STORY

The story of knowledge networks at the UNDP

Steve Glovinsky*

Adviser, Solution Exchange, United Nations Development Programme

Yes, I am the guy who started it all.

It was in 1998, before there were such things as 'Social Networks' or even 'Communities of Practice'. The IT Adviser in the next corridor was talking about 'Knowledge Management' and strange-sounding terms like 'metadata' and 'data mining'. I was a UNDP Specialist in Public Management, at Headquarters after 12 years in the field. I was a practical guy; field people are usually more worried about getting the project document in by the deadline than they are about terminologies or new-age-sounding terms cooked up by think-tank types.

As with most UNDP international staff at the time, my career track was in Management. Programme Officer in Liberia (1975), Assistant Representative in Nepal (1980), Deputy Representative in Ghana (1984). But that was my day job. In Liberia, I took advantage of my day job to design Rural Development projects during evenings and weekends. In Nepal, I became a Specialist in Decentralization; in Ghana, it was Planning. So in 1987 UNDP brought me back to New York to be one of the 15 'Specialists-In-Everything', as an Adviser in our Technical Advisory Division (TAD). That basically meant providing our keen analytical skills to every UNDP project document over $700,000, as we ran up or down the stairs (depending on the Regional Bureau) to the Project Appraisal Meeting. Often, after I shot down a particular project, they would send me out to fix it. TAD Advisers had a nice racket if you liked to travel or to avoid being in New York. So that is how I got my start visiting UNDP Country Offices.

I eventually fixed projects in about 25 offices over this period, and everywhere I went I was really impressed with the skills and talent of our national staff. They would accompany the Resident Representative (RR) to a Minister's Office and the Minister would provide a shopping list of Capacity Building-type things for the UNDP to do. The RR, of course, would be totally accommodating. Then as they would leave the office, the RR would turn to the Programme Officer and say he wanted everything on his desk by next Tuesday. And guess what? It would be there. Their expertise, it turned out, was unique; they knew how to get things done in their specific country environments. And what I learned from them is that process expertise is a distinct and valuable competency to have for working in the development arena. Development is essentially about change – hopefully positive change – but change nonetheless. These were not domain specialists, or 'experts', in the World Bank

sense. They were change managers, and their knowledge was as valuable as any expert's knowledge when it came to ensuring a successful project or programme.

Fast-forward to December 1998. Over the 1990s, we had expanded our little TAD unit into groups of 'Policy Specialists' in Poverty, Environment, Governance, etc. Somebody talked me into applying for a job to create UNDP's first regional Centers of Excellence: the Sub-Regional Resource Facilities, or SURFs. There would be nine of these to service our Country Offices with experts posted in their neighbourhood. I was very happy to have more Specialists to take the load off of our Headquarters teams, so I applied, was accepted, and got to work.

Our model was the traditional one; experts would sit in a Center and dispense knowledge to the seekers in the Country Offices. I was the 'Global Hub of the SURF System', which really looked strange on a business card. To start, I organized a test by the Global Hub to help us learn how to set these SURFs up. I found $15,000 leftover from a 'Knowledge Management' project and went to lunch with Jan Vandemoortele, then the head of our Poverty Group. I offered to split the cost of a consultant whose job would be to help field the questions coming from the Country Offices, chasing down the Policy Specialists to get them to respond. He agreed, and I brought in Jafar Javan (now at the UN System Staff College), who had worked for TAD's expert on Sustainable Livelihoods, a favourite UNDP topic at the time.

Jafar and I contacted our friends in eight country offices and asked them to each come up with five questions about Sustainable Livelihoods. We subscribed them all to an email group in order to run the test. When I said 'Go', everyone would send in their questions and Jafar would take care of the rest. Jafar got a bit nervous thinking how he was going to have 40 questions to answer all at once, but he was ready.

So I said 'Go' and they sent in their questions over the email group. Then they started to answer each other's questions. That's when the light bulb went on.

Here was the answer to my Question Number 1, relating to Egypt:

- - - - -Original Message- - - - -

From: Steve Glovinsky

Sent: Friday, December 18, 1998 1:19 AM

To: surfteam@sdnp.undp.org

Subject: SURF Team: SURF Team-questions

Here is a relevant question I was asked to look into today. The Egyptian Social Fund, for whom I am currently doing an assignment, is developing beneficiary assessments to gauge the impact of their interventions. I suggested adding social capital formation as one of the impacts to be measured. Where can they get information on indicators to include in a field assessment to determine gains in social capital formation which result from a project intervention?

RENATA LOK DESSALIEN wrote:

> Hi Steve,
>
> Just got some 70 SURF Team messages all at once yesterday which were
> being held hostage with our local server in Bamako. Bravo for the
> initiative! Will send my comments and questions shortly. Meanwhile . . . Re.
> social capital indicators, here are a few leads:
> - contact Alayne Adams (alayne.adams@columbia.edu). She is doing work

> with us in Mali on social capital and has developed a simple set of
> indicators to capture the quantity and vitality of social collective
> action at village level as well as the degree to which communities are
> capable of collective action.
>
> - check out the WB report 'Cents and Sociability: Household Income and
> Social Capital in Rural Tanzania' by Deepa Narayan and Lant Pritchett.
> Narayan's article 'Voices of the Poor: Poverty and Social Capital in
> Tanzania' published in the WB's Environmentally and Socially
> Sustainable Development Studies and Monograph Series 20 also gives
> some good leads into measuring different aspects of social capital
> (notably trust, village-level unity, associational activity . . .)
>
> - lastly, I downloaded some very interesting material from the Net
> from a simple search of 'social capital'. There are some interesting
> US-based studies on the subject that explore different methodologies
> for measuring social capital (some of which are applicable to the
> developing world as well).
>
> cheers,
> Renata

Renata Lok-Dessalien was then Deputy Representative in Mali but she had formerly been our Sustainable Development Adviser in HQ. When she went to Mali, her knowledge did not stay in her chair in New York, it came along with her. Sure enough, there were several good sustainable livelihood projects in Mali, and they were valuable to the rest of our little group.

So what Jafar and I did next was to sign up more of our friends. The response was enthusiastic; people discovered that they all had the same job descriptions and had experiences that their peers were interested in. UNDP had always bragged about its global network of 136 country offices. Well, it turned out that it wasn't a network of 136 offices, they were 136 isolated offices. It wasn't until the staff got on our email group that they discovered each other. Here I am speaking of those national officers who were the change managers, always eager to find new opportunities and channels for problem-solving.

I then went to lunch with the other Group leaders and we hired more 'Jafars'. There was no such term as 'Network Moderator' back then, so we just called them 'Jafars'. We created email groups for Governance, Environment, Private Sector, HIV/AIDS, Gender, and several others. We signed up our friends and they signed up their friends. And the buzz around UNDP was that something new and different was happening.

Now it was up to me, as the guy in charge, to figure out just what it was that was happening. It should have been about Knowledge Management, since that was where my budget was coming from. So I found Larry Prusak, whom everyone said was the Knowledge Management Guru. Larry was then heading a think-tank at IBM and I'd heard him speak at a conference in Boston. He was really entertaining, and didn't carry a laptop. He had published a book called 'Working Knowledge', as well as other interesting-sounding titles. So we brought him in to UNDP to tell us what was going on.

You can picture it: 'Oh Guru, what is Knowledge?'

And, being a Guru, he replied: 'Knowledge is what you know.'

Then he added, 'And Knowledge Management is to get what you know to the guy that needs to know it, as fast as possible'. And then he left.

Okay . . . . that was interesting, so we were on track after all. We just continued to sign up more people. More people, more knowledge.

And instead of dumping lots of documents into a website and calling it 'Knowledge Sharing', or creating one more Google Group, we created a business process similar to private-sector services called 'Knowledge on Demand'. This was a time-bound structured process for posting member queries and synthesizing the responses into 'Consolidated Replies'. We focused our members on helping each other out, offering their experience and knowledge and advice, but only when someone actually asked for it.

This was not easy. Getting buy-in from managers was the main challenge. Managers don't use knowledge; they use information, which they need for decision-making. And when managers need knowledge, they just ask their subordinates to get it for them and they don't care where their staff's knowledge comes from, as long as it's reliable. So they are not particularly in tune with the effort it takes, but unfortunately they do control the budgets. Talking UNDP into realizing that Network Moderators (the 'Jafars' now had a real name) were essential to Knowledge Management and needed actual positions, was a very long and difficult struggle.

But over time, UNDP's Knowledge Networks became the backbone of its Practice Architecture, as staff became more active and effective in sharing knowledge and experiences. And other UN Agencies came by to check us out. Eventually our networks, and our early moderators, generated comparable start-ups in the UN's Development Operations Coordination Office, the Peacebuilding Support Office, the Human Rights Mainstreaming Mechanism, UNICEF, and many other Agencies and programmes.

I have moved on to create Solution Exchange, the UN Country Team adaptation of these Knowledge Networks. But I have heard many people say that introducing these UN networks launched a transformation in how we did business. Essentially, UN Agencies don't have a lot of money. Instead, an important role of the UN Agencies engaged in development work lies in the knowledge they can bring to bear on a situation. In other words, the Agencies of UN's development arm should excel at getting what they know to the people that need to know it, as fast as possible.

Right, Larry?

Notes on contributor

Steve Glovinsky is recently retired from the United Nations Development Programme after a 35-year career. He is still working full-time with UNDP as Adviser for Solution Exchange, the only difference is that his paycheck is a pension instead of a salary.