

IKM Working Paper No. 8
Summary

Knowledge management and multiple knowledges: a multi-case study within the Netherlands.

The development sector comprises a broad spectrum of stakeholders with diverse geographical, social and cultural backgrounds, life experiences, personal beliefs, and norms and values. It is also a knowledge-intensive sector. Indeed, it is now widely accepted that development organizations need to have an effective knowledge management strategy in order to avoid 'reinventing the wheel'. This raises several questions: "Who should be involved in these knowledge management strategies?", "To what extent are 'multiple knowledges' – (namely knowledge taken from a representative cross-section of development stakeholders) - taken into account in these knowledge management strategies?", and "What results can a development organization hope to realise when key development stakeholders are excluded from its knowledge management initiatives?". A study of attitudes towards knowledge management within three different types of development organizations unearthed some answers.

Research methodology

The concept of 'multiple knowledges' is relatively new. An exploratory study was therefore conducted to gain insights into the dynamics of the concept and how it relates to knowledge management strategies in the development sector. To allow a cross-case analysis, case studies were carried out across three levels of development organizations: multilateral, bilateral and non-governmental. At the same time, the knowledge needs of development professionals within these organizations were explored, along with their experiences of knowledge sharing and attitudes towards it. The research combined qualitative and quantitative methods and included four methods of data collection: a literature study, an analysis of archival data; a standardised survey (Knowledge Management scan); and 37 in-depth interviews with development professionals.

Whose knowledge 'matters'?

The paper begins by attempting to clarify the concept of 'multiple knowledges'. It does so by exploring 'multiple knowledges' in relation to the development sector as a whole, and various expectations from and attitudes towards knowledge management in particular. For example, funding organizations often require different knowledge than development organizations working in the field. To compound this situation further, development solutions tend to be developed by Northern non-governmental organizations (NGOs), based on Northern perceptions of reality, without taking into account the knowledge or viewpoints of those whom the development initiatives are meant to help. The danger is that, by ignoring 'multiple knowledges', the focus inevitably switches to meeting the internal organizational needs of NGOs in the North rather than addressing knowledge deficits in the South. Social networking and Communities of Practice (CoPs) were therefore advocated by this study as a means of stimulating knowledge sharing and encouraging the integration of 'multiple knowledges' in development practice.

Attitudes of development professionals towards knowledge sharing

The attitudes of development professionals, combined with their own knowledge needs, provide additional insights into their awareness, or lack of awareness, of the relevance of 'multiple knowledges'. Such attitudes are also reflected in the knowledge management strategies of development organizations. Different factors that have to be considered when developing a knowledge management strategy include: **internal knowledge sharing** between colleagues *inside* the



organization; **the role of information and communication technology (ICT)**, especially when massive geographical distances are involved between headquarters and regional offices, or development workers who are active in remote, rural areas; **management's vision** and how this influences the knowledge management strategy; and **staff members' incentives (and disincentives) to share knowledge**.

The role of management

Development organizations should not only focus on the differences in knowledge between the South and the North; they should also be aware of the different layers of knowledge within their own organizations. For example, between different generations, and staff members with a different hierarchical status and years of tenure. Management needs to be aware of these differences, particularly how they can inhibit knowledge sharing within the organization. Examples of such differences were given in the paper, including staff members' personal experiences of them.

It was also concluded that management should be aware of the fact that it can stimulate the integration of 'multiple knowledges' into day-to-day practice by creating a supportive environment: one that encourages staff members and development partners in the South to take part in Communities of Practice (CoPs), go on field visits, and engage in cooperation and dialogue with each other. The study also revealed five forces that affect knowledge sharing within development organizations.

The way forward

To sum up, the research clearly demonstrates that 'multiple knowledges' exist throughout all the layers of the organization, although awareness and integration thereof is highly divergent. If organizations aim to become more responsive to the needs of the recipients of development aid, the different organizational dimensions which strengthen awareness and the integration of 'multiple knowledges' deserve management attention.

About this IKM Summary

This *IKM Summary* provides an overview of the following *IKM Working Paper*:

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