From knowledge transfer to a learning-based approach: perspectives from IDS' information services

Cheryl Brown, Louise Daniel and Catherine Fisher

Introduction

The Information Department at IDS has evolved over the last 15 years so it is now a home for a range of development information services. These include ELDIS, the development information gateway; id21, the development research reporting service; BRIDGE, the gender briefing service; and BLDS, the British Library for Development Studies.

While each service has a distinct approach, audience and focus, they all share one goal, to help development research and knowledge reach those who can use it to reduce poverty and injustice. This article looks behind the scenes to examine not *what* these services do but at *how* they have evolved and the developing thinking that drives them.

Over the years, Information Department activities have focused on librarianship, information management, advocacy, research communication, knowledge management and networking. We have also learnt to 'pick and mix' and adapt what works well into new approaches, for example, brokering connections between producers and users of development information. We are beginning to see this act of brokering as an 'intermediary' role and are now seeking to understand it better in order to carry it out more effectively.

This article is in three parts:

- Part 1 sketches the organic and sometimes haphazard development of the Information Department, trying to identify some of the key factors that led to where we are today.
- The second part outlines a 'coming of age' during which experimental projects matured and we began to seek out a greater sense of their place in the world. We describe how we tried reach a better understanding of our role as knowledge and information 'intermediaries' so that we could achieve better results. An important part of this process involved engaging with our users, learning from them and then adapting what we do - which presented its own challenges.
- Finally the article looks to the future and outlines an exploratory new path which seeks to learning more about knowledge and information intermediaries in collaboration with others playing similar roles, simultaneously generating and applying new knowledge.

Part 1: The 1990s - transferring knowledge from IDS to the south[i]

The Information Department [www.ids.ac.uk/ids/info/index.html] at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) was established in its current form in 1998, and now brings together a range of different services, including the British Library for Development Studies (BLDS), Eldis, id21, BRIDGE, Livelihoods Connect, and the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC). Much of IDS' work is about helping users deal with information overload. This involves gathering, filtering, organising, summarizing, repackaging, and disseminating information in various forms. The department is also beginning to explore other roles including capacity building, supporting institutional learning and helping build knowledge communities.

Many of our services are partnership based. We work closely with donors, other research institutes, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and others which bring benefits and complications. Some services are active in developing Southern partnerships: Bridge is heavily focused in this direction. Most of what we do is in English, but we are beginning to broaden our language coverage. For example there is a Spanish interface to Eldis, while Bridge and id21 are taking steps to translate more of their outputs into other languages. We are also developing the idea of a Francophone Eldis with French partners.

Pressure to disseminate better
The Information Department has grown considerably over the past 15 years. In the early 1990s, it was still getting a core grant for its publications work but was under pressure from the Overseas Development Association (ODA), now the UK Department for International Development (DFID), to disseminate IDS research more effectively. Following an internal review, it was decided to hire a Communications Manager and to develop a communication strategy for IDS.

At this time, the Information Department consisted of BRIDGE (Box 1), the IDS Publications Unit, and BLDS. Within 18 months, the ODA had taken thinking a step further and came up with the idea of setting up a new facility to disseminate all UK social and economic international development research, partly driven by a need to show that research was worth investing in. From the resulting tendering process, id21 was born (Box 2). This was a good opportunity to explore how research could be communicated more effectively.

Arrival and spread of the Internet
The Internet came along and provided an avenue for innovation and creativity. By the mid-1990s, the technology was becoming more easily useable. Along with Oneworld [www.oneworld.net], launched in 1995, IDS was one of the first organizations to see the potential for the Internet as a development information tool. IDS set up its first website at that time, and started work on Eldis, an idea that emerged from the Library (Box 3). At that time, few development organizations had their own websites and, if they did, they were relying on Oneworld to host them. No one could predict how fast the Internet would spread to developing countries, or get mainstreamed within Northern organizations.

Increasing use of the Internet was a gamble that paid off and once IDS had established a track record in developing and running websites, this became an important comparative advantage. There was also a

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Box 1: BRIDGE 1992-2006

The idea of BRIDGE [http://www.bridge.ids.ac.uk/] originated in conversations between IDS and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development/Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) Working Party on Gender. Representatives from bilateral agencies needed help in mainstreaming gender in their organizations, and the notion of a central unit able to offer short-term assistance was born in 1992. The main European bilateral organizations signed up for subscriptions to information support time from BRIDGE. The main focus then was a series of tailored reports and topic reviews. The newsletter *Development and Gender in brief* was launched in 1995. An independent evaluation of BRIDGE, funded by DFID and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), confirmed its good reputation and suggested some possible new tracks to follow, namely connecting more to practitioners, not just policy makers. Out of this came a new model for BRIDGE where the commissioned client work would be mixed with a new proactive role, creating knowledge products on cutting edge themes and facilitating the exchange of online resources via websites. By 2002 enough donors had signed up (in terms of subscriptions and donations) to ensure the new phase took off, including DfID, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), SIDA, the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Danida) and the Commonwealth Secretariat . So that the new BRIDGE reflected the needs of users, an International Advisory Committee now helps direct BRIDGE's future strategy, advises on the needs of users, gives feedback and assists in the two-way flow of information to the regions and with users. Members are from Asia, the Arab Region, Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe and are all gender specialists from a broad range of institutions (donor agencies, NGOs, information projects, regional networks, government and so on).

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growing appreciation in the mid-1990s of the importance of information and knowledge in development. Lack of it, along with the 'digital divide', was seen as a major development constraint.

Yet, the Internet could well have passed IDS by without some key people at BLDS and IDS' Computer and Technology Services unit with strong technical skills, who were intrigued by the potential of the new technology, and had the imagination and ability to try it out. Building on these in-house skills has been an approach we have followed ever since.

Injection of new skills
IDS already had a strong foundation in information management and librarianship and an experienced publications team. But it lacked journalistic edge and the guts to say 'this is interesting research, but so what?' New journalistic skills, for example, were needed for writing proposals, marketing our work and providing good content for our websites and publications. Combining these with the existing skill

set in the Library and publications unit gave us a uniquely broad range of skills; and hiring talented, enthusiastic staff with the initiative to push boundaries and pioneer new knowledge products and services was crucial.

Box 2: id21 1996-2006

As part of a series of tenders for large three year research projects, the Economic & Social Research Unit (then ODA) put out a Dissemination Tender aimed at increasing the impact of UK development research. The terms of reference only mentioned the internet in passing. With IDS as lead partner and Panos taking on a small Southern media component, the IDS bid involved a multiple approach to dissemination, including a strong web and email element moving away from just print newsletters and seminars. With a punchy editorial style, id21's [www.id21.org] niche was to produce good quality policy focused summaries of research findings for busy professionals. Winning the bid was a key step in getting IDS into this new kind of role.

Insights was re-launched in late 1997, the website launched in February 1998 and the first id21news email newsletter sent out 4 months later, the first of its kind in the development field. Well received, id21 quickly took off, disseminating UK development research findings to developing country policymakers and practitioners.

The IDS connection

The fact that the IDS Information Department is based at a world-renowned centre for research on international development has been a major factor in its success. Some services have direct links with the IDS Research Fellows, others less so, but the association of information work with the Institute's research reputation has helped build credibility and trust amongst users and funders. Another benefit is the ready supply of bright, well-qualified students on our doorstep - potential recruits but also major contributors to the lively and international social mix that is IDS.

Key technical decisions

We decided in 1997 to adopt DB Textworks as our database and web publishing platform. A good choice at the time and a critical element in our success, it has allowed us to be more flexible and creative than other packages would have done. However, we are now developing a new state-of-the-art technical platform for the whole information department so that services can share content and technical innovations more easily. . We also made some good choices on HTML authoring tools (Hotmetal, and later Dreamweaver) which were powerful enough to do interesting things and simple enough to be rolled out in a decentralized way.

In addition, the University of Sussex provides IDS with a low-cost Internet connection while the IDS internal network provides easy and cheap access to a good networking infrastructure which has allowed us to move faster and more flexibly than if we had had to work with an external ISP or hosting service.

Box 3: BLDS & ELDIS 1966-2006

The British Library for Development Studies (BLDS) started off as a national UK library collection on development studies with substantial core funding from the ODA. Built up since 1966, the library was briefed to collect comprehensively, especially little known material from the South. Substantially reduced funding from DFID in 2003 pushed IDS to develop the library into an international information resource with new, more tailored information services, some of which some clients would pay for. A three-way funding split was agreed, with DFID, IDS and the University of Sussex contributing. BLDS services now include an online catalogue, full text electronic resources, e-mail subject updates, an email enquiry service, and document delivery. BLDS houses over a 1,000 journal titles, 10,000 magazine, newspaper, and newsletter titles and over 80,000 monographs including research reports, working papers and books. It is Europe's most comprehensive research collection on development issues.

The idea for ELDIS started in 1994 when the library produced a guide to electronic information sources, originally in an Inmagic database, published as a printed guide and distributed to a variety of contacts including the Information Management Working Group of the European Association of Development Training Institutes [www.eadi.org]. The idea was there to turn it into a web product but we did not have the technology at that time. In 1996, Eldis got three year funding from Danida and decided to adopt Inmagic Webpublisher. The Eldis database initially consisted mainly of organizational records given not many documents were online. E-mail bulletins were sent out and we began compiling a mailing list. In 1998, Eldis database records reached 2400 organizational records and 3600 document records. Eldis then began hosting DFID's NARSIS natural resource database and later the Microfinance Information Gateway (for the Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP). Funding was difficult around this time. Eldis also became involved in GDNet and a Spanish version of Eldis was launched in collaboration with RIMISP, a Chilean NGO. Eldis started to produce a DFID-funded poverty resource guide – a good example of how individual topic guides can be funded externally. In 2002 Norad joined the funding consortium which also includes SIDA, DFID and SDC. Today, Eldis has 18,000 online full text documents and information about 4500 organizations. It sends out 25 e-mail bulletins and users can sign up for newsfeeds on 25 different topics.

Partnerships
An increasing number of our services have been implemented in partnership with others. Examples include GDNet [www.gdnet.org], developed in collaboration with the Global Development Network (GDN), and the Governance and Social Development Resource Centre (GSDRC) - a consortium involving Birmingham University, Social Development Direct and Enterplan as core partners. So too the Health and Development Information team (HDI) works closely with DfID, id21, Eldis, and the Health and Social Change research group at IDS. Forming strong alliances has been a good strategy for tapping into new knowledge and experience, new user communities and new sources of funds. Yet we have also learned how demanding close partnerships can be. Given that partnerships are likely to be an important part of our future, we need to make sure we learn from this experience.

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Project-based funding
The tight and highly motivated teams working on the various services have delivered a huge amount, and part of this has been because of team spirit, and the slight element of competition between teams. Services have also tended to come with their own distinctive challenges and goals, which has encouraged a creative, team-based, problem solving culture. Yet arguably this team-level focus has got in the way of cross-departmental content sharing and learning. Project-based funding also made it difficult to 'cross-subsidize' activities, to share content and information effectively, or to meet the needs of the users in the best way possible.

Part 2: Learning to respond to users' needs

It is all very well pushing out information about research but if the needs and demands of the users are not sought or heard, achievements are likely to be haphazard. In 2002, id21 carried out a study which aimed to assess id21's success in increasing the influence of UK-funded research within international development policy. It examined the ways in which policymakers access and use research; it then used the findings to assess the validity and performance of the dissemination methods used by id21.

While the report concluded that id21 did have an impact on policy formation in developing countries, it suggested that id21 should find out about and become more responsive to users' needs by targeting key audiences and specific user groups. The report also stressed the need for better understanding of policy processes and how research feeds into these.

As the Information Department grew larger and more complex, so did its awareness that it needed to take a more cohesive and strategic approach. In 2003, we developed a strategy that sought to get the most out of common areas of work and to share learning more effectively across the Department. We set up working groups to explore thinking and practice on important cross-cutting themes such as partnerships and evaluation. Out of this emerged a philosophy, or set of aspirations, intended to shape the future of the department as a whole. The first was to be 'demand-led rather than technology-driven', to counterbalance the tendency within the development sector of finding a problem to fit a technological solution. We needed to understand more about our target audiences (particularly non-users) and to adapt to their demands, needs and circumstances.

Market research
This meant we had to 'get out there', to interview and talk to users, to find out what kind of information they needed, and how they use it. In other words, we needed to shift from the disseminator and broadcaster role to that of 'information-seeker' – looking for information ourselves. Information Department staff visited 9 countries in Asia and Africa between March 2004 and March 2005 to meet development practitioners, policymakers, media organizations, donors, government advisors, researchers and information workers.

We explored how development policymakers and researchers use and access development and research information in each country. Some 224 interviews were conducted in Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana,

Bangladesh, India, Uganda, Ethiopia, Senegal and South Africa. We also visited the USA to explore similar themes in the World Bank, UNDP, and other big international players. These informal interviews were undertaken with existing users and partners, as well as non-users in relevant organizations. We gathered rich insights into their challenges of finding, accessing and using development research. But these would warrant an article of their own. Here, we would like to share lessons we have learnt from using market research to improve our understanding and inform adaptation within the Information Department.

Information overload

As the country trip reports piled up, one important lesson became clear: IDS Information Department staff members are similar to many intended users of development research: interested in new ideas but overloaded with information. When we examined common understandings about research dissemination and applied them to how we shared our market research internally, some practical steps emerged. The National Audit Office's report (2003) on how government departments commission research and how well that research is used to inform policymaking provides a useful summary of why any kind of research might not be acted upon. Some of the reasons they gave were equally relevant to our own experience with market research.

Researchers produce research that does not match what policymakers need
To help avoid this, we asked Information Department staff about their information needs and to identify the topics and countries they are most interested in. Other approaches included producing tailored reports on the data on demand, for example on the use of CD-ROMs across all the countries visited.

Researchers have a poor understanding of policy questions
Where we involved consultants in country trips or data analysis, we ensured that they knew the Information Department and its services thoroughly; we worked closely with them so that their reporting and recommendations were relevant to Information Department staff. By using a combination of staff and external consultants in the field trip teams, we could balance getting the bigger picture with getting enough detail to make the research more applicable to our services.

Researchers are not good at communicating research results
Although we pride ourselves on being able to communicate other people's research effectively, we initially failed to apply these skills to our own market research. At first we produced full reports of all the country trips and summaries highlighting common findings. However, as we know, few people have much time to read let alone time to absorb and act upon the findings in long reports. IDS Information Department staff are no exception to this. So we tried out other forms of communication such as:

- including recommendations for the Information Department in summary reports;
- meetings with individuals or teams to discuss the most relevant findings for them;
- lunchtime seminars presenting an overview of the situation in a country followed by a discussion of practical ways to respond;

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- thematic overviews of issues such as how research is disseminated, across all the countries we visited; and
- internal e-discussion to debate these issues and possible responses

In terms of concrete responses, here are a few examples of things we have done, following on from the country trip findings:

- BLDS is piloting an online reference desk among IDS alumni and with six partner organizations in South Africa and Tanzania. Due to be rolled out in early 2007, it aims to overcome some of the challenges of information literacy, helping users create search strategies and make better use of the rich resources available from the library.
- Many people we interviewed seemed bewildered by the choice on the Internet, prompting us to publish a guide to help them find their way (Hurst and Brown 2006). Entitled 'A Good Place to Start', it points readers to websites recommended by Information Department staff as places to begin searching for information.
- Given the severe limitations of Internet connectivity in many developing countries, ELDIS are working on producing CD ROMs of the ELDIS site, and id21 are producing more print products, specifically for users living in the South.

Creation of the Strategic Learning Initiative (SLI)
In April 2005, the Strategic Learning Initiative (SLI) [http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/info/sli.html] was set up to enable the Information Department to respond to many of the above issues. SLI is a multi-stranded programme, coordinating the Department's research, monitoring and evaluation, marketing, and learning-based capacity development. The new team has increased our capacity for reflection on the external environment and the role of information intermediaries in international development, and to share these findings with other organizations.

Understanding and responding to the changing information environment and the needs of our target audiences is crucial to our work. We are building on the findings of our country studies with desk-based research, a series of case studies, networking activities, in-depth interviews and by establishing relationships with comparable organizations. And wherever possible we try to share our findings. In July 2006, IDS Knowledge Partnerships [http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/knowledgepartnerships/] convened the annual workshop of the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) network, and during the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) meeting in Tunisia, we ran three well-attended workshops. The workshop that prompted most interest was entitled 'Naked lunch: what we know about assessing impact' where we presented a mapping tool developed by SLI to support monitoring and evaluation and help explore how information and communications services affect development processes and outcomes, and how that might be assessed.

We also want to learn from other intermediaries and our capacity development plans are based on aspirations such as viewing activities as two-way learning opportunities and aiming to create new knowledge through capacity development.

Part 3: Bridging knowledge divides between knowledge and information intermediaries

The previous sections have described IDS' role as knowledge and information intermediary, and how we have tried to understand that role better in order to carry it out more effectively. The Information Department is now embarking on a new strategy which aims to forge links with other intermediaries involved in bridging knowledge divides.

The work of knowledge and information intermediaries within the development sector is driven by the desire to address one of two closely related communications challenges, as follows:

- a group of development people – for example, government officials, health workers or gender practitioners – experiencing difficulties in accessing and using the information and knowledge they need; or
- a particular type of information – research, certain perspectives, indigenous knowledge – is not reaching key audiences and not influencing development processes.

In carrying out the 'intermediary' role, and undertaking the kind of research and networking described above, we have found there is a lot of interest in creating initiatives to address these challenges, fuelled in recent years by the development and the increasing availability of ICTs, particularly the internet. However, there is limited understanding of the intermediary's role and how it contributes to better development outcomes. Many initiatives have emerged from different sectors, with different drivers, paradigms and logics, and are succeeding and foundering in equal measure. This 'sector' can therefore be characterised by a series of haphazard initiatives lacking co-ordination and effective learning.

In response to this, the Information Department is developing a strategy that aims to strengthen the capacity of knowledge and information intermediaries, in order to address communication challenges within the development sector. It will attempt to generate greater understanding of knowledge and information intermediaries in different contexts, to explore the pros and cons of better co-ordination between groups, provide support for the organizational development of intermediaries, and to strengthen the skills and capabilities of individuals involved. We will do this primarily by creating spaces for learning, dialogue and exchange between peers around the practical and conceptual aspects of our work[ii].

Learning-based capacity development
We envisage undertaking a partner-driven approach to address three kinds of capacity: the capacity to 'do', the capacity to claim the space to operate, and the capacity to self-renew and innovate in order to be able to respond to change (Morgan 2006). This approach recognizes that capacity exists at different interrelated levels: individual; organisational; network or sector; and the enabling environment. It also

recognizes that interventions need to be mindful of the connections between them. We will do this in the following ways:

1. Creating spaces for learning
This will emphasize forming collaborative relationships between peers involved as knowledge and information intermediaries: creating spaces for discussion, exchange and learning in order to strengthen their capacities. We are exploring, on a practical level, whether there is value in knowledge and information intermediaries coming together to develop a 'practice sector' in different contexts (sectoral, geographical, professional). Whilst this will start with bi-lateral relationships between IDS and peers, over time we hope this will develop into multi-peer relationships. We are now exploring this approach with the African Medical Research Foundation (AMREF) in Nairobi which runs the Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) Knowledge Hub; the Economic and Social Research Foundation in Dar es Salaam, home to Tanzania Online which is a gateway to information on development issues in Tanzania;, and D-Net, Dhaka, which runs the Bangladesh Online Research Network (BORN).

2. Catalysing multi-stakeholder thinking
We aim to build understanding of the role of information and knowledge intermediaries in broader development processes. This will draw on conceptual and action research being undertaken by the SLI and the thinking emerging from interactions between intermediaries. It is likely to involve convening multi-stakeholder events or dialogues, bringing together intermediaries, donors, users and contributors to explore the role of intermediaries. We are currently exploring interest in this approach in East Africa and through our existing networks and contacts.

Outcomes of the strategy
We cannot yet say exactly what a strengthened 'intermediary practice sector' would look like but it can perhaps be characterized by:
- better sharing of learning and experiences across sectors where intermediaries work;
- greater co-ordination between donor and intermediary initiatives; and
- greater diversity of people in effective intermediary roles, resulting in a greater diversity of perspectives feeding into development processes.

The capacity development strategy is in its early days, however. Some of the challenges we face relate firstly to 'intermediaries' and secondly to the approach, as follows:
- The concept of an information or knowledge 'intermediary' is not one that people readily identify with. It could be open to many different interpretations and may need to be defined more specifically with reference to particular types of information or audiences.
- Encouraging knowledge and information intermediaries and stakeholders to focus on the role of the intermediary will in itself be a challenge as it has not been a focal point up until now. In a practical sense, many people may carry out this role as an 'add-on' to their main job, unable to free the time to focus on it.
- Knowledge and information intermediaries often frame their work for their audiences as capacity building; the idea of focusing on their own capacity to play that role may be difficult to grasp.

- Getting beyond the 'capacity-development-equals-training' mental model in which Northern organizations impart their 'expertise' to others will be a challenge, particularly as moving away from training is less concrete and implies a greater time investment.
- Building relationships based on learning rather than, or as well as, doing is a model that is less familiar. There is some good work on this, for example by Henson-Apollonio (2005), but it is hard to put into practice.
- Many intermediaries work in a 'service driven' environment where they are too busy to learn and reflect, expressed in the quote: 'we don't have time to talk to people in our organization let alone outside it' (this is applies to us too!). We have also noted a practical 'doer' tendency among people in these roles that can prevent engagement with less structured forms of learning.
- Overcoming barriers to sharing will be a challenge, including crossing sectoral divides, real and perceived power imbalances, and building trust between 'competitors', particularly where resources are limited.

Conclusions

The next chapter of this story will be written during 2007. Next year those projects funded by DfID will be externally evaluated. The Information Unit has also been collecting extensive monitoring and evaluation data over the last three years, described in part above. We will carry out further detailed data collection and analysis activities over the next few months. This rich information will feed into a total re-think and consultation process with partners which will, in turn, feed into a new strategy for the information unit and new proposals for prospective funders over the next 3 to 5 years. This strategic review will, we hope, bring all our thinking together on users and partners, with a new vision for the future. It is hard to say what the information department will look like in 5 to 10 years time, but safe to say that we want to be more user-led than ever before.

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Abstract
IDS is a trusted and widely used 'knowledge intermediary' through its range of information services including Eldis, iD21, and BRIDGE. Understanding and responding to the changing information environment and the needs of our target audiences is a key area of its work. A quick overview of IDS

experience over the last 10 years is provided: including needs, aims, services, and outcomes. Assessing the impacts of IDS' information services is challenging but the Information Department has been working with the Research Communication Monitoring and Evaluation group to share learning on this issue. IDS is currently aiming to strengthen the capacity of individuals and organizations involved in information interventions to achieve development results. It aims to take a learning and relationship-based approach, to create spaces for dialogue and exchange rather than focusing on knowledge transfer and training, and to create two-way learning opportunities and new knowledge through capacity development. Involving more people from the South increases the range, relevance and quantity of content feeding into development discourse, processes and practice. IDS aims to build capacity through collaborative relationships; greater knowledge sharing; internal organizational learning; enhancing capabilities; and understanding capacity better.

About the authors

Cheryl Brown is Marketing Coordinator with the Strategic Learning Initiative (SLI) team at IDS, leading the marketing activities of the Information Department. She has been with IDS since 2002, first as an Editor and then as Marketing Officer for id21 before moving to SLI. One area of her work involves increasing understanding within the department about its external environment and target audiences. Cheryl is particularly interested in applying marketing principles from other sectors to the Information Department's work.
Cheryl Brown, Marketing Coordinator, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer BN1 9RE, UK.
Email: c.brown@ids.ac.uk

Louise Daniel is Senior Editor at id21 (www.id21.org) the research reporting service at IDS. Louise is responsible for the overall editorial content of id21 including id21 insights. She joined id21 in 1999 for three years and then left for a two-year stint advising IFAD's Office of Evaluation in Rome on communication issues, before returning to id21 in 2004. Louise gained publishing and writing experience editing a company magazine in Namibia and as an Editor with Oxford University Press.
Louise Daniel, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer BN1 9RE, UK. E-mail: l.daniel@ids.ac.uk

Catherine Fisher is Capacity Development Coordinator with the Strategic Learning Initiative team at IDS and is responsible for the emerging Information Department capacity development strategy described in the final section of the article. She has worked in the IDS Information Department since 2000, working on GDNet from its inception to handover to the team in Cairo. She also works with IFIwatchnet, an online civil society networking platform. Catherine is interested in organizational change and learning, seeing these as central to capacity development. She lurks on the KM4Dev list and participated in the Geneva and Brighton meetings.
Catherine Fisher, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex, Falmer BN1 9RE, UK. Email: c.fisher@ids.ac.uk

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[i] This section draws considerably on an internal IDS document, 'Contribution to the Information Department Strategic Review' by Geoff Barnard, March 2003

[ii] Further details of this strategy and its evolution over the coming months will be soon be available on the Strategic Learning Initiative pages of the IDS website at www.ids.ac.uk/ids/info/sli.html, or contact Catherine Fisher for further information.