The KM4Dev FAQ Renewal Project: a cross-organisational knowledge sharing experience

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This contribution to *Community Notes* gives a glimpse into the workings of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Renewal Project. The team consisted of Urs Karl Egger, Ben Ramalingam, Lucie Lamoureux and Nancy White. With a grant from Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC), the team started in the spring of 2005 with a project for updating and reviving the FAQ section on the website (http://www.km4dev.org/index.php/articles/faqs/) of the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) online community.

Up to now, the team has scanned all the past KM4Dev mailing list messages along with the data from KM4Dev community surveys and have compiled a list of 150 potential topics. We have chosen four of them and are about to choose the next four based on a recent survey among the members. In the following section, a first instalment of our work is presented: an answer to the question 'What are effective ways for cross-organisational knowledge sharing?'

We have been having a grand time creating sample FAQs in our online 'FAQtory' - a wiki where we have gathered our source material to draft and edit our initial offerings (http://www.km4dev.org/wiki/). Very helpful are also our electronic workspace on Dgroups (http://www.dgroups.org) and regular phone conferences. We have also started to gather our reflections on our process so we can learn about making FAQs. (http://www.km4dev.org/wiki/index.php/FAQtory_Process_Observations). The examples of statements below show that writing FAQs for KM4Dev is an enriching experience for all involved:

> *I was at first quite overwhelmed when mining the archives to find source materials for the FAQ I was working on. But once I gathered all the material into a word document and started reading it closely, it became fascinating.*

> *The amount of wisdom packed into our discussion archives is amazing.*

> *By carefully sifting through the (often impassioned) discussions between KM4Dev community members to synthesise my first FAQ, I found myself reflecting deeply on the subject, and learning a lot about my own approach to my work.*

> *Going through archived list emails has been much more fun than I ever expected!*

Effective ways for cross-organisational knowledge sharing

Across the globe, thousands of development agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), other organisations and consultants are reinventing wheels and repeating the same mistakes again and again. So why is there not more cross-organisational knowledge sharing and learning?

In fact, there is a lot of cross-organisational knowledge sharing going on, and sometimes too much. Numerous cross-organisational communities of practices or networks exist, countless workshops and conferences are taking place, and hundreds of training institutions offer courses for almost every topic relevant for development cooperation. Is this not enough or is current cross-organisational knowledge sharing simply not effective?

This FAQ discusses first what added value cross-organisational knowledge sharing creates and what is different about knowledge from within organisations. Afterwards the pre-conditions for cross-organisational knowledge sharing are outlined and possible organisational forms presented. In the last part, you will find some tips on effective approaches and tools for cross-organisational knowledge sharing and how to get started.

Added value of cross-organisational knowledge sharing

Why is cross-organisational knowledge sharing important? Knowledge sharing between organisations can be beneficial for the participating individuals and organisations, as well as, as the examples below show, for development cooperation in general.

Examples of benefits for individuals and organisations include:

- Access to information and knowhow;
- Learning from others;
- Better understanding of needs and political agendas;
- Strengthening of capabilities;
- Pooling of resources and synergy development;
- Network expansion;
- Catalyst for establishing partnerships;
- Staging area for new ideas and innovative solutions;
- Intelligent division of assignments by focusing on specific strengths; and
- Benchmarking with other organisations or institutions.

Cross-organisational knowledge sharing also creates general benefits for development cooperation:

- More efficiency and effectiveness in development cooperation;
- Wider acceptance of complex challenges in development cooperation;
- Contributions to learning and shortened learning cycles by way of information and knowledge exchanges;
- Improvements to the information and knowledge base for decision-making enabled through the accumulation of information and knowledge;
- Linking of sectors, professions, countries, regions, and cultures and so on, contributing to more coordination, coherence and innovation;
- More balanced policy decisions; and
- Increased attention to certain topics in the policy agenda.

What is different about cross-organisational knowledge sharing?

The challenges of cross-organisational knowledge sharing are very similar to those in large international organisations, but there are also some differences. Cross-organisational knowledge sharing depends on the motivation and engagement of the involved organisations or professionals. Unlike in organisations, for example, there is no Director or Management Board demanding a knowledge sharing system.

Knowledge sharing between organisations faces a couple of challenges. Working in similar areas, they are in competition with each other for mandates and funding. They generally focus on their own needs and interests and, in order to avoid being taken advantage of, hesitate to share their knowledge with others. The staff in many organisations has no incentives to share their experiences with other organisations. Their engagement in external knowledge sharing, for example, is not appreciated and does not contribute to their internal career. Copyrights, patents, and other ownership issues are another challenge for cross-organisational knowledge sharing. In some cases also bureaucracy and red tape block knowledge sharing.

Cross-organisational knowledge sharing is also challenged by the variety of organisations and people involved: multiple cultural perceptions; language problems; different interpretations, frameworks and wording in the numerous disciplines and varying interests in the North, South and East. Such diversity makes it difficult to find a common denominator.

Last but not least, there is strong pressure in development cooperation to produce concrete outputs and outcomes. Cross-organisational knowledge sharing, however, is a long-term task where the output and outcome is not evident in the short term and often very difficult to measure. This is one of the reasons why it is more difficult to raise funds for cross-organisational knowledge sharing.

Pre-conditions for cross-organisational knowledge sharing

Successful cross-organisational knowledge sharing depends on a number of pre-conditions:
- Those involved and the organisations, as well, must clearly see a need for cross-organisational knowledge sharing and a benefit must result for all partners.
- The organisations involved require sufficient resources, such as time and funding for cross-organisational knowledge sharing, or they have to allocate their immediate resources accordingly
- Cross-organisational knowledge sharing is strongly based on good personal relationships or networks. These relationships form the basis for the necessary trust and confidence.
- Those individuals involved and their organisations have to be strongly committed to cross-organisational knowledge sharing and should not treat it as a side activity.
- Important are intercultural communication skills, open-mindedness and the willingness to learn from others.
- Cross-organisational knowledge sharing requires facilitators or brokers, be it organisations or people, who link organisations and people and moderate the communication flows.
- A sustainable partnership requires a culture of give and take. If partners feel exploited through cross-organisational knowledge sharing they will retreat.

Organisation forms for cross-organisational knowledge sharing

Cross-organisational knowledge sharing can take place through various organisational conduits:

- Thematic local, regional and international networks for knowledge sharing exist for almost every topic in development cooperation. Some are even legal entities and are similar to organisations;
- Strategic partnerships or learning alliances between organisations can contribute considerably to cross-organisational knowledge sharing;
- All over the world, communities of practice are facilitating cross-organisational knowledge sharing;
- A loose organisational form for bringing organisations together for knowledge sharing for a limited time include working groups or joint projects;
- Resource centres also play an important role in cross-organisational knowledge sharing. Resource centres are organisations focusing on information and knowledge sharing in a certain area by providing information, networking, training and capacity building;
- Although often not considered, consultants working for different development organisations are important facilitators for knowledge sharing between organisations. Flying like bees from one organisation to another they cross-pollinate by consolidating and disseminating the experiences they have made

- Professional associations also play a major role in cross-organisational knowledge sharing by developing professional standards, organising conferences, setting up web portals, or compiling expert directories

Enabling ways and tools

Most of the tools appropriate for knowledge sharing and learning within organisations are also useful for knowledge sharing across organisations. Examples of particularly useful approaches and tools for cross-organisational knowledge sharing include:

- Learning visits or learning exchanges between two or several organisations;
- Organisation of knowledge fairs for exchanges and learning;
- Organisation of conferences and workshops on specific topics;
- Websites or web portals or cross-references to each other's website;
- Dissemination and exchange of publications (hardcopies and electronic versions), CD ROM, videos, and other information resources;
- Common databases with documents, web links, expert directories or yellow pages, etc.;
- E-mail discussion groups and communities of practice;
- Staff exchanges or staff sharing between organisations; and
- Joint projects and programmes.

Procedure

How should you proceed if you would like to enter into cross-organisational knowledge sharing? Every long journey starts with a first step. If you are interested in sharing information and knowledge with other organisations, provide leadership and do it. Pick up the phone, write an e-mail or contact people at workshops and conferences. Think about what kind of added value of cross-organisational knowledge sharing you expect and what benefits your partners could be interested in.

Keep in mind that you will have to be patient. Cross-organisational knowledge sharing needs time. You have to establish good personal relationships and build trust. A good place to start is with small concrete activities like knowledge sharing meetings, mutual exposure visits, or by a regular exchange of publications. Organise these activities from the beginning jointly with your partners, but enlarge the circle of involved people and organisations not all too quickly. Keep the group small at the beginning. This makes coordination easier and you will develop a kind of group spirit.

Once a cross-organisational collaboration is established, you may try to build up a small community of practice around a specific topic or to launch small joint projects. The scale of possibilities for collaboration is now open and may range from informal exchanges to formal networks or formally agreed upon strategic partnerships.

Cross-organisational knowledge sharing can be very enriching and create benefits for all involved parties, if well organised. But you also have to be aware that sufficient resources like time and funding will be required. So make sure that the organisation you are working for allocates its resources accordingly.

KM4Dev discussions

Since the establishment of the KM4Dev mailing list only two enquiries have addressed knowledge sharing *between* organisations or *cross-agency* knowledge sharing. One of these enquiries led to a number of rich contributions, whereas the other received no responses. In the enquiry stimulating an e-mail discussion, Benjamin Docker raised two questions:

1. Does an internal knowledge sharing culture solicit an inter-agency knowledge sharing culture? What techniques have been used within the development community to produce cultural shifts, through attitude and behavioural changes across organisational boundaries?

2. What examples of the institutionalisation of cross-organisational KS activities exist? What has worked? What lessons have been learned?

The content of the contributions has been summarised in detail above. On the whole the answers given did not differ much.

The respondents were convinced that cross-organisational knowledge sharing is the only way information and knowledge resources can be applied on development problems. However, it was also highlighted that building effective knowledge sharing activities across organisations is very difficult as there are a number of barriers such as a lack of trust, competition, the pressure for concrete outputs, lack of understanding for each other's needs or bureaucracy. Some of the pre-conditions for knowledge sharing between organisations mentioned were, for example, trust established through personal contacts and a knowledge sharing culture based on give and take.

This culture of cross-organisational knowledge sharing will not appear out of the blue, but must be built up based on needs and with sufficient resources, at best from the bottom in small steps, e.g. by creating smaller communities of practice or projects. The respondents also noted that there are several types of cross-organisational knowledge sharing ranging from a unilateral provision of information, to rather general exchanges and knowledge sharing, and on to jointly established partnerships. Organisations can promote cross-organisational knowledge sharing by removing internal hindrances for knowledge sharing, creating incentives and internal policies or acting as brokers and facilitators.

The following members of the KM4Dev community contributed to the discussion thread on cross-organisational knowledge sharing: Benjamin Docker (launched the

discussion), Peter Ballantyne, Lucie Lamoureux, Tony Pryor, Chucri Sayegh, Barbara Weaver Smith.

Abstract

This contribution to *Community Notes* gives a glimpse into the workings of the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) Renewal Project of the KM4Dev online community, covering the example of cross-organisational knowledge sharing. The FAQ discusses first what added value cross-organisational knowledge sharing creates and what is different about knowledge from within organisations. Afterwards the pre-conditions for cross-organisational knowledge sharing are outlined and possible organisational forms presented. In the last part, you will find some tips on effective approaches and tools for cross-organisational knowledge sharing and how to get started.

About the author

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