Learning about Patterns of Learning within the Programme Mobilising Knowledge for Development Phase 2 (MK4D2)

This paper captures some of our ideas about the patterns of learning established within the programme Mobilising Knowledge for Development (Phase 2, MK4D2) and some of the processes we have in place for capturing learning. MK4D2 is a relatively large programme of work designed to strengthen the Knowledge Intermediary sector. Large programmes need to learn, it is helpful to capture big and small lessons. We have found two tools that seem to be helping us and this paper outlines the tools in its second half. This paper also points to some of our early lessons – both good and bad – with the aim of contributing to the strength of the sector.

Introduction to the unusual format

This paper captures some of our learning from the programme Mobilising Knowledge for Development (Phase 2, MK4D2) *and some of the processes we have in place for capturing learning*. The lessons were first presented to our donors, DFID (UK), in the form of a snakes and ladders game, and we have tried here to preserve the unusual format of our delivery. The game was chosen for three reasons.

1. There were so many lessons that not all of them could be discussed within the limited time of the meeting – we needed a process of randomly choosing some to discuss.

2. While the lessons were invariably connected to each other, the development of the lessons was not linear – one lesson was not the precursor to another, even though one lesson contributed understanding to another. We therefore wanted a way of showing both the randomness and connectedness of the lessons and that their development was not a linear process.

3. We wanted to break free of PowerPoint deliveries! All too often lesson learning and accounting to donors can mean a sanitised delivery through PowerPoint. Adults learn by exploring, and monologue presentations often do not enhance uptake of learning. Feedback from the game was mixed however it certainly stayed in the memories of the evaluators!

In each Practice Paper published, we share our experience and learning. We are presenting ideas that we are exploring and that others in the intermediary sector might like to explore.

Our experiences contribute to the body of knowledge, but rarely if ever contain incontestable insights. This paper should not be read in isolation, however, and should be seen as complementary to other work conducted on related issues of capacity development, knowledge management, and policy influence.

The knowledge and information intermediary sector comprises those who seek to improve flows of knowledge between actors in decision-making and change processes in order to generate better development outcomes. Intermediaries act in a range of ways: enabling access to information; helping people to make sense of it; and facilitating connections that enable knowledge to be shared between stakeholders. It is a practice sector which cuts across other sectors.
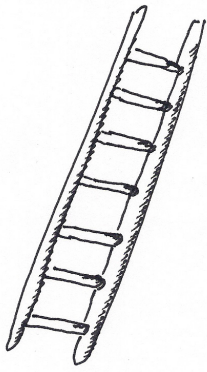
Start your journey with a Ladder (a positive lesson learnt): We don't have to wait until we have learnt a lesson to talk about it – publications can be about lessons *being* learned rather than learnt.

This paper then is structured a little like a snakes and ladders game. The lessons learned are flagged in stand-alone text boxes. In most cases the box summarises the lesson. For more detail on any lesson please contact us (see back page). The boxes do not relate to the main narrative that it is alongside. The main narrative weaves its way through the boxes, and the reader can choose to 'land' on a square and read that particular lesson. The alternative is that you find a die and generate a random number to read the boxes in a random sequence – but we doubt any reader will actually do that.

As discussed above, a feature of the original presentation was that we had more lessons than could be reasonably communicated in the given time. In this paper we have again c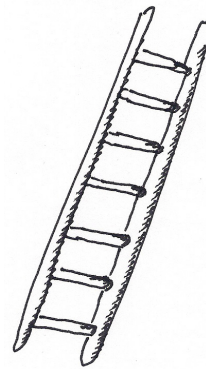hosen a random set of text boxes, and the lessons learned documented here are not a complete set of our emerging lessons from the MK4D2 programme.
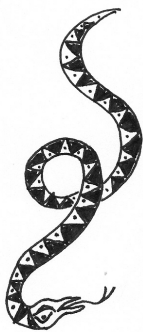
Background of the programme

Mobilising Knowledge for Development (Phase 2, MK4D2) built unsurprisingly on MK4D (Phase 1). In Phase 1 MK4D was attempting to enhance research communication and knowledge intermediation by supporting it from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). It generated a number of high quality products that enhanced the reach of research into the policy environment. However the generation of those products was mainly IDS-centric, with IDS acting as the hub of a hub and spoke network of contributors.

During MK4D (Phase 1), the programme established a team for learning. The Strategic Learning Initiative sought to identify how best to strengthen Research to Policy processes. It sought to engage with all programme staff and partners through workshops and consultations and this resulted in two key insights.

Innovative approaches to strategy development can be engaging. Using graphics and even cartoons enables people to view their work through different lenses. It is a rapid way to enable discussion beyond business as usual.

- First that Knowledge Intermediary work was in itself a sector. It was different from Research Communication *per se*, and there was a sector that needed support. Knowledge intermediaries are seeking to enable policy and practice actors to engage with multiple types of knowledge and information, while Research Communication has an agenda of promotion of a particular piece of research. The desired outcomes of the two are different.

- Second, that along with the view that Knowledge Intermediary work was a sector, was the idea that IDS was only one player, one element in a network, and that to strengthen that sector it should not seek to be central to the network but to develop the capacity of others. In MK4D2, the Impact and Learning Team was established to animate learning within the programme. The learning processes documented below are a result of the ILT enabling the programme staff and partners within MK4D2.

Snake (a negative lesson learnt): Donor policy influences the ability to implement approaches. For instance DFID was undergoing its own transition in its use of its own communications and its views on research uptake. This had some impact on how MK4D2 could promote itself and engage with the sector.

MK4D2 built on the two key insights highlighted above and was designed to focus on partnerships for co-construction, capacity building and on strengthening the sector. MK4D2 is not IDS-centric but sees IDS as an enabler to the Knowledge Intermediary Sector. In this paper we are therefore only covering early lessons from the first 18–24 months of this transition. The main focus is on specific areas related to transition in developing new ways of work, contracting and building partnerships, processes for working, learning about different contexts, learning about demand-driven approaches in the sector, and putting in place learning frameworks. This paper is the first in a series on our lesson learning for MK4D2 and sets the scene on putting in place learning frameworks.
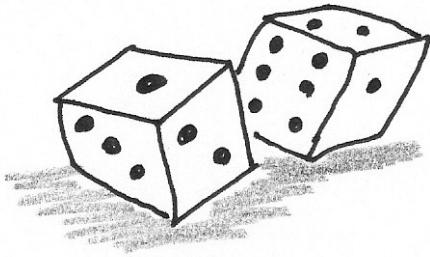
Space (a lesson identified but not yet addressed): Outcome Mapping is strong on planning and weaker on M&E, people need support to operationalise OM Monitoring and Evaluation.

There needs to be considerable investment in staff time (through workshops, trainings, peer reviews) to create an outcome orientation. The Development sector has for a long time focused on linear thinking (Logical Frameworks) and activity and output orientation. IDS staff were not unlike many programme staff around the world who have followed this trend. Shifting to be more outcome-orientated takes significant investment.

Mobilising Knowledge for Development 2 - the transition

The transition, from IDS-centric to IDS being a part of a network, has not been easy to implement. Nor has it been easy to describe in brief. For instance, the IDS website still talks of MK4D in terms of services. It states:

'MK4D is a coordinated package of work from IDS's most prominent knowledge sharing activities, funded by DFID to reduce global poverty and injustice by supporting more informed decision making by those in a position to influence change' (www.ids.ac.uk/go/knowledge-services/mk4d, accessed December 2011).

It talks about *Services* supported by MK4D. For instance of BLDS it states:

'The British Library for Development Studies (BLDS) Europe's largest research collection on economic and social change in developing countries. BLDS operates a number of services specifically designed to provide remote users with access to over one million research materials' (www.ids.ac.uk/go/knowledge-services/mk4d, accessed December 2011).

And yet a notable achievement of BLDS this past 18 months has been the support of a partner organisation, ITOCA, in its work on information capability: 'The effectiveness of ITOCA's courses have also improved as a result of this collaboration. Changes to content and teaching approach were, as a result of this programme, adopted by ITOCA's National Liaison Coordinators, and subsequently by participants of those courses in training staff and students at their own institutions. In this way, 83 course participants have gone on to train some 669 staff and students in their 32 respective institutions' (MK4D DFID Annual Report 2011).

The website also talks about Eldis *as a service*. 'A broad-based gateway to development information, providing easy access by web and email to a wide range of high quality online resources. The new *Eldis Community service* uses social networking tools to support engagement with users and networking between them' (www.ids.ac.uk/go/knowledge-services/mk4d, accessed December 2011).
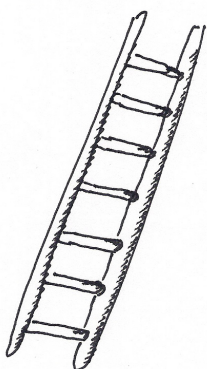
Use multiple formats in case one doesn't work. E.g. in Uganda there was an electrical power cut and the team used Post-It notes and flipcharts to progress with the workshop.

And yet the site is enabling the Knowledge Intermediary Sector to be strengthened by its own networking: 'The *Malawi Development Exchange*, which promotes the production and use of Malawian research, has 350 members drawn from diverse sectors in Malawian development research, policy and practice. This group exchanges research knowledge via a small editorial team in the Malawian National Library Service, and this is then packaged and disseminated via the MDE site on the Eldis Communities platform' (MK4D DFID Annual Report 2011).

Partnerships can easily drift into donor/beneficiary default relationships and active measures need to be put in place to keep the partnerships as equal as possible.

New way of working

What these web pages cited fail to communicate is the completely different way that many of these services are operating.

For instance, BLDS presents as a library service, with its HQ at IDS. However during the last 18 months it has worked with a number of groups in Africa on Information Capability (IC). It has enabled these groups to develop modules on IC which can be delivered to librarians and their clients with a student-centric approach. IDS is home of the famous Robert Chambers who championed the idea that development best takes place when adults are engaged in their own learning. While he proposed this in the context of community mobilisation and problem identification, BLDS has been able to take these lessons into the training for Information Capability. In MK4D2 their work is not only an IDS-centric service, but a building and strengthening of the sector.
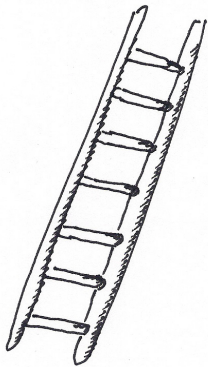
Processes help partnerships to run smoothly. Lots of lessons from MK4D programme and elsewhere suggest that there is need for systems and processes for working in partnership, yet these initially were not set up and a lot was done *ad hoc*.

Similarly, Bridge (another knowledge service of the IDS) were an early pioneer in the way they developed their Cutting Edge Packs. Nevertheless at the start of MK4D (Phase 1) they were an IDS-centric 'product', a pack of information sourced and informed by experts. During MK4D (Phases 1 and 2) their process evolved. Now their process for creating the packs begins with the advisory group. They engage their networks to form communities of learning, and from these communities the ideas for the subject areas of the pack emerge. The loci of control is no longer in IDS but in the advisory group.

This shift in the way MK4D works has not been easy. It is relatively easy to decide to write a product, like ID21 (another knowledge service of the IDS), and to gather and collate information and articles, and then produce to time a briefing note that communicates clearly and concisely. When the control of the co-construction sits with a partner, the process is often not centrally managed and is as weak as the weakest link. Partnerships depend on understanding each other, and many of the lessons from this first year have been about how to set up and develop partnerships. Partnerships also depend on influence rather than control. If IDS is engaging with a partner by giving them a subcontract with terms and conditions for delivery of a product, this is not necessarily the heart of MK4D2. It is not about partnership *per se*, but about subcontracting. Partnership requires considerable transaction costs – a lot of time talking and finding common agreement on what needs to be done and by when.
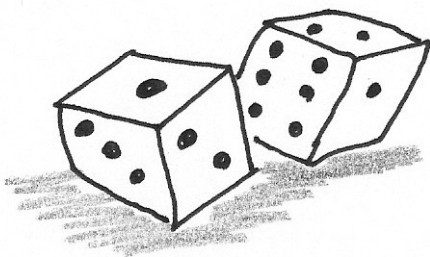
Uncertainty about funding causes strain in partnerships and delays in delivery. We know from the MK4D programme experience that lack of certainty about future funding has knock-on effects for how a programme is implemented but we have recently insisted on short-term contracts with at least two existing partners which has put strain on the relationship because our actions don't match our words in terms of our commitment going forward.

The shift also included changes in IDS. Apart from decreasing the number of people to implement the programme, there was a change in everyone's job description. 'Editors' have a different skillset from 'facilitators' or 'convenors'. The most common role now is the convenor – someone tasked with engaging with partnerships to stimulate or convene the growth of a product or service around a thematic area. So the 'health convenor' seeks to look for partners who are producing health knowledge intermediary services and products, and seek ways they might strengthen the others' work. This way of working is very different from seeking to strengthen your own work. This was about the need to have staff more oriented to diverse Southern contexts – a change that was much more than just a change in job descriptions.

> **Lack of continuity of personnel can mean established systems/plans are lost. Our recommendation is to give organisations who are attempting to dramatically shift the way they work with their core processes enough time to enact them. People who were comfortable working one way need time to adjust their expectations and to adopt and professionalise the new ways of working.**

As stated at the start, this paper is the first in a series that documents our MK4D2 learning to strengthen the wider Knowledge Intermediary Sector. We cannot put all lessons in one paper, and some lessons only come over time. For instance we are beginning to learn a lot about the challenges of keeping a view on project outcomes, milestones and partner capacity in this networked way of working. However, given that this first paper sets the scene and some of our learning from the first 18 months of the programme, the following focuses on the processes for capturing learning.

Capturing learning

So how then are we capturing learning in the programme? Any programme should have a monitoring and evaluation system, in order to be accountable to its funders, and to capture learning. The development sector talks of formative evaluation, gaining insights that will form the programme, and summative evaluation where the achievements are summarised, often for accountability. The norm for programmes is to have systems that collect and collate information, but only reflect on it at key moments. We talk of interim evaluations or end of term evaluations. In MK4D we wanted to learn on a more regular and frequent basis, to embed learning as part of the programme. We have had varying degrees of success, but there are two key instruments that we have employed.

Objective, Reflection, Insight, Decisions (ORID)

The ORID process was introduced to us by Christine Hogan, a short-term member of the Impact and Learning Team and the MK4D programme during its start-up. ORID is an acronym for a focused discussion after an event. An event might be a workshop, or partner interaction, a conference, or completion of a particular task. So for instance, we discussed gender mainstreaming and had a working group determining how best IDS could ensure that we were gender sensitive in all aspects of our work. When the group finished its report, we had an ORID on how the process of how the working group went, and the more informal insights into how IDS responded to the challenge of gender sensitivity.
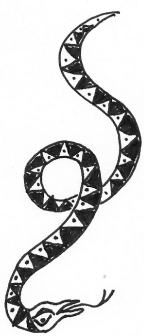
> **Commissioned strategies/plans are seldom implemented.**

ORID is a four-step focused discussion. It seems it best works when there is a facilitator who has not been engaged with the event. Trying to do a 'self-ORID' often means that the chair or facilitator doesn't get to voice their own opinions and is left out of contributing to the learning. We have generally tried to use it by one of us interviewing others either individually or as a group.

Extract of ORID guidance notes

Interviewer tips: As the interviewer you need to help people through the ORID process. Keep an eye on time, in particular making sure that people do not spend too much time on the first sets of questions leaving no time for the last questions. This is not a script, you will need to improvise, for example by adapting questions here according to the situation. You will also need to ask probing questions to help the interviewee dig deeper – e.g. 'Could you say more about what you mean by "good"' or 'Why do you think that was the case?' Finally don't be judgemental or add your opinion. Good luck!

The four steps are:

1. What HAPPENED? Objective questions: facts, data, senses: see, hear, touch.

- What did you plan to do? (Goals)
- What was the situation like? (Context)
- What images or scenes do you recall?
- Which people, comments or words struck you and why?
- What sounds do you recall?
- What tactile sensations do you recall?

2. What did you FEEL inside? Reflective questions: reactions, heart and feelings.

- How did this experience affect you?
- What was the high spot? What was the low spot?
- Were you surprised/concerned/angered/elated/curious/confused/depressed at any time?
- Where there points when you and/or others struggled/laughed?

3. What did you LEARN? Interpretative questions, critical thinking: so what?

- What was your key insight/s?
- What can you conclude from this experience?
- How does this experience relate to any theories, models and/or other concepts?

4. What will you DECIDE to do (or not do) as a result of this experience? Decision questions, now what?

- Has this experience changed your thinking in any way?
- What will you do differently as a result of the experience?
- What would it take to help you apply what you learnt?
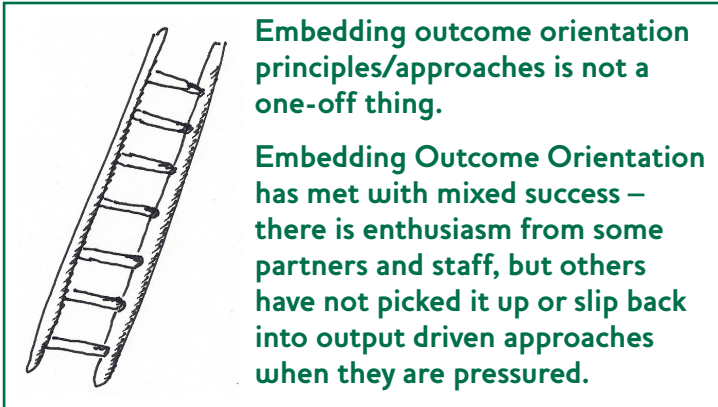- What would you say to people who were not there?

Extract of ORID Guidance notes for MK4D programme
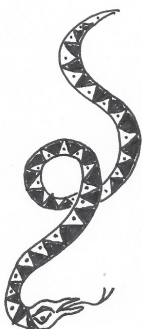
Unsupported secondments are stressful for the individuals involved.

We have conducted 32 ORIDs by the time of writing, relating to small events such as a single workshop in a single country, up to larger events such as an international workshop with multiple partners, and the gender mainstreaming working group. When undertaking a similar event, the notes from an old ORID are considered, to ensure that the same mistakes are not made again.

One of our key lessons about ORIDs is that sometimes people need to be chased to perform the ORID (we have found it depends on the team and their managers), and that consultation of older ORIDs certainly doesn't happen very naturally in the busyness of life. A key element in making it all work is to have a champion who nags everyone to consider previous ORIDs and a supportive management.

Embedding outcome orientation principles/approaches is not a one-off thing.

Embedding Outcome Orientation has met with mixed success – there is enthusiasm from some partners and staff, but others have not picked it up or slip back into output driven approaches when they are pressured.

Learning labs

Our other instrument has been 'learning labs'. These again are 2.5 hour reflections which can be applied to any overarching question. A typical one might be 'What have we learnt about partnerships?', or 'What have we learnt about co-construction'? We may tackle two overarching questions at one lab.
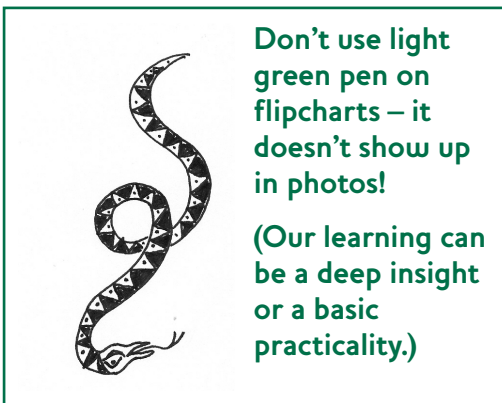
The team and guests gather around two blank flipchart sheets of paper placed on a desk. One overarching question is put at the top of each paper, and four sub-questions are put at the corners. The four sub-questions are always: What do we know? What do we suspect? What evidence (or resources) do we have? and What else do we want to document?

We then have 15 to 20 minutes of *silent* reflection, writing what we each know onto the flipcharts.

The method of the lab seems to us important for its inclusion of a number of subtle elements. The silence in the initial 20 minutes is one of those subtleties. We find that one person's writing sparks another person to think of something and add. The 20 minutes in silence writing on the sheets works well. We think we have gained an interesting insight – 20 minutes is long enough for some people to exhaust what they know or can think about the subject. At about the 15 minute mark people will back off from writing. However, in our experience, almost every time, two to three minutes from the end a new set of thoughts emerge from these people who thought they had given their all, and they write new and interesting comments on the paper.

Similarly, the silence works differently from discussion. In a discussion a linear pathway is created, with the next speaker adding to the thoughts of the previous speaker. But in a discussion we have passing thoughts that we have to either interrupt the discussion with, changing the flow of thought, or park our thought for later and then most often forget. By having silence and focusing on barely structured comments on the paper, our thoughts can build on anyone else's thoughts at any time and in any pathway. We create not a pathway of discussion but a landscape of ideas.

Don't use light green pen on flipcharts – it doesn't show up in photos!

**(Our learning can be a deep insight or a basic practicality.)**

After the silence, then the group draws together around one flipchart, and the written comments are read out. Discussion then ensues from each comment, often with the author explaining what they meant. At this point discussion is valuable as it unpacks the initial idea. The paper however draws the group back to other points as and when each sub-point is concluded.

A note taker should be commissioned, and it is best to decide who will write up the learning before the discussion starts. We have also found that it's valuable to stop perhaps 30 minutes early, or to keep 30 minutes free immediately after the session, so the person writing up can do so while it is fresh in their mind.

One of the strengths of this approach is that it does not require preparation. A seminar series or a facilitated workshop requires investment beforehand. A learning lab can happen without preparation; although it often requires follow-up to capture the learning and ensure that learning is formative.

Again these need to be championed. As deadlines and busyness overtake people it is easy to set them aside. The Impact and Learning Team have made the afternoon of the last Thursday in the month their own learning lab, considering two to three research questions, and ensure that no other meetings can take precedence. This is difficult to keep to when a deadline is fast approaching, or the Director is saying that's the only day he can meet with the manager of the team. However, without that discipline there is so little other time for reflection. As a sector we are intended to be a *learning* sector. We want our clients, policy actors, to learn from our knowledge intermediation. How will they do that if we ourselves cannot find the time to reflect and learn?

The learning lab format has worked well for us. As we said above, it has been particularly good because it does not require preparation. We have been quite strict with ourselves and we set aside the time and all challenge each other to prioritise it. Our portfolio of questions is growing and that enables us to come back to a question to see how our answers/comments are changing. It has proven easy to invite guests. Again they do not need to do any preparation, and
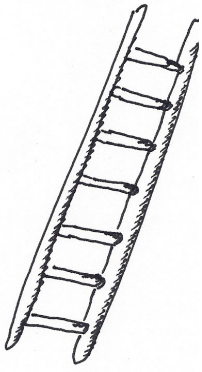
Learning from learning – reflection helps to improve future action. However while Learning is valuable it can be shallow and does not automatically feed into future action, it is most valuable if it is deep and applied.

therefore can be invited spontaneously. Indeed inviting people from MK4D to participate is a good way of broadening learning. We will admit to one shortfall in our implementation of learning labs and that is that we try to take time at the end to reflect on what this means for our work and next steps but this doesn't always happen.

Conclusion

We began this paper describing in brief the MK4D2 programme and its transition from MK4D (Phase 1). With its aim of strengthening the intermediary sector we have had to change our way of working. We work collaboratively, without an IDS-centricity, as part of the Knowledge Intermediary Sector, in co-construction, in Information Capability, in profiling Southern content, in open access.

For such a complex programme we have had to introduce regular and frequent instruments of learning, to form the programme and guide its direction. The paper has described ORID and Learning labs, the MK4D programmes' two main instruments for learning.

We hope our main contribution through this Practice Paper In Brief is to reveal that it has not been easy to embed learning into such a programme, and that it requires work. Champions are required who will ask people if they have done an ORID on their recent experience. Managers who are supportive of a learning environment are required. It is not an easy path, but we believe it is a worthwhile one.

Partnerships cannot be driven like in-house activities. They take time to establish and while they can be influenced they cannot be controlled. The logical framework and the associated donor accountability need to take this into account.

We have also shared some of specific insights in the text boxes. We have tried to be transparent sharing the good and the not so good, in order for there to be a public good, and to work towards our goal – a strengthened Intermediary Knowledge Sector.
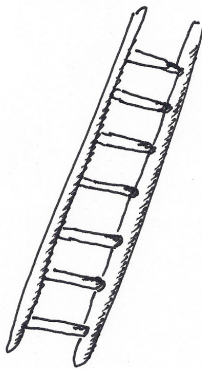
Learning is often seen as a luxury that is dropped under pressure – it needs to be manageable, embedded within processes and championed.
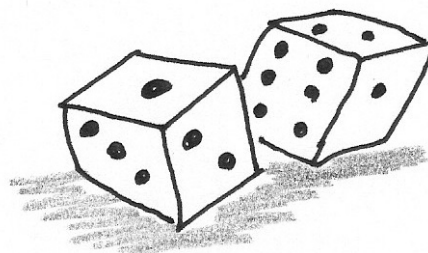
Congratulations – you reached the end of this paper!

Unfortunately this is not end of learning!

This paper is only the first in a series of learning from MK4D2. Large programmes need to learn – it is helpful to capture big and small lessons. The whole Knowledge Intermediary Sector needs to learn and share that learning. We hope you will document your own learning and share it with us.

Learning About Patterns of Learning Within the Programme Mobilising Knowledge for Development Phase 2 (MK4D2)

About the Impact and Learning Team (ILT)

What makes development research accessible, relevant or appropriate for people outside the research community? Does development research get its due in policymaking and practice? What would be value for money in research communication?

The Impact and Learning Team at IDS are interested in how communication of research brings about change - in particular, what happens when people and technology mediate between researchers and decision makers. We use the term 'intermediary' to describe people and technology acting in this way. We think they play a critical role in making knowledge accessible, relevant and responsive to demand.

The work we are doing in the Impact and Learning Team (ILT) is exploring and testing this assumption using action research. We support people to think about the difference they want to make as well as how they are going to go about it. We draw insights and approaches from IDS's history of research, and the fields of marketing, strategic planning and evaluation, and capacity development.

This Practice Paper is an output from our work.

Recent papers in this set

Batchelor, S., Gregson, J., and Crooks, B. (2011) 'Learning about an Alternative Approach to Strategic Discussions,' *IDS Practice Paper In Brief* 2, Brighton: IDS

Ishmael Perkins, N. and Okail, N. (2011) 'The Large Conference Re-Imagined and Re-visited,' *IDS Practice Paper In Brief* 3, Brighton: IDS

Evangelia, B. (2011) 'Learning About New Technologies and the Changing Evidence Base for Social Science Research and Decision Making in International Development,' *IDS Practice Paper In Brief* 4, Brighton: IDS

Hogan, C. (2011) 'Learning about the Role of Culture in Research Policy Intermediary Work,' *IDS Practice Paper In Brief* 5, Brighton: IDS

Batchelor, S. and Hogan, C. (2011) 'Learning about "Learning Styles" in Getting Research into Policy Use and Practice?', *IDS Practice Paper In Brief* 6, Brighton: IDS

Perkins, N. I. with Batchelor, S. (2011) 'Learning' from and Within a Multi-sited Organisation', I*DS Practice Paper In Brief* 7, Brighton: IDS

Birchall, J. Batchelor, S. and Hayes, C. (2012) 'Learning about Mainstreaming Gender in Knowledge Intermediary Work', *IDS Practice Paper In Brief* 8, Brighton: IDS

Birchall, J. Batchelor, S. and Hayes, C. (2012) 'Learning About Reflecting Knowledge: An Approach for Embedding Reflective Practice in an Action Research Film', *IDS Practice Paper In Brief* 9, Brighton: IDS

Institute of Development Studies Brighton BN1 9RE UK
T +44 (0) 1273 606261   **F** + 44 (0) 1273 621202   **E** ids@ids.ac.uk   **W** www.ids.ac.uk