IKM Summaries No. 7

How wide are the ripples? The management and use of information generated from participatory processes in international non-governmental organizations.

For some time, international non-governmental (development) organizations (INGOs) have been transforming the way they relate to the communities they wish to serve and assist. Part of this transformation involves the use of participatory approaches, which are now widely employed by INGOs for a broad range of organizational procedures. Such approaches emphasize the importance and validity of local knowledge, experiences and skills. However, just how far do the voices of those engaged in participatory processes travel, especially when they come from the grassroots level? To what extent do they influence or add to the organization's own knowledge, decisions and policies? And, in turn, how do they add to a wider understanding of development across the spectrum of development actors?

More and more development organizations of all types and sizes are using participatory methods and processes in their work. This helps them transform their relationships and include local input in their programmes and priorities. Participative methodologies cost time and money. However, if applied well, they can empower the communities involved and boost the success rate of the development initiatives with which they are associated. They also offer unique and detailed information about local realities and perspectives. These in turn can help to deepen our understanding of the processes in which we are involved. Nevertheless, as the authors Hannah Beardon and Kate Newman demonstrate, such learning does not take place automatically and much of this expensively acquired and valuable resource is currently being wasted.

In fact, there are many different challenges and issues which hinder the flow of information generated through participatory processes.

As part of the IKM Emergent programme, the authors researched how widely the information generated through participatory processes, especially at the grassroots level, is recognized and used – whether in neighbouring programmes and parallel projects, or as a contribution to the body of knowledge which the wider organization draws on for learning, planning and policymaking. The research involved a literature review, interviews with people from the field of international development, and a series of reflection processes with staff from several international NGOs - ActionAid, Concern, Plan International, Healthlink Worldwide, Panos - with a presence in the UK, all of which resulted in six detailed case studies.

Rather than dwelling on the reasons why voices at the grassroots level fail to get through, the paper identifies ways – small and large – in which people and organizations have been managing to successfully promote the flow of information from grassroots participatory processes. Everyone who works in international development is aware of the challenges and tensions. Those of us who have been working on participatory approaches know how difficult it is to deal with power issues, to deepen and strengthen participation without alienating ourselves from our wider organization, and in particular the activists and pragmatists who just want to get on with solving problems.

Two of the key issues identified by the authors during their research included:
- **Management and accountability issues.** These affect how organizations can or do elicit and use information. International non-governmental (development) organizations (INGOs) have dual accountabilities - to donors and communities - often requiring different or even conflicting approaches to planning and reporting.
- **Language and culture issues.** The work of INGOs is wide reaching; working directly with poor communities and local organizations and also with national governments and at international forums. While a range of perspectives and opinions may be sought to feed into

work within a particular context, there are differences in language and culture between local and international, and between programme and policy which can be difficult to breach. As international NGOs strengthen their presence in international policy arenas, they are required to present their analysis in more exclusive, technical policy language, and employ people who can intervene powerfully in that domain. This requires, at best, the translation of poor people's agendas into policy jargon, and at worst a detachment of policy from grassroots analysis. There is also a tendency amongst international development NGOs to represent the issues, needs and stories of change in positive and simplistic ways, obscuring the complexities and political decisions and alignments that are a necessary part of the development process.

All of these are tensions which interfere in the free flow of information from grassroots participatory processes through international organizations to policy influencing and decision-making. There are also knowledge management issues of data storage and organization, and the ethical questions which accompany them.

Whatever the fundamental merits or difficulties with participatory methodologies, the persistent failure to make full and efficient use of information is a genuine knowledge management issue, and one which has implications for institutional relationships and structures. Some of the key questions faced by many INGOs are:
- "How can a huge organization be managed so as to be flexible and responsive to people at the grassroots, while ensuring the confidence of donors that it is doing what it promised?"
- "How can people feel safe and secure enough to let go of their own power and the control of the situations they are managing?"
- "How can organizations create cultures which value different perspectives, and go against the huge tradition of western academic and expert knowledge?"

Some of the case studies demonstrate that accountability and listening cannot be one-off, self-contained processes. They require changes in the way an organization works, where power is located and how it is exercised. This requires political will, and it is easy to see the difficulties in getting those with power to give their full backing to challenges directed against that same decision-making power. Institutional support for accountability or bottom-up processes was highlighted as one of the key issues that needs to be addressed.

The authors commend several INGOs for introducing structures which use routine participatory processes to systematically feed grassroots voices into their organizational processes of planning and evaluation. However, the authors also argued that while these large organizational structures are necessary, they are not sufficient to change the culture and power of development knowledge, or to tackle the tension between accountability to donors, with its restrictions on flexibility in planning and responsiveness to what is being said on the ground. Furthermore, it was clear from the case studies that there is still a real problem of capacity for effective analysis, capturing and sharing of the outcomes of participatory processes. And this requires not only skills and time at the grassroots, but attention to recruitment criteria and performance management across the board.

The opportunities provided by systems such as ALPS and PALS need to be seized in order to make participatory processes transformative not only for those directly involved, but for those who are listening too. The case studies suggest that the strategic use of products such as oral testimonies, critical stories or qualitative scenarios, could increase the reach of voices from the grassroots. This may require dissemination strategies in the planning of participatory processes, and paying attention to the capacity of people managing these processes to write up the outcomes and share them strategically. This offers a genuine opportunity of increasing the diversity of the body of development knowledge on which organizations and their staff base their plans, decisions and policies.