

An interview with Kingo Mchombu

Knowledge sharing in Africa: the key to poverty alleviation?

Interviewed by Dina El Halaby

How did your interest in knowledge sharing come about?

My interest in knowledge sharing (KS) can be traced back to an action research project I did with the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada titled 'Information needs and seeking patterns for rural people's development' (Mchombu 1993) which was carried out with rural communities in three countries: Botswana (where I was working at the time), Malawi, and Tanzania. This project was done between 1992 and 2000. Essentially, we studied the information needs of rural people, designed information centres based on their needs and information seeking and use patterns, and together with the communities, operated the information centres for the duration of the project. This was an important formative period for my interest in KS. At this time I worked very closely with the IDRC Information Sciences Division which was unfortunately later disbanded, during some internal restructuring at IDRC, but it was a very important time for sharing and consolidating my ideas. One of the Centres, set up during the project, is still operating very well in Malawi in the Chiwamba Community outside Lilongwe. It operates under the Malawi National Library Service.

In the meantime, in 1997, I attended the Global Knowledge Conference held in Toronto, Canada. I was highly impressed with the discussions and predictions made by various speakers on the role knowledge management would take in the future of corporations and nations. From 1992, I had also been teaching information management at the University of Botswana and, later on (1997) when I moved to my present post at the University of Namibia, we introduced a course on knowledge management. I have always appreciated that the best way to learn is to teach others. This has been the case at the University of Namibia. We have many intelligent students who ask searching questions and this makes you think and move forward in your own thinking.

From 2000 onwards, I have worked closely with three organizations, and each has enabled me to develop further certain aspects of my involvement in KS. Perhaps the number one organization has been Oxfam Canada, through the Horn of Africa Capacity Building Programme under the leadership of Raymond Genesse. Oxfam wanted us to continue the work done previously by IDRC to provide training to communities in the Horn of Africa on KS and community development, and set up some community development information resource centres. The training and interaction with the Horn of Africa communities was excellent and another wonderful learning opportunity. Once again, I was amazed at the insights, intelligence and dedication of ordinary people, if only one interacts with them as equals and gives

them a chance to express their own knowledge and sustainable solutions. The final report of these activities and cases is available on:

<http://www.oxfam.ca/publications/SharingKnowledge.htm>

The second organization with which I worked closely was the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) of the Netherlands. We worked on agricultural information dissemination projects since I was at the University of Botswana. The area of impact assessment of information services and products was the area which is most relevant to this interview. From the various workshops, we as participants were able to come up with several publications in the area of impact assessment, including the Smart Toolkit.

The third organization has been the South African National Research Foundation (NRF) with which we have had some wonderful discussions on indigenous knowledge. This is an aspect of KS that is not often taken into account. The intention was to form an Indigenous Knowledge Chapter in each Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) member state.

Having been privileged to have contact with so many organizations and individuals, I decided two years ago that I should ensure that my understanding of knowledge management and sharing has no gaps so I joined an online distance education programme for knowledge managers offered by eKnowledgecenter based in the USA. The online course has proved extremely valuable in filling gaps in my understanding of KS. I would recommend this course to anybody interested to further their education in KS (<http://www.eknowledgecenter.com/>).

The link between KS and poverty reduction in Africa

Ideally there should be a strong link between KS and poverty reduction in Africa because, with high application of information and knowledge by the poor, they can substitute and add value to the limited resources they possess. Poverty is complex, it includes not only economic deprivation i.e. low levels of income, for example living below one dollar per day is one of the measures of extreme poverty, but it also includes affordable health services, reasonable levels of education, adult education and lifelong learning, decent housing, access to safe drinking water, access to external resources from Government and donor agencies, food security and adequate nutrition to mention but a few factors. Hence to be a success, poverty reduction strategies need to use integrated approaches rather than a single sector approach.

The importance of knowledge to development has already been discussed by the World Bank (1998), UNDP (2003) and various other agencies. In the context of urban and rural poverty, we can look at information and knowledge as two distinct components which dovetail into each other. Information refers to the poverty reduction ideas which are disseminated by agencies, the mass media, posters, video, interpersonal sources, social networks, etc. but such information is not yet knowledge. Knowledge, on the other hand, is information coming from different sources which has been consolidated, processed and internalized by individuals, a community or

society in the context of what they know already, and can either add it to their knowledge base or reject it. Thus knowledge is filtered and contextualized information which can be used to take action against poverty.

Poverty reduction in Africa has been very disappointing, despite the continuing spinning of new acronyms to describe programmes targeting the poor, such as Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRSP) of the World Bank, the Human Development Index (HDI) of the UN Development Programme (UNDP), and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) of the UN. Part of the failure of development programmes targeting the urban and rural poor comes from a KS failure of the knowledge support structures for the urban and rural poor.

The link between KS and poverty eradication is very weak because of a number of reasons: the first one is the focus on information transfer activities without monitoring and evaluating how effective the information disseminated has been. In most cases, the information needs of the urban and rural poor are seldom taken into account when they are supplied with information to solve their problem of poverty. The assumption being that they know very little and that is why they are poor, thus the knowledge system of the urban and rural poor is totally ignored when supplying them with external information. Indeed often their very way of life and culture are held responsible for the lack of development.

What are the challenges to KS in Africa?

The challenges are many because the end result is not information and knowledge sharing, for its own sake, but to overcome poverty, so we must not confuse the means with the end. A key challenge is to work with poor communities and understand the profile of poverty from their perspective so that solutions make sense to them and are not imposed from outside. This would include investigating poor people's information and knowledge system (IKS) and what exists in the system in order to identify gaps and ways of strengthening the information and knowledge system that poor people already have in place rather than try to replace it with an externally driven system.

Another challenge is to have an integrated information and knowledge system to reflect the fact that poverty is an integrated human phenomenon rather than a single sector phenomenon. Only bureaucrats see poverty as a single sector. The poor have many issues and questions to address to overcome poverty, thus a comprehensive integrated information and knowledge system, which includes their own knowledge resources, is needed which uses multiple communication methods (including word of mouth, visual materials, drama, games and cultural interaction, and networks) to reach out to the whole community without excluding women, youth or minorities.

An important challenge is to foster a culture of knowledge sharing among the community members by overcoming information hoarding tendencies. This would also include addressing the problem of the community not knowing what it knows as it is normal to undervalue the vast resources of knowledge among its members. The belief among the poor is that those who come from outside the community have superior knowledge.

Another challenge is the retraining of agencies which support the rural and urban poor communities with information to be able to accept participatory and two way communication approaches. Such training should include such agents of change learning from the urban and rural poor on how to solve development problems. Such learning by the change agents should include a review of how they transfer and share information in communities e.g. the use of information gatekeepers (two step flow of information approach) who may not always share the information with others in the community equitably.

In some cases we are now witnessing ICTs being used to address the needs of the urban and rural poor. The main challenge in Africa is that of shortage of local content which matches the needs of the rural and urban poor, local languages and, of course, problems of connectivity, including Telecom monopolies. The other challenge with ICTs is how to design them to blend seamlessly with the existing information and knowledge sharing system so that they are not imposed by external agencies and simply perpetuate exclusion and powerlessness.

What are the most effective approaches or tools for KS in Africa?

The best approach is to start with an investigation of the information needs to address poverty eradication which would include an evaluation of the existing information and knowledge system of the community. The latter should have a component which looks into the KS elements to establish how the communities access poverty eradication information at present and what the gaps are. Ever so often, many false assumptions are made about the information needs of poor people and the absence of any meaningful information and knowledge system of their own. Such an investigation should preferably use Participatory Rapid Appraisal methodologies to ensure not only high participation but awareness-raising and, of course, quick data generation which can be acted upon.

The characteristics of the community should determine the mix of tools used for KS. High on the table should be facilitation of networking, which holds a prominent position as a tool for KS. One way of facilitating networking is by creating community information centres which also serve as social clubs for the people to come and play games, sports, drama and other social activities. This would then be the platform on which information sharing can be accommodated.

Certainly visual communication is of great importance to communities where the use of print information sources is not always favoured because of low literacy levels. This would include the use of videos, pictures on the walls, and posters to convey messages concerned with poverty issues and other behaviour change goals. For example, wall charts which show progress on such issues as infant mortality, attendance at immunization campaigns, production of agricultural crops, adult literacy and primary school attendance, etc. are all valuable in showing the community where it stands against these goals.

Oral communication is also very important as a tool in addressing poverty issues as most of the people rely solely on it for KS. This can be woven around discussion forums facilitated by adult education and community development tutors or even religious leaders, regular talks given by agricultural and livestock extension workers, public health workers, and school teachers. Radio listening clubs, particularly for development programmes such as health, adult education, agriculture, and small business management, is another useful tool. This could be enhanced by discussion forums where the issues raised in the radio programme are discussed further and its application to the community made more explicit.

Print materials in the form of books and pamphlets, textbooks, and recreational reading such as novels and plays can also be a valuable tool in poverty eradication. The contribution to education in general at primary, secondary and adult literacy levels is crucial to achieving the objectives of educational programmes.

ICTs are increasingly being used for KS in many rural and urban communities in Africa. The key problem is that ICTs rely on 'infomediaries' as most of the urban and rural poor lack ICT use skills. Indeed, the lack of local content reduces the value of ICTs as tools for KS. However, in the long-term, ICTs have great potential because of their power to share information over a vast geographical space and time span, thus achieving economies of scale in the creation and use of content. Given that there are core common areas of information needs for addressing rural and urban poverty, one could envisage content development from a central location to address the common core areas of need, focusing on accessing and adapting global information and other forms of external information, shared over a nationwide network on poverty alleviation. The information needs which are location specific and dependent on climate, agricultural practices, and cultural heritage (e.g. indigenous knowledge) would be created with local communities.

Another crucial and enabling tool is participation of the community through a committee system which is representative of all sections of the community. The whole ethos of KS for poverty eradication should be towards making people empowered by the new knowledge rather than more dependent. Through such participation it would become easier to facilitate discussions on information and knowledge as both a factor of production and public good which can help the community to achieve its development goals. Part of the challenge of empowerment is to enable the community to use information and knowledge to think for themselves and about their situation and how to work together to get to solutions. The community should learn to create their own meaning from both incoming information and their own traditional information and knowledge in the light of social and cultural changes which have and are taking place.

Based on your work, where was KS was successful in making in impact?

There are several examples from the Horn of Africa programme between Oxfam and various communities which are described in chapter 7 of 'Sharing knowledge for

community development and transformation (<http://www.oxfam.ca/publications/SharingKnowledge.htm>). The one example I would like to share among the various case studies in the book is the Illubabor Community Libraries and Information Centres (South West Ethiopia) because it showed what the rural and urban poor can achieve if they participate fully and have control of an information and knowledge system programme. The programme had several goals, including to: increase the use of information and knowledge to help rural people to manage social changes, improve on production, and learn better health practices; nurture the ability of people to innovate and spread innovations locally, support rural people to become independent and regain their dignity; and increase the use and appreciation of indigenous knowledge which had become marginalized.

The process to reach these goals included capacity building through training, participation of the community in decision making, strategic planning, advocacy, resource mobilization, and strengthening civic public space in society. A preliminary evaluation by an independent researcher showed that the Illubabor community information centres have achieved many of the goals they set out to achieve in terms of identifying their own development problems and are progressing to address them with the resources they have. The realization that information and knowledge are an important development resource has led to advocacy for community information centres throughout the district. Resource mobilization has taken off with communities making contributions to support the information centres. Use of the information centres has increased ranging from 3% to 321%. The goals of poverty eradication such as increasing production, improvement in education, use of indigenous knowledge, and improvement in health status are all showing very positive movement.

The second case is the Chiwamba Community Information Centre in Malawi, outside of the capital Lilongwe, which was set up as part of the action research programme supported by IDRC in the early 1990s to early 2000s. The sharing of knowledge was based on a simpler conceptual framework but the Chiwamba community has benefitted very much from the development information centre. After an investigation into the rural development information needs of the community (carried out as part of a larger project covering rural communities in three other Southern Africa countries), an information strategy was designed with the community which essentially provided visual, oral, cultural, recreational and print-based information services on various development themes. The impact of KS has been very positive in the Chiwamba community in terms of increasing literacy levels, formation of KS networks, use of health services and improved health behaviour. For example, there were many reports of people learning to use condoms for the first time as a result of the information centre providing information and condoms. The Chiwamba Community Information Centre has witnessed a stream of visitors from other African countries who want to replicate the model in their own countries which is a sure sign that it is regarded as a success.

How can we measure the impact of KS on poverty reduction?

This is a question that requires deep reflection because poverty affects many people in Africa and the possibility of impact derived from KS would be very useful in combating both extreme poverty and moderate poverty. It is estimated that 45% of people in sub-Saharan Africa live in extreme poverty while 30% live in moderate poverty thus making it an average of 75% of the population who are poor. Further recent data shows that poverty has grown since the 1980s. The vision of the MDGs is to end extreme poverty by 2015.

To reduce poverty one needs to address the causes of poverty, hence success of KS would be measured in terms of how it impacts on reducing the causes of poverty. Key causes are:

- low savings and capital formation so KS should provide ideas on alternative ways of generating savings for poor communities;
- growth in trade for example through agricultural surplus selling to nearby markets to generate more income so KS would have the goal of creating higher production and the introduction of high value crops to replace low value crops;
- capacity building through literacy, improved education for children, including female children, should also include increments of technological knowhow in the community, so KS would have the goal of addressing all the human capital issues required in capacity building.
- poor health caused by infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB and malnutrition which calls for KS interventions directed towards behaviour change to prevent such diseases from decimating the most productive members of the community and thus increasing poverty by creating child headed households and many orphans;
- lack of innovation which may be common because of poverty restricting the flow of innovations from outside and within the community thus robbing the community of new ideas to increase production, start small business and commercialize their agriculture to a higher level of production;
- population explosion because the poor choose to have many children as a safeguard for old age. Such children will not get good education and will in turn want to have many children, ultimately use of resources, overcrowding in cities, etc. thus high population leads to deeper poverty and deeper poverty leads to high population. The KS intervention would have the goal of family planning and cultural attitude change in favour of smaller families.

The success indicators for KS would have to be the rate of growth in savings and capital formation in the community as a result of adoption of innovations on community savings and capital formation strategies. In the second case, indicators would be the growth rate of trading done by the community as a result of changing the economy towards creating products they can sell. In the third category, indicators would be the rate of improvement of education and changes in capacity building in the community; the fourth could have indicators which show the decreasing percentage of people who have fallen sick due to the various ailments as a result of KS. Fifth would be indicators which show the growing numbers of innovations and appropriate technologies the community has adopted as a result of KS. Sixth would be

indicators on the growing numbers using contraceptives and other family planning techniques as result of KS.

However, there are several problems to be overcome before one can use KS to address poverty in such a strategic and integrated style. Most projects are single sector projects so this causes difficulties when addressing poverty issues. Such an integrated approach calls for KS to be part of an information and knowledge system (IKS) controlled by the community. Second is the difficulty of attributing impact to single KS intervention when other variables may have played a part. In many cases, most projects do not have baseline data from which to measure impact at a later stage.

Overall, however, KS holds great promise for poverty eradication and it is a challenge to KS practitioners interested and committed to poverty eradication.

What KS activities are you involved in at present?

At present, I am involved in several KS related activities. My normal duties include teaching and research, and we are currently offering a knowledge management course to undergraduates. I am also supervising a research student who is researching knowledge sharing in selected organizations in Namibia. I just finished preparing a paper for a conference in Durban, South Africa, entitled *Knowledge management and sharing in Higher Education: the case of the University of Namibia*.

I am also working on a request from Book Aid International to prepare a discussion paper on *The role of libraries in poverty eradication* in collaboration with Ms Gertrude Mulindwa of Uganda Library Services and Gray Nyali of Malawi Library Services. I just finished reading a book by Jeffrey Sachs called *The end of extreme poverty: how can we make it happen in our lifetime?* This is a fantastic read! So I do have a few things on my plate at the moment!

References

Mchombu, K. (1993) *Information needs and seeking patterns for rural peoples. Development in Africa*, IDRC: Gabarone

Mchombu K. J. (2004) *Sharing knowledge for community development and transformation*, Oxfam: Ottawa
<http://www.oxfam.ca/publications/SharingKnowledge.htm>

World Bank (1998) *World Development Report – Knowledge for Development*, Oxford University Press: New York

UNDP (2003) *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a knowledge society*, United Nations Publications: New York

About the interviewee



Kingo Mchombu is a professor in the University of Namibia and works in the Department of Information and Communication Studies. He is originally from Tanzania where he worked in the public library services where he held various positions including librarian, and between 1980 and 1986 held the post of training officer. Between 1986 and 1996, he was a lecturer at the University of Botswana. In his present position, he lectures in communication for development, community information services, knowledge management, marketing of information services, and media and information studies research. He also supervises Masters and PhD research students. He is currently researching the role of public libraries in economic development, and the indigenous knowledge system of the San community in northeast Namibia. He also serves as Deputy Dean in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Kingo Mchombu, Department of Information and Communication Studies, University of Namibia, Private Bag 13301, Windhoek, Namibia.

Tel.: 264-61-206-3641 E-mail: kmchombu@unam.na or kmchombu@yahoo.com