

## COMMUNITY NOTE

### Communities and networks in support of knowledge sharing. Part 1

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This is the first of a two-part Community Note looking at the strategic applications of online communities and networks in development cooperation. This first part looks at how communities and networks are used to share knowledge and learn with case studies provided by members of the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) community.

I was asked to be part of the writing team for the upcoming Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Information Management Resource Kit (IMARK) module on knowledge sharing. I was assigned the units on the use of communities and networks for knowledge sharing. Because I find stories and examples of real communities and networks the best way to showcase the diversity of use, I asked my fellow members of the KM4Dev<sup>1</sup> community to offer their examples. I was happily flooded with pointers. Because the contributions of the community were so significant, we thought it might be nice to share an adaptation of the lesson as a series of two ‘community notes’ here. In this first part, I look at how communities and networks are used to share knowledge and learn. In the second part, I will be looking at how communities are used to connect people, and their creation and support.

Communities and networks are types of social structures which create diverse opportunities for people to connect in order to create and share knowledge, learn and accomplish things together.

As we have talked about ‘togetherness’, we also find ourselves in a world of new technologies that are redefining what being together means. No longer do we have to be face to face in the same space, at the same time, to participate in communities and networks. What impact does that have on our institutions and on how we connect?

#### Strategic applications of networks and communities

It is easy to say that communities and networks are places for knowledge sharing, but that is very generic. It would be hard to convince your organization to use them without some more specifics. So how do you connect this to your real needs? To help explore the value, I am going to share a series of real examples and draw a key lesson from each one. After the examples, I will provide some questions for you to consider if you are thinking about using communities or networks in your organization. Where there are significant differences between a community or network application, I will flag that.

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Figure 1. 'Tweet' from KM4Dev member Johannes Schunter via Twitter.

Otherwise, we will use the term 'communities' generically. I will start by asking some questions about what you or your organization might want or need from communities or networks.

Here are some strategic applications you might be looking for:

- (1) Share knowledge
  - Publish explicit knowledge (papers, blog posts, articles, Tweets)
  - Get exposure for you/your organization's thinking and work
  - Share your knowledge so it will be taken up more widely (scaling)
  - Find knowledge from a global community of experts
  - Engage others in knowledge sharing – particularly those you want to work with
  - Apply lessons from other fields
- (2) Learn
  - Grow beyond your own 'knowledge boundaries'
  - Get exposure to and keep abreast of the latest in your area of interest and work
  - Have conversations to surface tacit knowledge
  - Learn something in order to have the capacity to do something
  - Learn something specific in order to improve the overall effectiveness of your work
  - Find opportunities to practice with others
  - Seek answers to your questions from other practitioners and in turn, answer others' question
  - Innovate by thinking with diverse practitioners
- (3) Connect
  - Connect and build relationships with fellow practitioners
  - Discover and connect with new partners from similar and different settings
  - Find out who knows what
  - Establish your reputation and identity as a practitioner
  - Help newcomers to the field

- (4) Create
  - Build a knowledge base
  - Create new knowledge by cooperating with others
  - Collaborate on projects with others towards shared goals
  - Work with partners
  - Catalyze action
- (5) Support communities and networks
  - Connect smaller communities into larger networks
  - Help people find communities and networks ([http://reliefweb.int/rw/hlp.nsf/db900ByKey/CoP\\_Home?OpenDocument](http://reliefweb.int/rw/hlp.nsf/db900ByKey/CoP_Home?OpenDocument))
  - Create new communities
  - Create and enhance networks (support, infrastructure, etc.)

As you explore this list, you will probably find you are trying to do a number of these things. That is natural. Some will fit more easily into a community structure, while others match up better with the nature of networks.

### ***What about online?***

Internet technologies now allow people to be together across time and space. No longer are we limited to being in the same room, city or country. We can ask questions, share ideas, create new knowledge over the Internet using tools such as email lists, blogs, wikis, micro-blogs and voice-over-internet Protocol (IP). Let's consider the strategic implications for online communities and networks for your work and that of your organization. Online communities and networks can:

- provide access to more and potentially more diverse peer practitioners;
- connect people across time and geography, which is particularly important for practitioners working in isolated circumstances;
- provide a means to capture the interactions and refine them for outputs (see the work of Solution Exchange, the KSToolkit, etc.); and
- connect individual communities into wider networks of practice for spreading and sharing knowledge.

### ***Share knowledge***

#### ***Livelihoods network***

Knowledge management expert David Snowden says:

We always know more than we can say, and we will always say more than we can write down. (Snowden 2008)

Communities and networks give us a forum for saying what we know, both in writing and verbally. The Livelihoods Network (<http://community.eldis.org/.59bfe511/>) (Figure 2), which is interested in applying sustainable livelihoods approaches within international development, understands the need for a diversity of approaches for people to share what they know. They have a combination of online communities of practice where people use email and web tools to support ongoing conversations about their work, accented with a series of seminars (<http://community.eldis.org/.59b96c29/Discussions/>) and workshops that bring people together (online and offline) to have those important conversations for

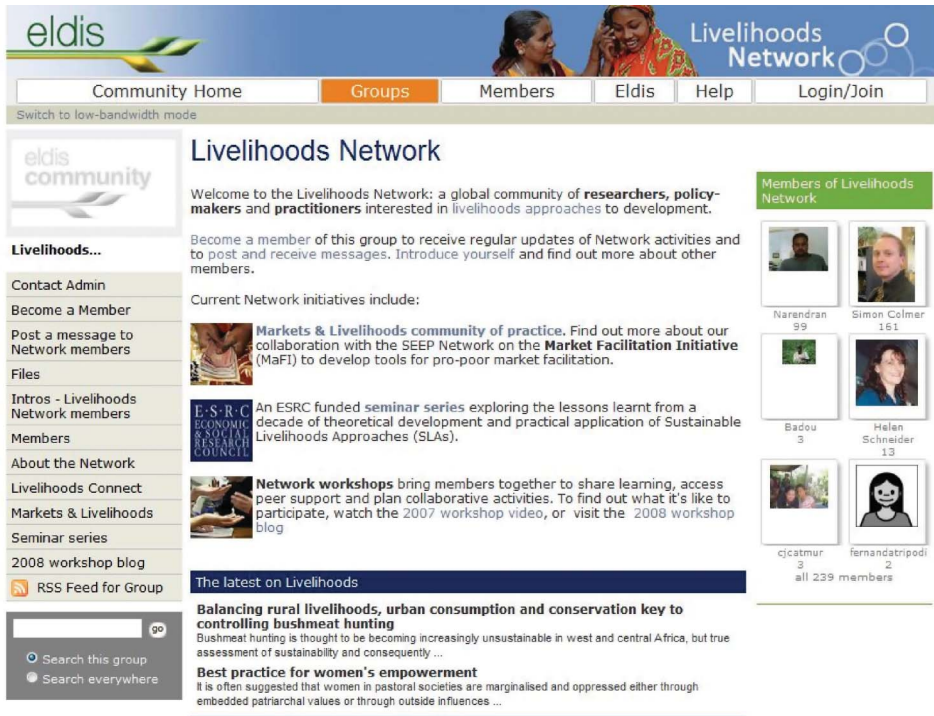


Figure 2. Screen shot of eldis Livelihoods Network home page. Available from: <http://community.eldis.org/livelihoodsnetwork/>.

knowledge sharing. On the site, they give visibility to the 200 members, so people can get to know each other. There are repositories of information as a resource. Over four years the community has had varying activity, but they find the seminars and workshops are a good way to bring in new members and re-ignite interest and participation in knowledge sharing around sustainable livelihoods. Community host and KM4Dev member Carl Jackson says:

One of the values of having a list, plus seminars, plus meta data for example, is that given the diversity of learning preferences in any population not putting all the eggs in one media basket accommodates those outside the centre of the bell curve and also the contrasts can grab attention.

## Learn

### *Agrihuddle Twitter Experiment<sup>2</sup>*

Sometimes we need a place and a group of people to experiment with to learn something new. One challenge we find today in sharing knowledge globally is figuring out how to use all the new Internet based tools. The KM4Dev (<http://www.km4dev.org>) network

#### **Box 1. Tip from Carl Jackson, KM4Dev**

Knowledge sharing happens in many ways. Consider more than one way for people to share knowledge (especially contrasting communication media), both to accommodate their needs, and to prompt moments of more focused attention.

(Personal communication with Carl Jackson, KM4Dev member)

created an on-the-spot experiment at their 2009 gathering to learn more about the micro-blogging tool Twitter to activate more network-wide knowledge sharing – the kind that flows beyond one’s close circle of colleagues. People could tap both their networks and the networks of the others in the group.

Here is the story as told by one of the participants, Peter Ballantyne on his blog <http://iaald.blogspot.com/2009/10/combining-twitter-with-live-discussion.html>:

Since the group contained various Twitter users, we decided to set up a time-bound twitter chat where the group of people in the room could quickly share experiences and insights ‘live’ with colleagues elsewhere. We called this process a ‘twiddle’ – that merged the use of TWitter with the face to face huDDLE.

Time from the initial idea to action was short, so the twitter users quickly called on their followers to join a discussion in 60 minutes time, and proceeded to help 4 new twitter users sign up and get ready to twiddle.

For some 45 minutes on 7 October 2009, the Twitter users in Brussels shared the face to face AgHuddle findings with colleagues from Addis Ababa, Brussels, Cali, Rome, and Washington DC. As the flow of messages [retweets removed] shows, it was a lively discussion that added value to the face to face discussions, helped get the main ideas documented, and provided a chance to hear views and reactions from beyond the room. It was also a lot of fun.

A side effect from the face to face element in Brussels was the way the Twitter newcomers and oldtimers shared practical Twitter tips. The side effects didn’t end with the one hour experiment. As a result, a group of people interested in agriculture in international development continue to share ideas via Twitter. You can see some of the ongoing results by clicking into this site: <http://socialmention.com/search?q=aghuddle&t=all>

### **Box 2. Tips from the Agrihuddlers**

When you are not quite sure how to do something, it is useful to have a community or network to learn from and to practice WITH! Sometimes you need to go outside of your familiar circle of contacts to learn more.

### ***Asking and answering each others questions on Solution Exchange***

UN’s Solution Exchange<sup>3</sup> is a well known resource for the UN agencies in India where years of questions and answers have been formatted, vetted and organized for easy reuse. There are 12 thematic communities of practice, each facilitated by one or more UN agencies, constantly having email based questioning and answering conversations. This is the ‘connect’ and ‘collaborate’ part of the network. But there is also the ‘consolidate’ part, packaging of their interactions which adds value beyond the moment of the email conversation. UN’s Solution Exchange, lead by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has achieved something very important by not only hosting the ‘social container’ for the interactions, but making the results searchable and available to a much larger network of people. It is a nice combination of communities and networks.

Here is the description from the Solution Exchange India Site (Figure 3) and from KM4Dev members Steve Glovinsky and Meghendra Banerjee:

Solution Exchange, an initiative of the UN agencies in India, is harnessing the power and passion of Communities of Practice to help attain India’s development objectives and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by connecting the nation’s development professionals and enabling them to share, learn from each other, and collaborate.



Figure 3.

Source: [http://www.wordle.net/show/wrdl/1205712/aghuddle twiddle](http://www.wordle.net/show/wrdl/1205712/aghuddle+twiddle)

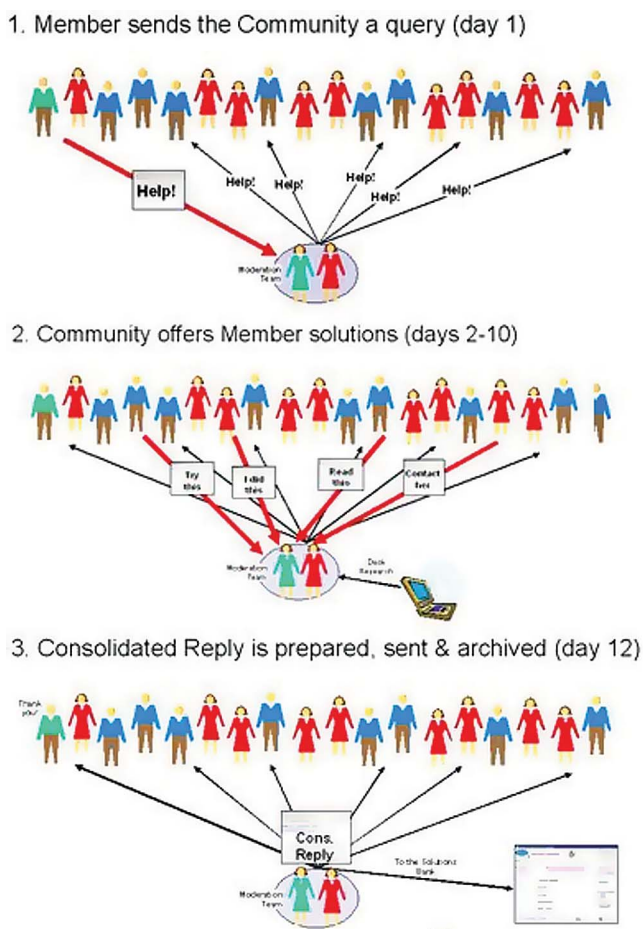


Figure 4. Solution Exchange consolidated reply process.

Source: <http://www.solutionexchange-un.net.in/> with kind permission of Steve Glovinsky and Meghendra Banerjee.

While ‘expert’ knowledge is often well documented, valuable tacit knowledge gained through practitioner experience is typically lost or ignored. Furthermore, practitioners can not always access knowledge they need, such as whether a particular idea was tried before or where to turn when facing a bottleneck. To harness this knowledge pool and help development practitioners avoid reinventing the wheel, the UN offices in India created Solution Exchange – a free, impartial space where professionals are welcome to share their knowledge and experience. Members represent a wide range of perspectives from government, NGOs, donors, private sector and academia. They are organized into Communities of Practice built around the framework of the MDGs [Millennium Development Goals]. Through moderated e-mail groups, members interact on an ongoing basis, building familiarity and trust, gaining in knowledge that helps them contribute more effectively – individually and collectively – to the nation’s development challenges.

As of January 2010, 12 thematic Communities are up and running in India: Maternal and Child Health, Water, Gender, Food & Nutrition Security, AIDS, Decentralization, Education, Work and Employment, Microfinance, ICT for Development, Disaster Management and Climate Change. Since starting up in April 2005, membership has grown dramatically – between 80 to 90 a week – and currently stands at over 37,000 subscriptions (21,000 members subscribed to one or more Community) from across the country. (Personal communication with KM4Dev members Steve Glovinsky and Meghendra Banerjee)

One specific example is the Food and Nutrition Community in India which is co-hosted and run by the FAO in India. There is a website which shares community news and all the consolidated replies, while the day-to-day interaction happens on an email list, making it easy for people in many locations to participate, even if there is low or limited Internet bandwidth. Replies are also offered in multiple languages (Figure 5).

There is a lot of support from UNDP to make these communities happen and particularly in the production of the consolidated replies and facilitation of the email lists. Solution Exchange is a good example of how an organization’s support can make a difference to communities and networks. Steve Glovinsky wrote:

Essentially, our selling point is that we are a research service supporting development professionals in a country. Our 3-part business model is (a) the research service, tapping into (b) Communities of Practice of development practitioners, in (c) an impartial UN-sponsored space. The strong focus on service provision and not CoP [Community of Practice]-strengthening is what distinguishes us from most other CoP-related initiatives. This said, the collaboration dimension can go beyond research to spin off small-group work for filling identified needs, and so when measuring the value of our service, these ‘action groups’ produce the most impact.

Community value is made visible through testimonials:

There has been a quite active discussion of issues around agricultural diversification and marketing in this group . . . The group has played a key role in encouraging discussion between agricultural experts and nutritionists to address the issues of food security and agricultural diversification. (David Radcliffe, DFID, New Delhi) (Personal communication from Steve Glovinsky)

**Box 3. Tips from Steve Glovinsky and Meghendra Banerjee, KM4Dev members**

- Where there is a lot of knowledge, invest in facilitating its flow and use/resuse.
- Expand models and practices when they work, making local adjustments as needed.



## सोल्यूशन एक्सचेंज - खाद्य एवम पोषण सुरक्षा समुदाय एकीकृत उत्तर

**सवाल :** 'समुदाय चलित व प्रबंधित अन्न अधिकोषों का विकास  
– अनुभव

संकलन: गोपी घोष, रिसोर्स परसन, राज गांगुली, सलाहकार, और टी. एन. अनुराधा,  
शोध सहयोगी

प्रकाशन तिथि: 30 जून 2009

द्वारा उत्पल मैत्रा, एम.पी.आर.एल.पी, डी. एफ. आई. डी. एवम मध्यप्रदेश  
सरकार की परियोजना, भोपाल, मध्यप्रदेश  
प्रेषित 4 मई 2009

मध्यप्रदेश ग्रामीण जीविकोपार्जन परियोजना (एम.पी.आर.एल.पी) ([www.mprlp.in](http://www.mprlp.in)), मध्यप्रदेश  
के नौ आदिवासी बहुल जिलों में कार्यान्वित किया जा रहा है। यह परियोजना गरीबी से ग्रस्त  
परिवारों को गरीबी के खिलाफ एक निर्णायक लड़ाई लड़ने के लिए प्रोत्साहित करता है।

Figure 5.

Source: <http://www.solutionexchange-un.net.in/> with kind permission of Steve Glovinsky and Meghendra Banerjee

### *UNDP communities of practice*

Communities of practice play many roles in UNDP. In addition to development-focused communities of practice in their primary areas of support to countries (environment, democratic governance, etc.), they have a number of closed, internal communities that focus on specific business functions within the organization. They are characterized as being about 'solving day-to-day problems'.

In a message to the KM4Dev mailing list, Satish Vangal shared this story of the UNDP CoPs in which he shares his views and tips of the communities:

I would like to highlight UNDPs internal Management Communities of Practice. We have 4 active un-moderated networks in the areas of HR, Finance, Project Management and Procurement and the discussions revolve around management support to development goals. Each community has 1200–1600 members from our 140+ offices around the world and Headquarters. These are the most active of UNDPs communities and focus primarily on day to day problem solving in operational issues, but also provide feedback on our rules and regulations to make them more responsive to on-the-ground needs of our offices. Over the lifetime of these communities (5 years), more than 50% of members in each community have sent at least one message.

Pros

There are no silly questions in these communities; there are no official moderators or facilitators; members feel empowered to seek solutions from their colleagues on a range of topics;



from something that they could have looked up easily online to more complex queries. Members write in to bid farewell when they move on; and welcome new members when they introduce themselves there is a real community feeling, particularly among the communities core the Finance, HR, etc. professionals in each of our offices. The fact that the actual communities are 5–6 times larger than the relevant professional grouping (HR staff, Finance staff, etc.) is testimony to the perceived utility of the networks.

#### Cons

Available technologies/knowledge bases need to be better utilized to channel queries off-net-work when appropriate, to reduce the sheer message volume, particularly in terms of repeat queries. (Personal communication with KM4Dev member Satish Vangel)

#### **Box 4. Tips from Satish Vangel from UNDP**

- Empower people to ask and answer – they know a lot.
- Hold space for the social interactions – they matter as much as the knowledge in some communities.
- Do not be surprised who is interested – it may be broader than you think!

#### ***Thematic networks at the FAO***

The FAO has been working towards becoming a ‘knowledge organization’ since 2005. One of their key initiatives was to connect people through Thematic Knowledge Networks (TKNs). Here is their definition:

A TKN is based around the interaction between peers in a Community of Practice (CoP) on a specific issue and involves the sharing of resources and experiences, as well as mutual assistance in the solving of problems. TKNs have facilitator(s), and essentially the interactions are many people to many. TKNs exist in various forms in terms of the membership of the CoP (internal staff and/or consultants and/or external) and timescale (continuous or time-bound). TKNs may perform a wide variety of functions for CoPs with common interests, e.g.: (i) evolving knowledge around one or more technical disciplines; (ii) enabling management of tasks (e.g. projects) or resources; (iii) enhancing working relations between team members; (iv) enhancing quality standards in technical or operational work. (Salokhe *et al.* 2009)

In a 2009 paper reviewing the TKNs, it was noted that the first 18 months experience of implementing TKNs held many lessons. But three things they identified stand out when we think about the usefulness of communities and networks.

- (1) Real need matters: ‘Some knowledge networking initiatives at FAO are addressing a real and articulated need which ensures focused and on-going learning activity within these networks’.
- (2) There is a place for formal and informal but not over-control: ‘There are a number of informal knowledge networking initiatives at FAO which seem to be doing very well because they remain informal. Some knowledge networking initiatives at FAO are being sponsored from the top with guiding vision and direction, in this way merely facilitated by senior management. This gives them the freedom to thrive within terms that are formal and yet flexible’.

- (3) Look outside: ‘External communities are usually characterised by vibrant and regular participation’.

e-Agriculture is a global TKN to enhance sustainable agricultural development and food security by improving the use of information, communication, and associated technologies in the sector. In shorter terms, ‘[knowledge sharing] in the area of ICT for rural development’, a shorter description evolved by the community itself. It is easier to share with others, to invite them in.

The overall aim of the network is to enable members to exchange opinions, experiences, good practices and resources related to e-agriculture, and to ensure that the knowledge created is effectively shared and used worldwide. It was launched in September of 2007 and is thriving as of January 2010 with 6000 members both in and outside of FAO. This size brings with it diversity, which can be challenging in terms of language, specific interests and the ways in which people want to be involved. FAO’s ‘sponsorship’ amounts to staff-in-kind (not funds).

While there are resources and opportunities for general ongoing knowledge sharing – to be specific these are functions for sharing news, events and information objects (URLs and files) – on the group’s web-based platform, most of the activity happens when they convene an online event around a particular topic, such as the 2009 discussion, ‘The Role of ICT in Agricultural Value Chains’ (Salokhe *et al.* 2009). This is a great example of a large network of diverse practitioners who can pick and choose to participate in what is most relevant and valuable to them. There are also some side activities to help others learn about the network, such as updates on Twitter<sup>4</sup>) and participation in face-to-face events organized by others (e.g. creating e-agriculture discussion panels at a conference out of e-agriculture community members). This last point is important, because it not only helps new people learn about the network, it helps to ‘bind’ the network together by giving existing members an opportunity to actualize some of the potential they gain from being part of the network, as well as interact on a personal basis.

KM4Dev member Michael Riggs of FAO says:

We like to take the approach of weaving knowledge on particular subjects of interest to the community (e.g. the use of mobile phones in rural development) through multiple iterations that involve different community formats. Mobile telephony, for example, was discussed in a large online/virtual forum. Then a paper was written and widely disseminated. The paper was presented as a talking point for a panel in a (non-e-Agriculture) global conference. The panel’s comments were fed into a follow-on online forum about mobile telephony conducted in a different language (from the original forum) as well as used by e-Agriculture partner organizations in their own work. This is where the ‘dynamic energy’ is found in this large, diverse community, and how an idea that pops up in one area of the network can be passed around from sub-group to sub-group, gaining and developing as it goes. (Personal communication with Michael Riggs)

#### **Box 5. Tips from the FAO team**

- While there is a place for internal communities and networks, do not underestimate the knowledge that sits outside the organization.
- Consider the power of both formal and informal communities and networks.

### ***Special interest group on Monitoring and Evaluation (MandESIG)***

Grant Ballard shared about MandESIG<sup>5</sup> which is a special interest group (SIG), a community of practice that is interested in monitoring and evaluation (M&E). If you have ever been involved with M&E you know it is complex. There are many methods, approaches and views on it. A practitioner has to keep abreast both of what is going on in M&E and the field where they are using M&E. That is a lot of learning and knowledge sharing, so it makes sense that a community of practice could help someone. The MandESIG is just such a community in the household energy (HHE) sector. There are also many CoPs on individual M&E methods.

The aim of the MandESIG is to ‘foster coordination and collaboration between and among those working with M&E with a general aim of operationalizing M&E in the household energy (HHE) sector’. On their website, they state the SIG aims to:

- support information exchange, knowledge creation and help build M&E capacity among all stakeholders;
- consolidate existing M&E resources (methodologies, techniques, best practice, reports, meetings etc.);
- Provide a framework to increase the profile and effectiveness of existing and future M&E initiatives of key stakeholders (GVEP International, the Monitoring and Evaluation for energy and Development International Working Group (M&EED), World Health Organization (WHO), GTZ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit, etc.);
- Involve and learn from M&E practitioners from outside the HHE sector (health, water etc.); and
- Work towards a closer integration of various M&E themes, including social development, user perspectives, technical, financial, health and emissions.

The community is sponsored by HEDON, an NGO, and offers the following activities:

- communicate and deliberate via an e-mail discussion list discuss;
- assemble an e-library of case studies and ‘best practice’ based on MandESIG members’ experiences;
- where consensus, act as a advocacy group; and
- disseminate materials and information to inform policy-makers, private enterprise, financing bodies, and other stakeholders relevant to the goals of the SIG.

HEDON supports not only their SIGs, but also created Regional Interest Groups (RIGs), experimenting with different forms. KM4Dev member Grant Ballard notes:

It is always worth pointing out that we have to make a lot of effort to make them work and it is not easy to get them to a point where they are self-sustaining. We are still in the process of learning how to do that.

### **Notes**

1. <http://www.km4dev.org>.
2. Sources: <http://iaald.blogspot.com/2009/10/combining-twitter-with-live-discussion.html> and <http://jschunter.blogspot.com/2009/10/how-twitter-can-support-live-events.html>.
3. <http://www.solutionexchange-un.net.in/en/index.php>.
4. [http://twitter.com/e\\_agriculture/](http://twitter.com/e_agriculture/).
5. [www.hedon.info/MandESIG](http://www.hedon.info/MandESIG).

### **Note on contributor**

Nancy White is an international practitioner in understanding and practicing online group facilitation of distributed work, learning and community groups (presenter, writer, teacher, coach, facilitator, rapporteur). She is a consultant at Full Circle Associates (<http://www.fullcirc.com>).

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