

Elective affinities? Reflections on the enduring appeal of knowledge management for the development sector

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Introduction

Interestingly, whilst the knowledge management fad seems to have passed its peak in the private sector, within the context of international development organisations, the appeal of the discipline seems to endure. The fifth anniversary of the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4 Dev) online community and the recent launch of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* bear witness to the persisting interest in development circles for knowledge management issues and strategies. What are the reasons behind this? Are there cultural factors that can explain the difference between the private sector's and development organisations' reception of the knowledge management paradigm? Although the question might seem academic, there is some value, I would argue, in reflecting on these issues because they might provide an insight into fairly practical cultural challenges that knowledge management practitioners face in their daily work, such as, for example, winning internal buy-in for knowledge sharing initiatives (see the second part of this article). As Vincent (2005) pointed out:

Cultural assumptions shape the public and explicit planning mechanisms of international development, but also play a part in the private professional concerns and enthusiasms of powerful individuals and groups within organisations.

I should also confess – let me throw this as provocation – that at the back of my mind there is a lingering question which I was asked on a number of occasions, namely: since proving return on investment on knowledge management initiatives is notoriously hard, has the fact that the development sector insists in embracing the discipline, whilst the private sector has largely shunned away from it, something to say about the culture of non-for-profit enterprises?

In this article, I attempt to provide some initial personal reflections on the above mentioned issues, based on my experience as a knowledge management practitioner in three development organisations. As such, this is more of a 'think piece' aimed at encouraging debate with other KM colleagues than a rigorous attempt, as it were, to provide a phenomenology of knowledge management in development organisations.

Knowledge management and development organisations: the reasons behind a continuing love affair

Perhaps the main factor that accounts for the enduring appeal of knowledge management in development organisations is the stronger motivation for development practitioners – when compared with their counterparts in private companies – to analyse and eventually overcome

barriers to knowledge sharing across organisations, communities or even governments in order to maximise their impact on the ground. The urgent need to tackle humanitarian and environmental crises, such as the Asian tsunami, the human immune virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) epidemic, or the rescue of refugees in Sudan – to name but a few examples – puts organisations under pressure to share knowhow quickly and effectively, so that the latest scientific research findings as well as lessons derived from previous projects are readily available. It is not a coincidence – as was also noted in the KM4Dev list recently - that the 2005 World Disasters Report (<http://www.ifrc.org/publicat/wdr2005>) from the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies focused on the role of information in disasters.

Another element that may explain the continued interest in knowledge management in the development context – this time externally driven – is the increased call for transparency and accountability within this sector. Rightly, development organisations face increasing demands from donors and the general public to provide detailed information on how effectively they spend their funds and what mechanism they put in place to avoid repeating mistakes that can often have a high cost not only in financial but also in humanitarian terms. For this reason, in the development context, the practice of capturing and disseminating lessons learned and best practices is often connected to monitoring and evaluation and/or fundraising purposes.

Knowledge management challenges in private and not-for-profit enterprises: a quick comparison

The private sector and international development organisations face many similar dilemmas when it comes to implementing knowledge management strategies, such as, for instance, how to encourage information flow between headquarters and regional offices, how to develop metrics to evaluate the impact of knowledge management activities, how to engage with time-stripped experts on the ground to persuade them to share their tacit knowledge with their colleagues. And there has undoubtedly been a significant level of cross-fertilisation between the private sector and international development organisations, as exemplified by the work of Geoff Parcell, a senior knowledge management professional from British Petroleum (BP) and co-author of the influential book *Learning to fly* on the AIDS Competency Model for the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS/United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNAIDS/UNITAR).

Despite these similarities, there are challenges in the area of knowledge management that are probably quite specific to the domain of non-for-profit organisations. I am listing below a few based on my experience without any claim to exhaustiveness:

1. Definition of boundaries

What are the boundaries of a knowledge management initiative in the context of a development organisation? Can the scope be confined to employees, as would often be the case in the private sector? But what would be the purpose of accumulating expertise internally on, say, poverty reduction, if that knowhow is not ultimately shared with the communities it is meant to affect? This tension often pushes development practitioners to question organisational silos in a rather

radical way (see, for example, the work on organisational learning at ActionAid as documented in David and Mancini 2004).

2. Staff engagement

Typically, employees in development organisations are driven by a strong commitment to the mission. This can turn out to be a double-edged sword when it comes to engaging them in knowledge management initiatives. On the one hand, if it can be proved that adopting best practices enhances the impact on the ground, then best practices are likely to be embraced with a passion that would perhaps be difficult to encounter in a private sector context. On the other hand, staff are unlikely to buy into a knowledge sharing initiative thanks to incentives based on material rewards alone, as may be the case in a for-profit enterprise. Furthermore, the internal culture is such that every single penny that is not spent in concrete projects is often perceived as a waste of money. Therefore, somewhat arcanelly worded initiatives such as ‘capturing tacit knowledge’ would often be perceived as having a remote connection with the development mission. It is thus unlikely to find a favourable reception and take off the ground.

3. Dealing with oral knowledge and the cultural dimension

It is already challenging enough to talk about knowledge capturing and dissemination, or, say, storytelling, in a context when everybody is an office worker. But what about the challenge of getting isolated communities of mostly illiterate *campesinos* or peasants in Paraguay to share their techniques for growing manioc (as in the case study presented in the Swiss Development Cooperation’s (SDC’s) *Guide to using story and narrative tools in development co-operation*? Or persuading park rangers, poachers and local communities to engage in a constructive dialogue on how to preserve wildlife while at the same time improving their living conditions? What techniques can be used in this context, and what ethical dilemmas do they raise? To quote Vincent (2005) again:

It is important... to ask how the understanding of different cultures is being used. Is it to strengthen communities’ understandings and expression of their priorities and values? Or to effectively ‘translate’ messages derived in the North?’

4. North to South, South to North knowledge flows

Traditionally, aid has flown from developed countries in the North to developing economies in the South. The flow of financial resources has often been accompanied by the presumption that knowledge about the best recipe for development resides in donor economies. The recognition that local stakeholders hold crucial knowledge that can inform the policy and strategic decisions taken in the North has prompted organisations to question whether they are equipped to support South-to-North and, increasingly, South-to-South knowledge flows.

A debate worth having?

Can the factors mentioned above account for the enduring intensity of the debate on knowledge management in development organisations? Or should we be looking elsewhere to justify the cultural affinity between knowledge management and the development sector? How can we

persuasively answer the challenge that the knowledge management bubble has not exploded yet in the development world just because we are not sufficiently focused on tangible financial results?

I am looking forward to exchanging views and further considerations on this topic with the readers of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*.

References

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Note

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Abstract

Whilst the knowledge management fad seems to have passed its peak in the private sector, within international development organisations, the appeal of the discipline seems to endure. What are the reasons behind this? Are there cultural factors that can explain the difference between the reception of the knowledge management paradigm in the private sector and development organisations? Reflecting on this issue can potentially equip knowledge management practitioners with some useful insights to tackle the specific cultural challenges they face in the context of development organisations.

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