

EDITORIAL

Learning from the past: impact of information and knowledge management on individuals and organizations over decades

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Development organizations with more than 30 years of history are going through two distinctive phenomena which are affecting their employees and their knowledge management approaches, namely the departure of the Baby boomers to retirement and the employment of the new generation of Millennials in many development organizations (Sanz, 2018). This is happening in a context of high mobility, technology and quick changes where work contracts are defined by their short-term nature, and while consultancies are characterized by an increasing high turn-over. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the knowledge economy is actually transforming the demands of the labour market in economies throughout the world (Mangabeira Unger, 2019) and this is also, naturally, having an impact on the field of knowledge management for development.

At the same time, organizations themselves are sometimes also being closed down due to changing priorities but also budget cuts. Taking the example of the UK, BOND, the British network for organisations working in international development, has established that almost half of surveyed non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were facing closure in May 2020 because of funding challenges related to COVID-19 (BOND 2020), while small NGOs appear to be particularly threatened by the government budget cuts announced in August 2020 (Hodal, 2020). In our experience, the existence of COVID-19, budget cuts and changing priorities is affecting all sorts of organizations, even well-known organizations with a renowned contribution to the ‘development knowledge ecology’ (Cummings et al, 2011). Organizations in low and middle income countries (LMICs), recipients of development aid, are also facing challenges as they receive less donor funds, possibly because they cannot ‘compete’ with the government programmes which now have more funds, better personnel and more ideas. The result is that, more and more often, ‘...an initiative that has been a guiding light in development, placing a real emphasis on learning and knowledge sharing, will be going out at the end of this year, and the development field will be all the poorer’ (Cummings, 2007: unpaginated). In this situation and for many different reasons, we expect

organizations and project will last for shorter periods of time, and we all have to be ready for that.

In this Special Issue, we focus on the legacy and impact of such organizations and their projects and programmes, but also on how other organizations are coping with personnel changes related to current trends. We would also like to explore how individuals and networks, like Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev), act as a pool of knowledge which remains, even when organizations have closed their doors. At the same time, recent articles in this journal have shown how some organizations are struggling to learn from the past and past knowledge (Hankey and Pictet 2019, Schusterman 2019). This Special Issue includes two papers, four case studies and two reflections. Many of these contributions are, in our opinion, unique and we will describe why we think this is in this Editorial. They include contributions written by the past Director of an organization which has closed, looking back at the political realities of its closure (Figueres), a development worker who took part in a livestock project in Mozambique, arguing with hindsight that the project was characterized by epistemic injustice (Boogaard) and also a framework which aims to support knowledge retention in development organizations, based on research in many United Nations (UN) organizations (Sanz and Hovell).

Examples of organizations facing closure: CTA and others

One organization which recently closed after 35 years of operation is the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA), a joint international institution of the Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States (OACPS) and the European Union. We consider that CTA has been ‘a leading light’ in information and knowledge management over these years with innovative initiatives, such as the Smart toolkit, experience capitalization, Question and Answer services, the *Spore* newsletter and many others. It has had an enormous impact on the professional lives of many knowledge managers, including on three members of this Guest Editorial team and this is also documented in our video [CTA and the culture of learning](#). The contribution has been recognized by many, including Ibrahim Mayaki, CEO of African Union Development Agency-NEPAD: ‘Allow me to convey my gratitude to CTA’s staff. Your contribution in boosting agriculture and development cannot be over-emphasised. It is my hope that the knowledge and expertise will keep improving food security and sustainability.’

In this Special Issue, two case studies deal with the legacy of CTA. The first, ‘Lessons from working with the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA): the Case of the Ghana-Question and Answer Service (Ghana-QAS)’ by *Joel Sam*, carefully documents the lessons of the Ghana-QAS project, implemented by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research-Institute for Scientific and Technological Information (CSIR-INSTI), Ghana, with technical and financial support from CTA over the 2000-2011 period. It argues that CTA has had a lasting legacy in terms of value propositions with respect to its unique approach in supporting partnership building and organizational learning. A case study which takes a minute retrospective of a project which ceased to exist more than a decade ago is a unique phenomenon in the opinion of the Guest Editors, recording its national impact but also the impact it has had on the author, a leading knowledge manager in Ghana and internationally.

The second CTA-related case study, ‘Knowledge and data management during project execution and organisational closure: learning from the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development (CTA)’ by *Mejury Shiri, Imelda Mechtilde Aniambossou, Aichetou Ba and Josina Mariëtta Leguit*, documents CTA’s knowledge and data management approaches during project execution and its orderly closure phase, serving as an example to other development organizations. The authors draw on their recent working experience at CTA to encourage development organizations, irrespective of their size, to make significantly more use of digital tools for collecting, processing, visualising and sharing data. Over the past five years, CTA used various digital tools, including cloud-based platforms and services, to integrate and interpret data obtained through monitoring, evaluation and experience capitalisation. This practice started to have a positive effect on organizational learning and KM, while also making it easier to produce a comprehensive inventory of the Centre’s intellectual legacy assets during the closure exercise. The paper also highlights the steps that CTA has taken to hand over some of these assets to other international development agencies that demonstrated a willingness to maintain and further strengthen the relevant services. This case study was written while CTA was closing, which makes it different to the next contribution, a reflection, which was written, with hindsight, some years after the organization had closed.

In the Reflection ‘Communicate and collaborate to prepare for the unexpected: the International Institute for Communication and Development in the Netherlands’, *Caroline Figueres* reflects on the closure of a prominent organization in the development knowledge ecology, namely the International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), based in the Netherlands and funded by the Dutch Ministry for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation (BHOS) over the 1996-2016 period. Caroline Figueres was the Director of IICD during its final years (2008-2016) and, in this contribution, she reflects on the IICD’s approach to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) for Development, namely multi-stakeholder engagement, demand-driven and local ownership in low and middle income countries (LMICs). From 2014 onwards, IICD aimed to transform into a social enterprise, IICD-next, but the political realities led to its closure in 2016, despite a later re-assessment of BHOS’ policy which led to a renewed emphasis on ICT and knowledge for development.

Looking back at development projects

On the whole, development organizations work with short-term projects which all finish after some time. The objective is always to draw lessons which help draft new and better projects, and, at the same time, to set the conditions for long lasting impact. This is also despite the fact that recent evidence from a meta-analysis of a project funded by the Swiss Programme for Research on Global Issues for Development (R4D) that showed that longer projects are often more effective in research knowledge utilization (Eschen, 2021). In some cases, development workers reflect on past projects and their role in them but it is extremely unusual for an individual to totally reassess a project with hindsight to demonstrate fundamentally new insights. In the paper ‘Epistemic injustice in agricultural development: critical reflections on a

livestock development project in rural Mozambique,' *Birgit Boogaard* looks back at a livestock development project which took place 2011-2013 and in which she was part of the team. She focuses on a central question in international development, namely whether development projects in Africa and elsewhere maintain, reinforce, or even cause epistemic injustice, defined as 'the idea that we can be unfairly discriminated against in our capacity as a knower based on prejudices about the speaker, such as gender, social background, ethnicity, race, sexuality, tone of voice, accent, and so on' (Byskov, 2021: 114). The study draws on 27 project documents which were searched for indications towards epistemic injustice based on four forms of epistemic injustice as presented in the literature, namely testimonial injustice, epistemicide, epistemic blindness and hermeneutical injustice. It concludes that the project contributed to epistemic injustice by imposing a Western market-based development ideology, labelling people as mainly knowledge beneficiaries, excluding indigenous knowledge and epistemologies from trainings, imposing Western concepts through project interventions, and framing research within Western categories and frameworks. The findings indicate three underlying, structural problems, namely hegemony of the agricultural modernization paradigm; Eurocentrism in knowledge-based development; and the fact that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are being used to legitimize development interventions. The findings of this study are deeply troubling because they indicate that epistemic injustice towards Africa continues but it is hidden by apparently benign concepts like 'reducing poverty' and 'reducing hunger.'

Preparing for the unexpected: COVID-19

Two of the contributions focus specifically on the impact of COVID-19 on information and knowledge management, an issue which has already been raised by Chris Zielinski in discussions with the KM4Dev community in 2020 (Zielinski, 2020). Indeed, both of these contributions emphasize the importance of documenting and learning the lessons of the COVID-19 at the level of organizations but also in their interactions with partners. The case study 'Documenting UNICEF's response to COVID-19: applied tools and practices' by *Nima Fallah, Ivan Butina and Sailas Nyareza*, explores key practices and challenges of the efforts of the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) to document its response to COVID-19, aiming to contribute to the global dialogue on organizational learning. The activities of UNICEF's COVID-19 documentation focus on five streams of work, namely documentation approaches and methodological quality; knowledge sharing and peer support; easy access to emerging lessons and related knowledge products; use of early lessons; and, finally, identifying connections with relevant initiatives within the COVID-19 Secretariat. In the long-term, the process is heavily dependent on embedded and institutionalised documentation and evidence generation routines, based on leadership support, dedicated resources, and a culture of collaboration.

The reflection, 'Investments in learning during the Ebola outbreak shape COVID-19 responses in West Africa: evidence from Sierra Leone and Nigeria' by *Alfred Makavore and Emily Janoch* of CARE International, demonstrates that building on learning from the Ebola outbreak in 2014, and from previous experiences responding to Ebola, was critical to getting an effective response to COVID-19 mobilized quickly. The time and investments in

documenting lessons learned and in building learning and collaboration spaces allowed many countries in West Africa to quickly respond to COVID-19. In particular, CARE International was able to apply lessons about communicating risk more effectively, about engaging with community leaders to reinforce healthy behaviours that would protect people, and about collaborating across partners to develop tools and resources that would support the government's public health response.

A framework for knowledge retention

In a situation of organizational uncertainty where staff are reaching retirement, knowledge retention becomes crucial. The paper, 'Knowledge retention framework and maturity model: improving an organization or team's capability to retain critical knowledge' by *Rocio Sanz* and *John Hovell*, argues that knowledge retention can be considered a broad practice within the larger field of knowledge management. KM has many frameworks and maturity models to support itself. Following a peer-reviewed process in which they discussed their work with many experts prior to submitting it to this journal, the authors have developed a knowledge retention framework and a knowledge retention maturity model. The framework aims to create a shared definition for knowledge retention, and the maturity model aims to create an approach for assessing a team or organization's knowledge retention maturity. The maturity model outlines steps to increase the maturity of knowledge retention, based on data and evidence to support action. Overall, this paper presents a vision of an ecosystem in which knowledge retention is institutionalized practice, embedded in everyone's tasks and part of the way we work.

The importance of young people

In the situation where many older people are retiring, it becomes even more important to engage and support the talents of young people. The case study, 'Mécanisme d'insertion et d'appui à l'Entreprenariat des jeunes ruraux dans les filières agricoles, Mali/Mechanism for the integration and support of rural youth entrepreneurship in agricultural sectors, Mali' by *Makono Coulibaly*, reviews the contribution of the Vocational Training Project for Integration and Support of Rural Youth Entrepreneurship (FIER), started in 2014 with support from the International Fund for Agricultural Development. The FIER project aims to facilitate the access of rural youth to attractive and profitable employment and integration opportunities in agriculture and related economic activities. The economic integration of rural youth goes through a process made up of three main stages, namely support for the identification of the idea of an economic project or choice of project idea; support for preparation of a bankable business plan; and support for the implementation and consolidation of the economic project.

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