangulu and Wood 1995, Zeleza 1996, Cline-Cole 1999, 2006, Olukoshi 2004, see also the work of Cabral, Davidson, Fanon and Said). An explanation of why this might be and what attitudes such practice reveals would be very welcome.

(2) The setting of research agendas is seldom undertaken in collaboration with research subjects or beneficiaries and, even when it is, seldom through a prolonged iterative process in which imbalances of power and language are recognised and addressed. To the extent the research agenda is set by development actors, these are almost invariably the large funding organisations. Although some individual programmes work in participative ways with communities who are trying to build development for themselves, this approach is in no way systematically encouraged. The institutional structure of 'applied research' is overwhelmingly organised within academic environments, within the incentives, contractual norms

and quality control of academic life or its commercial competitors and is not accountable to the people to/for whom the research is applied. In fact examples of populations who have contributed their experience or samples to research processes being even properly informed – in their own language and in the context of their understandings of the research questions – of the research findings and their local implications are rare in the extreme. The default position is that development research should be carried out by experts for the benefit of other experts. The interests and rights of the populations likely to be most affected by the results of the research are often not acknowledged. Again, and particularly in the context of the various 'better governance for development' agendas, questions may be asked about the basic ethics and attitudes that researchers are bringing to their tasks.

(3) Research 'for development' is primarily based on one sort of knowledge, namely academic knowledge that is generally not receptive or inclusive of other types of knowledge or other realities. We would argue that the 'knowledge as truth' paradigm is not appropriate for trans-disciplinary and cross-boundary work with its inevitable contradictions and paradox. Linked to this is a need to deepen our understanding of evidence in the context of 'evidence-based decision making'. Of course such practice is welcome in contrast to the implied alternative of 'ignorance-based decision making' but, as in legal proceedings, evidence can be contradictory and ambiguous and often cannot lead to any certain conclusion. The notion that 'evidence' can in and of itself provide a conclusive basis for 'correct' decisions that in turn guarantees predictable results betrays a failure to recognise or take responsibility for the usually complex, multifaceted and dynamic conditions in which most development-related decisions need to be made.

(4) The lack of openness and support for new paradigms, enabled in part by informational developments, which are based on finding new value through connecting existing knowledge sets, rather than the pursuit of 'new knowledge' within disciplinary boundaries. This is particularly unfortunate given that development is so evidently an environment in which multiple knowledges exist and interplay.

(5) Research frameworks that see unpredictability and emergence as problems rather than as the inevitable and welcome products of genuine participatory and iterative exploration. Open enquiry, genuine interaction with research stakeholders and, again, issues that emerge from the research process, all demand more open frameworks for the planning and conducting of research than the current rigid, risk-adverse norms based on the desirability of predictable outcomes.

(6) The dominance of neo-liberal ideology that looks first and foremost for the monetary value of knowledge and does not recognise its other values or roles.

Tools for handling multiple knowledges

Good information design – including both means of expression and means of reception – has the potential to greatly strengthen the transmission signals. This may be the most appropriate context in which to set the issues raised in some of the local knowledge case studies and also in the information artefacts work (see Boxes 1 and 3). How can we design appropriate artefacts to facilitate the gathering, handling and the use of multiple knowledges?

Although the development of new informational tools for communicating information is now widespread in many areas, including development research, we believe innovative practice within development organisations is still the exception rather than the rule and this means that IKM's interest in exploring new artefacts still offers the potential of stimulating innovation in the sector. The IKM installation, developed by artist, Ralph Borland, at the EADI General Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2009 had considerable impact. IKM attended a conference hosted by Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in which open source tools, new models of data sharing and of allowing the query and visual presentation of user-generated data were demonstrated. This was a rare but welcome example of interest in these issues by a mainstream development organisation. It, however, left uncovered areas of particular interest to IKM, namely the visualisation of qualitative argument and the extent to which visual languages do or do not cross-cultural boundaries. Likewise the growing momentum of linked and open data offers both real potential for finally creating a seamless development information environment and the danger of a system dominated by big players, privileging quantitative interpretations of reality over qualitative ones and blasé on the issues of access and effective use. Exploring these issues remains an active part of the programmes work (Powell 2010).

Similar issues are behind the development of IKM Vines, a pilot search and aggregation tool that, as well as being highly innovative in a technical sense, is inviting people to consider and redress the bias that hides Southern output within mainstream search engines. We are also close to having a working model for the visual navigation of multiple knowledges on our website.

Looking Ahead

The environment

As IKM enters its 5th year, it finds itself in the paradoxical position of its message and way of working having been warmly received by nearly everyone in the development sector with whom it has come into contact and yet finding the tide of the development sector as a whole still running strongly in an opposite direction. Development management theory remains dominated by concepts of results and measurement. The British government's Department for International Development, one of the strongest proponents of research communication, remains locked within crude and linear concepts of knowledge and change whereby 'research produces evidence which produces good policy decisions which produce results on the ground'. Meanwhile, one of the major development NGOs, Oxfam GB, has surrendered 20 years investment in building Development in Practice journal, a unique multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder space for critical thinking on how development has done, because it can no longer see the strategic priority of engaging with such issues at a time of financial constraint.

The agenda

However, our overall conclusion at this point is positive. We would stand by the original arguments that the programme proposed. We have not found out anything to make us change them. Instead, we believe that, in several areas, our understanding of them has developed considerably and that this fuller understanding in turn opens up the possibility of further work and its communication. We also believe that we have succeeded in creating some very rare space in which programme members can work far more freely than is

their/our normal experience. We think many programme members have strongly appreciated this and used the freedom very productively. We hope that, whatever happens to IKM, such spaces become less rare in future.

An exciting and growing body of outputs illustrate the breadth and depth of this work. The issue now is to see what we can do to link these multiple outputs into a coherent narrative both for the intellectual completion of (this stage) of our journey and, more importantly, to give us the best chance possible of communicating the need for and possibility of change to the development sector.

Implications for practice

IKM is unusual in its focus both on the overall knowledge processes used within the development sector and on some of their specific details. This subject area has inevitably provoked consideration of many ethical, intellectual and philosophical issues, some of which may appear remote from the harsh realities that the development sector is committed to trying to ameliorate. However, as we work towards the end of the programme and reflect on what we have learnt in the context of the actual realities that the development sector faces on a daily basis, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that current knowledge processes within the sector are very out of line with what is actually needed. Moreover, it begins to be possible to map out some profound but very practical signposts for changes that could lead to some significant improvements in how the sector operates. We suggest these include the need to

- work far more in relevant (local) languages and support such work through the development and use of professional translation/interpreting services;
- understand the value of critically supporting local knowledges as part of the dynamics of sustainable local involvement in development processes, beyond any instrumental value of the knowledges themselves;
- create new arrangements for planning, process management, monitoring and evaluation in a context of recognised and welcome unpredictability;
- collaborate in building a development knowledge environment as a global public good from which all may benefit and to which development organisations should contribute in an open and standards-based manner; and
- create new models of accountability, involving accountability to the so-called beneficiaries as well as to donors, to replace assessment based on compliance with pre-existing plans.

Developing and testing effective ways of achieving these goals is an agenda for the rest of the programme and beyond.

Notes
1. www.ikmemergent.net.
2. www.eadi.org.
3. http://www.telradio.org.
4. http://www.sulabatsu.com/.

5. http://ourproject4ikm.wordpress.com/.
6. http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Brussels_Workshop_2009.
7. http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/File:0910-localcontent.pdf.
8. http://theprocessdiary.wordpress.com/2009/10/04/reflections-on-a-local-content-strand-in-ik memergent/.
9. http://thegiraffe.wordpress.com/2009/06/07/first-ikm-interactive-workshop/.
10. http://thegiraffe.wordpress.com/2010/04/05/emerging-digital-generations/.
11. http://www.diplomacy.edu/.
12. http://igf09.eg/.
13. http://www.eadi.org/working-groups/wg-information-management.html.
14. http://metropolib.pbworks.com/.
15. http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/File:1007-SemanticIKM-v2.rtf.

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