

CASE STUDY

Networks and communities at FAO: using lessons learned to nurture a learning organisation

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In mid-2008, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) completed a review of its experiences with knowledge networks and communities. The review methodology included a series of focus groups and interview discussions with network sponsors, coordinators and members. Data from the focus groups were qualitative, and the findings were subjected to a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis. A range of key factors were identified for the networks and communities to thrive and to be useful to the organization, including the need to sponsor from top, to ensure the right blend of membership, to support demand, to ensure a sound business case, to facilitate continuously, to encourage flexibility, to recognize staff time, to promote the network(s), and to monitor and evaluate. The analysis further revealed the need to cultivate an understanding of knowledge sharing in the organization, to create incentives for participating in networks and communities, and to support the proliferation and growth of networks and communities with human resources initiatives and appropriate technical platforms. The lessons learned and recommendations from the review have informed the recently formulated FAO Knowledge Strategy, and they will continue to be leveraged in the implementing of the strategy, and in enabling FAO as a learning organization.

Background

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has as part of its mandate to facilitate the flow of information and knowledge in agriculture in the world (FAO 2000). In this context, the FAO connects and enables cooperation and collaboration among researchers, governments and other institutions as well as the private sector. A key mechanism in the global facilitation of information and knowledge in agriculture are networks and communities sponsored by FAO. These networks and communities are platforms through which people interested in issues in food and agriculture can connect, share experiences, initiate collaboration and learn together.

In 2006, FAO initiated a Knowledge Forum¹ as a platform for enhancing the exchange of its wealth of knowledge and expertise. One of the three aspects of the Forum were Thematic Knowledge Networks (TKNs), which we here call FAO networks and communities. Meanwhile, a survey conducted in 2006 identified a wide range of networks and communities supported or managed by FAO (Lamoureux 2006). This survey revealed that FAO

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networks and communities should better harness the experience and expertise of their members and be better supported by new technologies.

Following on this, a pilot phase lasting approximately 18 months undertook to enable, support and cultivate existing and upcoming FAO networks and communities. These networks and communities were meant to foster knowledge sharing, allowing network members to communicate and work more effectively together on common goals or outcomes. The networks and communities covered different thematic areas ranging from more normative subject-specific areas to task-oriented groups, and they varied both in complexity and in their membership profiles. Technical support and guidance were provided by the Office of Knowledge Exchange, Research and Extension (OEK). A profile of one of these networks, the Food Security and Nutrition Forum (see Box 1) illustrates the concept of a knowledge community in FAO terms.

Review of the pilot phase

To evaluate progress and success of the pilot phase, the OEK undertook a review of 15 networks and communities during December 2007 to May 2008. The purpose of the exercise was, apart from evaluating the experiences, to identify the lessons learned and future challenges and then be in a position to use those to nurture a learning organization at FAO. For review purposes, the definition (see Box 2) of a network and community was used to guide and direct the process. This definition was nevertheless open to interpretation depending on what was emerging during the review process.

The review was carried out through focus groups and interviews as these do not take much time to conduct and provide rich qualitative data to work with. Five focus group sessions were conducted with sponsors (senior officers who are promoting the creation of a network in their areas of work), coordinators (those who create, facilitate and are responsible for day-to-day running of the network) and members (a total of 30 people) of existing FAO networks and communities.² One-on-one interviews were also conducted in some cases to complement focus group data. Both internal and external networks and communities³ took part in the exercise. All who took part in the focus groups and interviews were working at FAO.

All focus group participants and interviewees were asked questions under the following categories: network purpose, membership, participation, facilitation, return on investment, resources available, technical support solutions, network promotion, and suggestions for improvement. Responses to these questions were noted during the focus groups and interviews. The identity of respondents was kept private.

The data gathered via the focus groups and interviews was put through a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis. It was thought that a SWOT would be the most appropriate approach to the analyses as this yields a multidimensional pattern of results based on which it is straightforward to derive recommendations. In this way, the main messages that emerged informed a set of recommendations for organizational change.

Findings: strengths and weaknesses

During the focus groups, questions were asked of the participants that yielded a number of perspectives pointing to positive aspects (strengths) and not so positive aspects (weaknesses) of FAO networks and communities. These perspectives always referred to matters that are internal to FAO as an organization and reflected approaches, behaviours and

Box 1. Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Forum

The Forum was opened in October 2007 to inform strategy and policy on key global food security and nutrition issues, in order to enhance the lives of rural populations and contribute to the growth of the world economy. The Forum addresses FAO's role as a convener, providing a neutral platform for knowledge exchange and discussion of current issues related to food security and nutrition in a range of contexts. The Forum has also provided access to FAO's knowledge on current food security and nutrition issues.

Membership: Membership of the Forum has been continually expanding, standing at around 1600 members (December 2009) from 140 countries (31% from Africa, 27% from Europe). Around 27% are from UN/intergovernmental organizations (including 180 from FAO headquarters and decentralized offices), and there is significant representation from governmental organizations (10%), academic/research institutions (30%), non-governmental and community-based organizations (20%), and the private sector (c. 5%).

Outputs (December 2009):

- The Forum's principal facility is its website and accessible to members and non-members at: <http://km.fao.org/fsn/>.
- In December 2009, more than 700 documents/publications have been shared on the FSN Forum website, of which about 60% are from FAO.
- To date, a total of 49 topics have been selected and discussed on the email discussion list. The discussions have been moderated, with messages from members filtered and combined into periodic digests. A total of around 1000 postings have been disseminated. Around 200 members contributed regularly to the discussions, with significant representation from all regions. When a topic has been closed, the Introduction, Proceedings and Summary are published on the Forum website in English, Spanish and French. Summaries are disseminated through other websites such as Development Gateway and Eldis.
- A Policy Brief was prepared on 'Nutrition education: essential but often neglected'. The Brief was published on the Forum website. A booklet with summaries of the first 44 discussions will be published in January 2010.
- A total of 10 newsletters and around 300 separate items of news on current issues have been disseminated from the Forum website and the email list.
- The Forum secretariat has responded to members' requests for specific information on food security and nutrition issues, and members have expressed their views on the Forum activities.

Feedback: In a survey of a sample of Forum members (May 2008), most (59%) stated that they regularly read the Forum postings but did not contribute to the discussions, 24% indicated they both read and contributed to the discussions and 17% indicated they did not regularly read or contribute. Some 65% of members stated that the Forum definitely contributed positively to their work; 28% stated that it contributed somewhat, and 7% stated that the Forum had not contributed to their work to date. Members have indicated that the Forum's benefits have been providing access to up-to-date information on current priority issues; access to diverse practical expertise from many countries; guidance from experts on policy/technical issues; enhancement of their awareness of key food security issues and stakeholders' opinions; and understanding of the complexity of food security and nutrition challenges 'on the ground'.

Conclusion: The FSN Forum has: (i) addressed the mission and purpose of FAO as a convener and source of knowledge for external audiences, and (ii) enhanced the effectiveness of the Forum's individual members (inside and outside FAO). The Forum has raised the profile of FAO in the area of food security, increasing availability of FAO's relevant knowledge. Within FAO, the Forum has improved knowledge exchange between disciplines and units.

Box 2. Definition of a Thematic Knowledge Network

A Thematic Knowledge Network (TKN) comprises the interaction between peers in a Community of Practice (CoP) on specific issues and involves the sharing of resources and experiences, as well as mutual assistance in solving problems. 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: evolving knowledge around one or more technical disciplines; enabling management of tasks (e.g. projects) or resources; enhancing working relations between team members; and enhancing quality standards in technical or operational work.

circumstances that positively or negatively impacted the networks or communities effectiveness. The following section discusses the strengths and weaknesses organized by three main themes (participation, support technologies and culture) emerging from the SWOT analysis.

Participation

The focus group discussions and analyses revealed that *external* knowledge networks and communities are characterized by vibrant and enthusiastic participation. In other words, networks and communities sponsored by FAO addressed a real need to share knowledge and learn about matters in agriculture, globally. Their members, predominantly outside of FAO, were motivated to participate, and share and learn as part of the network. They had ownership of the process and wanted to sustain it and see it grow.

On the other hand, the analysis revealed that networks *internal* to FAO had mostly poor exchange and activity with the exception of one which was entirely bottom-up and informal. It was felt that FAO staff who are members of these networks would not normally take part in discussions because these were perceived as merely adding to their workload rather than adding value. In some cases, it was felt those who work in the FAO did not feel a real need to network in order to do their jobs well, and are not familiar with the tools.

Technologies

Participants (mostly network sponsors) said they had spent considerable time on elaborating the technology solutions supporting their networks. In general, it was apparent there were too many technologies (some better integrated in the FAO than others) to foster networks and communities, and such a proliferation was confusing.

It was also evident there was a lot of freedom in adopting technological solutions, such freedom having positive and also not so positive repercussions. Positive because flexibility in choosing an appropriate platform is key in meeting network and community needs. Not so positive because lack of coordination among the technological solutions being adopted forces each to disconnect from the rest. Clearly, if there were to be better coordination among the different solutions being adopted, then this would encourage networks and communities and be potential for cooperation among different initiatives. Such a coordination would also strengthen knowledge networking within disciplines between headquarters and the decentralized offices, and networking between subject-related silos, where multi-disciplinary work is called for.

FAO culture

During the focus group meetings, network sponsors focused on the technologies supporting their networks, while network coordinators and members identified issues related to the culture of FAO which were hindering them from deploying their initiatives. The two principal cultural factors were *lack of positive recognition of work achievements* and *reluctance to work together*. Clearly, the two were linked. All participants also acknowledged there is varied understanding in FAO of what is knowledge management and sharing, what are networks and communities, why they are useful and what it takes to cultivate them. Such lack of understanding had been leading to networks and communities struggling or failing. For networks and communities to work at FAO, there should be appropriate knowledge management and sharing approaches, practices and processes that promote, encourage, use and evaluative knowledge networks and communities as part of work systems and that inspire people to lead positive change in the organization.

Findings: opportunities and threats

During the focus group meetings, questions were asked of the participants that yielded a number of perspectives pointing to areas of network and community expansion, growth and development (opportunities), and areas where networks and communities might fail both themselves and the organization (threats). These perspectives referred mostly to matters that are internal to FAO as organization. They reflected approaches, behaviours and circumstances that positively or negatively impacted the networks or communities future and course of development. Some of these opportunities and threats were clearly articulated, while others were extrapolated based on participants' comments.

The following section discusses the threats and opportunities organized by the four main themes (FAO reform, human resources, positive culture and networks and communities momentum) emerging from the SWOT analysis.

FAO reform

FAO has been undergoing a reform process since 2005 aiming at improvements throughout the organization. The process has been further energized by an Independent External Evaluation of FAO which took place in 2007. The SWOT analysis highlighted the risk of the FAO reform not enabling an organization that nurtures and encourages knowledge sharing and networks and communities. Instead of enabling new approaches, processes and understandings of the work of FAO, and in particular those that encourage learning and innovation, the FAO reform could merely institute a new set of bureaucratic disincentives. This would be particularly likely if the reform was too focused on structure and not enough on process and approaches.

Human resources

Another risk to networks and communities not becoming an integral part of the work of the organization is if these were seen as an end in themselves rather than as a means to an end. In this sense, a related risk to networks and communities at FAO would be an insufficient continuity in human resources in general, and in the particular context of networks and communities. Vital components of a knowledge network are its facilitator and/or moderator, and yet too often short-term staff, or volunteers, are hired for these roles, rather

than using core staff with experience and motivation. At least in part this could be due to the fact that networks and communities are not seen as core to how the FAO works. This tendency in FAO, if prolonged or even institutionalized, would lead to networks and communities failing once the individuals involved leave the organization. Interested groups of staff would need to be involved with each network or community to provide the necessary continuity and avoid the risk of knowledge ‘leakage’ when a network/community support person leaves the organization.

Positive culture

At the time of the review, FAO was at a key point when it could embrace networks and communities in terms of their underlying philosophy, approaches and support requirements. This could set the organization on a road of continuing and positive change. For example, one network, the FSN Forum network, had been considerably contributing towards FAO fulfilling the role of a convenor on issues and policies of food security and nutrition in the world (Box 1). In this way, this network has been creating conditions for a positive and lasting change to the way this topic is treated by FAO and its partners. Furthermore, this network had been concretely contributing towards FAO being a facilitator in information and knowledge flow in the domain of agriculture in the world.

Allowing for appropriate changes in approaches, processes and behaviours supportive of networks and communities could make a big difference to the entire organization. The analysis of strengths and weaknesses showed that networks and communities at FAO need a supportive environment. People with interests in issues of strategic importance should be able to fully exploit the opportunities of coming together in networks and communities to learn and act. In addition, networks and communities at FAO need appropriate technological support which is another opportunity that could be leveraged. Having the right technologies in place (technology being a very tangible thing) could quickly make the benefits behind networks and communities more visible and enticing to people.

There is also a need to establish systematic monitoring and evaluation of FAO’s networks and communities. This would enrich the understanding of good practices in enabling and cultivating networks and communities at FAO and contribute to their positive and continuing evolution.

Momentum

The SWOT analysis revealed the need to build on the experiences gained and momentum generated through the networks that were part of the review. These networks had been successful in drawing a large membership base and generating a lot of enthusiastic interaction among staff and external participants. It was felt people should be encouraged to form and participate in networks and communities, as well as trained on knowledge sharing tools, approaches and facilitation. In particular, the lessons learned from the reviewed knowledge networks should be used to inform emerging networks. This should build on interested support and sponsorship, rather than directives; it should be facilitating what is seeking to emerge rather than directing this in a top-down way. Importantly, there had been a growing realization at FAO of the need to work together as ‘knowledge organization’ which in itself is an opportunity on the basis of which to engage, communicate and act. Building on this growing understanding with workshops, seminars, and case studies, as well as trusted and appropriate leadership, was what FAO should do.

Recommendations

The analysis of FAO networks and communities' strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats led to the development of a short list of recommendations for future knowledge network and community activities at FAO. The recommendations for cultivating a knowledge-sharing culture and systems at FAO which are essential for network and community initiatives are:

- In the organization, an understanding at all levels for the essence, principles and challenges of knowledge sharing, and specifically in the value of knowledge networks and communities, should be continually cultivated. It is the responsibility and interest of all to cultivate such an understanding. Special emphasis should be placed on developing these approaches in decentralized offices.
- There should be incentives such as incorporation of knowledge management into professional competencies and job descriptions. Training could also be offered to develop staff awareness and skills in key areas such as facilitation. Hierarchical and procedural barriers should be addressed in the wider context of the corporate knowledge strategy by encouraging, enabling and cultivating an open and collaborative work environment.
- There is a particular need for a corporate technology platform, or a set of synchronized platforms, to be made available for on-demand development of solutions to support knowledge networks. This platform should address the interest in exploring new (social) media. There should also be a coordinated programme for deployment of the platform that will ensure adequate awareness and training.

Following are seven recommendations for cultivating networks and communities from within and in the FAO context.

- (1) *Sponsor from the top.* Sufficient resources (human and financial) should be provided for the enabling, cultivation and sustainability of networks and communities. Additionally, there should be awareness of the important contribution that networks and communities can make to improve the Organization's performance, and provide appropriate support to staff enabling and cultivating networks and communities and/or supporting them in some other way. Awareness of what the 'right' approach to supporting networks and communities in terms of leadership, staff development, and resource requirements is also needed at all levels, as well as understanding that everyone has a role to play in the learning process.
- (2) *Ensure the right blend of membership.* Membership should where possible be at least partly external. While the 'membership blend' is important, it does not necessarily account for success. Several informal communities of practice internal to FAO do work well.
- (3) *Support demand.* Networks should be created as a response to a real and articulated need of an identifiable group of people sharing the same interests, rather than in a top-down way. The views of staff should be considered and respected in this regard.
- (4) *Ensure the business case.* Consultations should be organized with members of potential networks and communities, to establish the business case for the network and community before this is set up. This will help to ensure buy-in from the members and continued motivation and interest.

- (5) *Facilitate continuously.* Facilitation is key and should be provided in accordance with the needs of the network and community. In order to be able to do so, more staff need to be trained in facilitation and in particular online facilitation which is key when cultivating networks and communities supported by an online platform.
- (6) *Recognize that one size does not fit all.* Appropriate methodologies and technologies should be selected for different types of networks and communities. Resources need to be allocated to train and enable staff involved in knowledge networks and communities to encourage, support and cultivate them, including preparation of guidelines and development of technology. One size does not fit all, and so flexibility and openness in choosing platforms and deciding on communication and facilitation patterns is key.
- (7) *Recognise staff time.* There should be sufficient recognition for the contribution of any member of staff towards the success of knowledge networks and communities. Incentive mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that all people in the Organization reach out within and between their silos and start sharing information and knowledge among themselves and with other FAO stakeholders.

To implement both sets of these recommendations, the review with its findings has now been integrated into the FAO Knowledge Strategy, to enable a comprehensive and strategic corporate approach building on the exercise. From there, the review recommendations will be implemented as part of implementing the Strategy. In this process, it has been important to engage in consultation with groups of stakeholders so that all levels in the organization feel part of and own the process. Such ownership will support real corporate change in the context of the wider Knowledge Strategy.

Conclusions

The review of FAO networks and communities has enabled some key lessons learned about cultivating networks and communities within and from within the FAO context to emerge guiding the organization on its path of learning organization. It is the intention of the organization to keep learning from its experiences with networks and communities and constantly adjust its course in order to ensure its role of a global facilitator of knowledge and information in the area of agriculture is effectively and continually fulfilled.

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Notes

1. FAO Knowledge Forum <http://www.fao.org/knowledgeforum/>.
2. The following networks took part in the exercise: AGROVOC e-Agriculture, Ask FAO, Bioenergy, Facilitation (BlueBar), FAO Representatives Network, Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Forum, Food Security, Nutrition and Livelihoods Network, Integrated Food Security Classification System (IPC) Online Conference, Global Partnership Initiative for Plant Breeding (GIPB), Negotiation, One UN, 'Solution Exchange', Urban Forestry, WebAgris.
3. Internal networks/communities have members from within FAO only, external networks/communities from within and outside FAO.

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