Letter to the Editors

'Understanding the role of culture in knowledge sharing: making the invisible visible'

Helen Gould

Belated congratulations to the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* for profiling the issue of Culture (Understanding the role of culture in knowledge sharing - making the invisible visible, Journal 1(3):2-4 2005).

Creative Exchange is a specialist network and knowledge manager addressing culture and development and therefore in the unenviable position of promoting two fields which are not best valued or visible. We contributed to the cultural debate with our publication, *'Culture: hidden development'* which suggested the 'Levels' model as a way of describing the relationship between culture and development. Subsequently, the model was raised and discussed on several platforms, and was very helpfully propagated by Dr Rob Vincent in his Findings Paper: 'What do we do with culture?'(Vincent, 2004). So I thought it would be useful to explain where it came from and share some thoughts on the challenges in developing a cultural approach to knowledge management.

Briefly, the 'Levels' model evolved from our DFID-funded research, 'Routemapping culture and development', which worked with 5 UK-based international development agencies to explore how and why culture was being employed in development and what impact it was having. To share some statistics which highlight the degree of invisibility of culture, as raised in the Journal, in these five agencies alone, we found 350 culturally based projects in 40 countries over just two years, with a conservatively estimated cost base of £30 million. So culture is widely used in development but we found that its contribution to development projects is not often evaluated or recognised.

During interviews in the UK, country offices, among field workers and beneficiaries, it became apparent to my research colleague, Mary Marsh, that there were many different understandings of culture, and this lack of a common understanding about culture may be partly responsible for the invisibility - there was no common reference point. But Marsh noted that the concepts of culture were all interrelated and fell broadly into four 'Levels':

Culture as context: factors specific to local life: beliefs, value systems, history, geography, social hierarchies, gender, faiths, and concepts of time;

Culture as content: languages, practices, objects, traditions, clothing, and heritage;

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Culture as method: the medium or cultural forms that projects will use to engage/communicate with communities e.g. drama, dance, proverbs, song, music, video, radio or television; and

Culture as expression: the creative/artistic elements of culture that offer a platform for our beliefs, values, attitudes, feelings and ways of viewing the world - these often connect to communication strategies.

Culture at all of these levels tended to be used either as a tool - pre-determined and message-driven - or as a method of participatory cultural engagement.

The subsequent response has indicated that people find that the 'Levels' help them to easily conceptualise their work in cultural terms, though we acknowledge it is not the only way of so doing. As a case in point, Creative Exchange has recently been developing a research and networking project on Culture and HIV/AIDS ('HIV/AIDS: the creative challenge'). The Levels model has been helping practitioners and policymakers in workshops to understand how HIV/AIDS strategies and programmes can become more locally sensitive and engaging by working within local cultures, rather than just delivering messages telling people to abstain and be faithful.

Which brings me onto the question posed in the Journal: What do we mean by the cultural dimension of knowledge sharing for development? We have recently prepared a Findings Paper reporting progress with our HIV project. Within that we pointed out that culture has been referred to as 'webs of significance' (Gorringe 2004). A cultural approach, we argue:

> *… sets out to systematically engage with these 'webs of significance'; it takes account the cultural context in which communities and groups exist; it negotiates with local social hierarchies and living patterns; and it draws on local forms of communication and expression to engage people.*

In other words: A cultural approach hinges on a *process* which tries to understand a community's sense of itself and tries to engage with that community, respectfully, at its own level.

Why is a cultural approach valid? Culture and knowledge are sometimes synonymous in meaning 'ways of living, being and understanding the world' - social hierarchies, living patterns and forms of communication are as much part of the local knowledge base as local cultural life. Culture adds a further dimension in that it is creative, expressive, tapping into the emotive and spiritual life of community. It is interesting that 'Creativity' in the brain has been described as playing a mediating role between lower (instinctive) and upper (reasoning) brain functions. Knowledge can be ascribed to the upper brain whereas creativity is something much more instinctive and affective.

So working with and respecting local forms of knowledge (indigenous health knowledge, for example), and drawing on local cultures and forms of expression, should create programmes which engage, inspire and affect people. If you want to act on human development, what a powerful combination! It was this kind of approach which was partially credited with reducing HIV infection rates in Uganda in the early years of their prevention programme. The Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), has argued that the benefits of a cultural approach stem from revitalising local cultural forms of expression and channels of communication, building solidarity and empowerment within the community, and encouraging self-reflection; and making public health knowledge more accessible and sustainable (Somma/Bodiang 2004). So there is a sense that working with culture can strengthen opportunities for knowledge management.

A specific challenge arises from the fact that culture does not appear to be valued by the development sector in its knowledge management systems. As an illustration, none of the INGOs we worked with on 'Routemapping' had cultural keywords in their databases, so none was collecting data on their cultural projects - all data was sourced through organisational memory and personal data gathering. As another example, it appears that very little data is collected on cultural issues when undertaking poverty analysis. Since cultural issues (such as ethnic identity, social hierarchies, faiths) have a bearing on exclusion and poverty, it makes sense to gather cultural data to expose trends in poverty which have cultural causes. In relation to HIV/AIDS, it appears the only impact which appeared to be valid in development communications projects using culture was a change in behaviour. Cultural projects have often shown a wider array of impacts which are not captured, such as changes in: 'knowledge, skills, awareness, attitudes, beliefs, emotions and interpersonal relationships', but these were not valid impacts.

It would seem then, that knowledge management processes need to become more inclusive of the cultural dimension. But the development sector is not capturing or managing cultural knowledge because it is not sufficiently aware of (or does not prioritise) the role of culture in development. Here we hit the problem of invisibility which was central to the Journal's theme. But it is hard to change this because insufficient evidence of the impact of culture on human development is flowing from knowledge management. So invisibility and the lack of a cultural dimension to knowledge management are a self-perpetuating problem.

So I would close by posing a further question to knowledge managers in the development sector: what can we do about cultural invisibility in our own agencies? And what simple and practical measures can be taken to ensure knowledge management systems start to accommodate a cultural dimension? Ideas welcome...

References
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About the author
Helen Gould worked as a journalist, largely in the field of arts and cultural policy, for ten years before specialising in research and networking for culture and development. She founded Creative Exchange, an international network for culture and development, in 1997 and serves as its Coordinator. She has written and contributed to a number of publications and has served as a consultant. With Creative Exchange she has been responsible for the development and management of several projects, including a multi-partner project addressing the human rights of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh, 'Routemapping culture and development', and 'A sense of belonging', researching cultural approaches to the resettlement of refugees and asylum seekers.
E-mail: hgould@creativexchange.org