

## Editorial: Facilitation for development

“We spend millions on IT systems to capture, store and disseminate ‘stuff’. We endlessly attempt to codify ‘what we know’ into different forms of media for those who might benefit from it, so they can completely ignore it. We set up communities of practice to connect the unconnected and link our structural silos. We endlessly promote the virtues of Web 2.0 and social media as the panacea of all our knowledge ills. We do all sorts of things in the name of knowledge management it seems – except tackle potentially the most productive and lowest hanging of all our fruits, our meetings.” (Cognitive Edge, 2010)

In the light of this quote by an experienced group of knowledge management (KM) practitioners, it is no surprise that this special issue of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* focuses on *Facilitation for development: Concepts, experiences, and practices knowledge management development practitioners use to obtain communication learning, and productivity outcomes for societal development.*

### What is facilitation / a facilitator?

There is no universally agreed definition of *facilitation* but a few definitions of what a facilitator is offer useful pointers: "An individual who enables groups and organizations to work more effectively; to collaborate and achieve synergy. He or she is a 'content neutral' party who by not taking sides or expressing or advocating a point of view during the meeting, can advocate for fair, open, and inclusive procedures to accomplish the group's work." (Doyle, as cited in Kaner et al. 2007)

"The facilitator's job is to support everyone to do their best thinking and practice. To do this, the facilitator encourages full participation, promotes mutual understanding and cultivates shared responsibility. By supporting everyone to do their best thinking, a facilitator enables group members to search for inclusive solutions and build sustainable agreements." (Kaner et al., 2007)

The key elements of facilitation thus revolve around: neutrality, fairness, openness, inclusiveness, helping a group do good thinking and achieve collective results, paying attention to collaboration processes, listening, support, participation and respect.

Knowledge management is overwhelmingly associated with information management – the ‘databases’ that people flag at any occasion without questioning their assumptions about what they really mean.

Often, knowledge management is also equated to the social side – knowledge sharing – though still from the perspective of setting up these tools, platforms and ‘communities of

practice that teams and organizations are expected to use and share knowledge on. Somewhat magically

Very seldom is knowledge management associated with the effective, intensive learning efforts that are put together to run conversations that matter. Yet it is that capacity to cooperate, collaborate, tap into everyone's knowledge to do their best thinking that actually makes knowledge management worthwhile and successful or futile and sterile.

The art of facilitation has a major role to play in the spectrum of knowledge management's purpose, from information management to knowledge sharing through to learning. It is a practice that expands the ability of people working together or whether at an event or in a wider initiative to collaborate effectively and come to fruitful decisions. It is an approach that maximises the likelihood of engagement and interactions among people. And ultimately it is also a boosting factor to ensure that important decisions resulting from these interactions are properly recorded and documented for future use.

Nick Milton (2014) a recognized knowledge management consultant did not fail to notice this when he stated that facilitation is [the first skill any new knowledge management team needs to learn](#).

#### **Facilitation history**

According to some sources (<http://mgrconsulting.com/index.php/reference-materials-mainmenu-34/fast-newsletter-archive-mainmenu-40/29-10-qfacilitation-in-the-90sq-by-gary-rush-mg-rush-systems> - accessed 30 March 2015), in 1950, two men (Alex Osborne and George Prince) decided that American corporations needed a boost in creativity. They formalized brainstorming - based on word association - and started a number of firms to provide brainstorming facilitators. And facilitation was born.

In 1976, Michael Doyle and David Strauss published "How to Make Meetings Work". Along a parallel path, other groups developed facilitation techniques. Groups such as the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) developed the "TOP" - Technology of Participation - method. And in 1995 these two groups met.

Although used earlier, facilitation as a practice in global development, probably did not materialize much before the late 1990s and started gaining some visibility only in the course of the 2000s, when the agendas of various development organizations became increasingly interrelated and the importance of structured, facilitated collaboration became more of an imperative.

If one takes a definition of knowledge management as what develops the frequency and the quality of conversations that get your job done, then facilitation becomes very quickly central to this purpose, by ensuring the inputs of everyone involved in these conversations that matter and helping lead the conversations to effective actions, outputs, outcomes.

## **Facilitation for development is more important than ever, but no less challenging**

The challenges being confronted by the development community, and our approaches to tackling them, are increasingly complex. Some argue that the rising role of wicked problems such as climate change -- complex challenges that have no clear solutions, evolving vested interests, and uncertain consequences -- demands that people's participation in decision-making become wider and more heterogeneous (Turnpenny, Lorenzoni and Jones 2009). At the same time, there is growing focus on the roles that knowledge brokers, intermediaries, or boundary-spanning actors and institutions play in interpreting information and making decisions (Meyer 2010; Cash et al. 2003). Facilitation processes are critical to navigating this complexity amidst a widening range of actors.

Alongside our growing appetite for wider, more complex forms of engagement, the emergence of new technologies to facilitate these forms of interaction have massively expanded the range of possibilities available to development actors and institutions. These new technologies, whether online courses, virtual conferences, or knowledge sharing platforms, to name a few, also offer new potential for the convergence of knowledge management and facilitation processes; opportunities explored by some of the contributions to this issue of *Knowledge Management for Development*. Whatever roles that new technologies might play in brokering knowledge and enabling interaction, these activities remain fundamentally *human* undertakings, and effective face-to-face engagement and facilitation processes are critical to their success (Hammill, Harvey and Echeverria 2013).

## **Where is facilitation in knowledge management, in practice, and where should it be?**

We have argued that the trends in the types of development challenges that we are addressing and the shifts in the tools and approaches that we are using are bringing knowledge management and facilitation into close contact. As such, where indeed can we spot facilitation in KM, or where *should* we expect to see it? And what skills are associated with it?

Facilitation cuts across contexts, endorses a similar palette of functions and requires a similar set of skills across these scales, only to a wider or deeper extent. These typical functions and related skillsets are not all used at the same time or for the same initiative but they are usually mixed and mashed up. They include the following:

- **Designing** processes in a way that maximizes engagement, interaction, learning and productive outcomes ó this skillset requires a good understanding of cooperation, learning and collaboration process, and sometimes also expertise in the topics addressed by the event;

- Effectively, **operationally facilitating** these events so that the efforts put into the design bear fruit ó this skillset includes deep listening, negotiation, problem solving etc. And it is where knowing a lot of the tools mentioned by Treinen et al. becomes handy.
- **Documenting** the events ó either formally or informally, graphically or otherwise so that the conversations that were held are recorded and hopefully acted upon ó this skillset includes online platform stewardship, typing, reporting and summarizing of the main insights, etc.
- **Engaging online with the ‘participants outside’**: Online facilitation or engagement with external audiences can be brought to make sure that those not physically present but interested can actually participate to some extent and contribute their best thinking too ó this skillset includes online platform stewardship too, operational facilitation of synchronous or asynchronous conversations, social media engagement and tracking/monitoring.
- **Network and trust building** ó somewhat underlying this whole set of activities is the cultivation of the collective human system. Good conversations, good cooperation or collaboration can be fostered by a strong process design and operational facilitation. One achieves durable results only if the entire collective is driving the work and if its interactions are nurtured through intense and caring relationships between individual members. Facilitation skills in this respect relate to empathy, deep listening, curiosity, positive feedback and focusing on the collective good.

A facilitator may use some or all of these roles depending on the objectives and receptivity of the audience (Laven and Pyburn). Similarly, facilitators work across the following contexts in which the above-mentioned activities and skills are put to use:

1. *Facilitating events*

Following the iceberg analogy, a lot of the visible facilitation in knowledge management happens at large events and conferences ó if the knowledge management units are (allowed to be) considering these conversations as part of their mandate. At any rate, this scale is typically where there is most chance to see facilitation taken seriously, as some event organizers realize that the success of their events depends on those facilitation skills, although there are very few instances where all elements of an ideal event are facilitated.

2. *Facilitating processes of communities*

Perhaps slightly less visibly, the facilitation of larger processes is another area where KM uses facilitation beyond events. The [issue 9.3 of the Knowledge Management for Development Journal](#) specifically looked into this issue of facilitating multi-stakeholder processes. This process facilitation goes way further than the facilitation of multi-stakeholder meetings, as it may also cover administration, management, monitoring and evaluation of these engagement processes, etc., which are not areas usually covered by knowledge management, strictly speaking.

However, the skillset that is required for facilitating meetings is of high relevance for wider process facilitation; all the more so if the actors involved have to cooperate over a longer period of time. The main difference perhaps is that this facilitation of cooperation is extended to ongoing periods or even to a permanent state of engagement, learning and documentation.

Communities of practice (CoPs) are part of these processes that require facilitation. Whether they consist of online or offline interactions among their members, the art of facilitation is often too rare a skill to make communities of practice genuinely effective or especially if those CoPs were set up institutionally, not as free and spontaneous, neutral communities like Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev).

### *3. Facilitating day-to-day conversations*

Next on the iceberg are what the starting quote for this editorial alluded to -- the millions of smaller day-to-day meetings happening every day around the world -- an estimated 11 million in the United States alone and that is a conservative estimate (dating back to 2003) (Geetesh 2013). During these, every day over 30 million PowerPoint presentations (again a very conservative estimate) are shown.

As such, this is not a problem, but as Collaboration at Work's experienced facilitator Sam Kaner would describe: these are meetings of type 1 (passing information onto people) or type 2 (seeking feedback on information) (Kaner et al. 2008). The learning dimension of knowledge management, and all the trends and drivers that affect facilitation are calling for a different kind of meetings and a different kind of skillset than preparing PowerPoint presentations.

### *4. Other fields of application of the facilitation skill in knowledge management*

Even at a personal level, there is a relation between facilitation and knowledge management. It may not be the case of overseeing collective conversations, but it relates to the process literacy that people can develop in their own work, to develop their personal knowledge management (or personal knowledge mastery) processes and preferences (Jarche 2014).

Every individual can cultivate conversations with various other people and keep traces of these conversations. The kind of social change that is required in global development greatly benefits from individual efforts made to cultivate knowledge processes at that individual level. As such, the facilitation skillset extends into personal effectiveness (in going through these knowledge processes) and into cultivating a personal learning network too, for the sake of maintaining a fertile ground for collective conversations later.

## **Where is facilitation headed in the future?**

It is difficult to tell of course where knowledge management itself is going and where in that pathway facilitation fits, but various possible trend scenarios come to mind.

### *More online facilitation*

As communities are cultivated more and more globally, and as development resources periodically go through intense periods of scarcity, it seems a no-brainer that more and more group conversations (beyond bilateral contacts) will move online and will require more and smarter facilitation than the current prehistoric age of digital meetings would have us think. This trend is explored into Mullinax and Gumann's article.

### *More extensive roles for facilitation*

Even in the unlikely case that the growth curve of online facilitation plateaus, it is fair to assume that the increasing complexity of our work will require more facilitation of group conversations. So we can safely assume that the skill of facilitation will be more in demand and probably put to use more widely too, as Lefore suggests in her article. This may also mean that facilitators increasingly connect the different scales, certainly from events to wider processes (which Mullinax and Gumann echo).

### *More specialized functions around facilitation*

A related trend is that, as the "business" of facilitation expands to more areas and is requested more often, there are likely to be more pockets of specialization in facilitation around specific functions: graphic recorders, social reporters, music conveners, group attendants, collective ethnographers etc. adding a whole new layer of meaning and results to facilitation. With more people around the globe working on these skills, more creativity and cultural perspectives are likely to emerge in what is still considered nowadays as a rather well-contained "field". The field may give way to the multiplication of facilitation "pastures" (and postures). Akude et al.; Staiger et al. and Jackson give us some exciting hints at those.

### *More resistance to facilitation*

On the other hand, one can also expect that as more events and conversations are regularly facilitated, more people may also call for some limits as sketched in the "hell" of facilitation by White and Lamoureux to be put in place, either because the facilitators called upon may not be as skilled as the job requires and may be hired in a tokenistic manner (facilitation: check!) or because the groups themselves may consider that they have progressed enough in their "process proficiency" and do not require someone that tells them what to do with their own learning and sharing dynamics. Lefore suggests some communities are wanting to break their dependency on external facilitators. This brings us to an expected final trend.

### *A more collective undertaking of facilitation*

In a majority of cases right now, there is no facilitation hired for a lot of events and conversations. When there is, it is usually devolved to a single person that has the job to see to the entire process. Rarely in global development do we see facilitators act as duos, or facilitators working with other specialists on supporting events (perhaps more so on supporting longer-term processes, however). But it is very possible that as facilitation becomes a more widespread skillset, the "process literacy" of everyone increases to the extent that the design, operational facilitation, documentation, etc., are borne by a much

larger group than in the past. Herout and Schmid indeed note that: "the facilitators' very distinct social skills are essential but not sufficient." And it thus becomes obvious that we should consider moving away from having one facilitator to having a facilitation team.

And if that trend proves true, that means knowledge management will have left some genuinely important legacy to human systems, in ensuring that the "conversations that matter" are taken care of by a collectively smarter, more capable and more resilient human system.

## **About this issue**

The articles included in this issue of *Knowledge Management for Development* offer a wide range of perspectives on, and experiences of facilitation for development. These range from reflections on the conditions needed to make facilitation successful, to assessments of particular tools and approaches, to case studies examining the use of facilitation in specific settings and contexts.

## **Papers**

Two recent phenomena related to sustainable agricultural development converge to frame the article "Facilitating gender-inclusive agri-business" (by Anna Laven and Rhiannon Pyburn) namely the prioritization of gender and the expanding role of the private sector in agro-businesses. The authors distinguish three arrangements used by large private sector players that operate in international agricultural value chains to link business to sustainable development goals and look at the role of facilitation in getting gender higher on the corporate agendas. The authors use concrete examples from their professional experiences within the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT).

Ashley Mullinax and Cydney Gumann outline in "The facilitator role within learning networks at USAID" how the United States Agency for International Development approaches learning networks and translates some of the lessons they have generated into a facilitation framework available for others to adopt and adapt. In their work they attempt to address learning objectives on industry, network and organizational levels; the authors share insights from these attempts. Additionally, they outline recommendations for the planning of a learning network and show various aspects, related to inter- and intra-personal dynamics, that a facilitator should be aware of when involved with a learning network.

In "Designing facilitation for a knowledge share fair: practical steps" Sophie Treinen et al. then take us through the practical steps for designing the facilitation of a knowledge share fair, based on the experience of several share fairs organized between 2009 and 2014 by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). This paper details the role of the facilitator in the design process and the importance of selecting a good mix of knowledge sharing methods to support knowledge exchange and the event's overarching goals.

## **Case studies**

Petra Herout and Elisabeth Schmid offer a case study 'Doing, Knowing, Learning. Systematization of Experiences based on the Knowledge Management Approach of HORIZONT3000' in which they argue that to enable successful processes of learning, rather than information exchange, they recommend a facilitative approach that actively involves all stakeholder on equal footing. The shared experiences gained in such processes can lead, through self-awareness and self-reflection, to changes in practice. In particular, they consider internal vs. external facilitation in the 'systematization of experiences' method.

In 'Group facilitation: Experiences and lessons from international agricultural research organizations' Simone Staiger-Rivas, Ewen Le Borgne, Michael Victor, Juergen Hagmann, Cristina Sette and Petr Kosina put their collective experience as well as results from a survey and follow-up interviews into an overview of group facilitation at CGIAR over a 10-year period, thereby reflecting on how the practice of event facilitation has evolved as to spread onto much wider processes of engagement.

'Co-Design for Collaborative Problem Solving' (Carl Jackson) uses Human-centered design approaches to encourage staff in the international development sector to experience alternative ways of exploring problems and forming solutions by drawing on humanitarian disciplines such as art, theater or craft. Jackson walks us through a complete co-design process using an example of a program that focuses on issues of governance and accountability by enabling citizen engagement and open, responsive government in 12 countries in Africa and Asia. Jackson makes the case for this approach to build enthusiasm for a more engaged, interactive, collaborative, and learning orientated form of group work.

In 'Where lectures meet KM4Dev practice' John Akude, Peter J. Bury, Philipp Grunewald and Jaap (W.J.) Pels track their efforts to transform a conventional conference with lectures to a more inclusive and interactive learning and sharing event, inspired and supported by the global KM4Dev community. They analyze crucial moments that shaped the facilitation process, report on its unfolding and review the effectiveness of facilitator notes, providing information and insights for others who might wish to take a similar path.

Shifting slightly away from the use of facilitation, Lefore's contribution 'Strengthening facilitation competencies in development' ó Case study of the processes, challenges and lessons of a learning alliance to develop facilitators for local community engagement' makes a case investing into developing local facilitation capacities among those who hold an ongoing stake in the development challenges being confronted. She describes the case of the IMAWESA network's systemic approach to building facilitation capacity within water users' associations. Lefore concludes with a series of lessons learned to be considered for similar initiatives, including the need for senior-level buy-in to the undertaking, and continuity in the group of participants engaged in capacity development efforts.

## **Community note**

In their community note on this issue's theme, "The Heaven and Hell of Facilitation" White and Lamoureux, two experienced facilitators, reflect on multiple dimensions of facilitation - describing the "heaven" and "hell" scenarios for each, and giving practical tips to ensure facilitation success.

### Review

In what is actually not a publication review, "Blogosphere review: Facilitating interactions through blogs and posts" draws a list of blogs and blog posts that editors of this issue and KM4Dev members have found particularly inspiring on the topic of facilitation and facilitated collective action, and have crowdsourced for this issue.

What stands out across this wide range of contributions is the flexibility and innovation that sits at the core of this wealth of facilitation expertise within the Knowledge Management for Development community. As such, we hope that this volume will serve as a resource *and* a source of inspiration for others seeking to use facilitation to navigate the complexity of our contemporary development challenges.

*Pete Cranston, Philipp Grunewald, Blane Harvey, Carl Jackson, Lucie Lamoureux, Ewen Le Borgne, Linda Morris, Simone Staiger*  
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