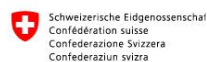

Evaluating the impact of knowledge brokering work

**Analysis of an e-discussion on
the Knowledge Brokers' Forum**

Catherine Fisher
Impact and Learning Team
Institute of Development Studies
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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper summarises a rich discussion about how to evaluate the impact of Knowledge Brokering work that took place on the Knowledge Brokers Forum during October and November 2011. The debate aimed to share members experience and insights about evaluating impact in order to be better able to evaluate our own work and build greater understanding of the potential of the sector. This summary aims to draw together the richness of the discussion, bring together themes and identify emerging areas of consensus and ideas for action.

As we know, the term Knowledge Brokering (KB) covers a wide range of purposes and activities; consequently approaches to evaluation will depend on what outcomes you are trying to achieve and why you are undertaking an evaluation. In exploring how to evaluate KB work, the debate began to uncover the range of purposes and types of impact that Knowledge Brokering is trying to achieve. A range of approaches to understanding different kinds of impact were shared and – while as one contributor pointed out, *“it’s generally a mistake to try to develop a grand theory of everything unless you are quantum physicist”*, it may be possible to develop a sense of what evaluation approaches/questions/metrics are suited to the different kinds of impact KB initiatives are trying to have.

The resources shared in this discussion and collated in the [KBF Impact Resources](#) document and [wiki](#) will help.

While understanding the differences between KB initiatives is essential for undertaking meaningful evaluation of those individual initiatives, approaching this as a sector could enable us to go beyond demonstrating that specific projects had particular impacts, and move instead towards a deeper understanding based on meaningful comparison that helps us to understand why particular projects had particular impacts and what that means for other projects and approaches.

The challenge for building a broader understanding of the impact of knowledge brokering is to overcome the differences and the context specific nature of a lot of the work and instead identify the synergies and similarities. If we are able to identify synergies in the outcomes that KB work is intended to achieve then we may be able to build up a picture of what kind of KB interventions work better in what contexts. This discussion took us some way along this route.

A word of caution: many of the ideas and terms used in evaluation are contested by people far more knowledgeable in M&E than the author of this summary so no doubt there are mistakes or areas of contention in how this has been summarised. This bears testament to the value of bringing collective knowledge to this challenge!

2. UNDERSTANDING THE PURPOSE OF YOUR WORK IS THE BASIS FOR EVALUATION

There was some consensus among contributors that a starting point for any evaluation is a clear understanding what you (your project or initiative) are trying to achieve and the impacts that you are seeking to have. Knowledge brokering covers a wide spectrum of activities and a wide range of purposes and is perhaps unusual in that activities and purpose are often conflated or confused, making evaluation difficult.

A number of contributors argued for the value of frameworks to guide both your activities and evaluation. Isabel Vogel put this clearly:

“ I am a great believer in frameworks and defining up front what it is you think you are doing, why you are doing it and why you think it will work that way to achieve your objectives. Without this as a guide it is difficult to make sense of the M&E information you do collect... ”

Drawing out the theory of change or intervention logic can help you clarify the kinds of change you are hoping to have, identify your assumptions, and so identify indicators and proxy indicators (Penelope Beynon). These areas will be expanded on below.

The [Michaels' framework for knowledge brokering](#) was recommended for thinking through different kinds of brokering action (Louise Shaxson, Isabel Vogel), as was the [nested set of roles](#) framework generated through the first KBF discussion on concepts (Ritobrato Bhattacharyya, Laurens Klerkx).

Frameworks for thinking through what you are trying to achieve that are not specific to knowledge brokering were:

- [Montague's spheres of influence and reach](#): *"encompasses context receptivity and capacity, influence and reach"* (Isabel Vogel) some of the ideas in this are similar to those in the [IDRC Outcome Mapping approach](#)
- [Theory of Change](#): *"technique for thinking through in a structured way how your activities link to a series of changes in the world, why you think the change happens that way and reality-check your approach"* (Isabel Vogel)
- [Social framework](#): *"format for describing an expected path way of influence through a wider network of people groups and organisations"* (Rick Davies)
- [Reflexive Monitoring in Action \(RMA\)](#): process of continuous self-reflection facilitated by a broker (Lauren Klerkx), tools within this approach around "system analysis" are similar in purpose to other frameworks here

Links to these are also in the [KBF Impact Resources](#) document and [wiki](#).

3. BE CLEAR WHY YOU ARE EVALUATING YOUR WORK

The discussion revealed that there are many different reasons for evaluating a project or intervention. Generally (or perhaps ideally) evaluations are undertaken to help inform decision making processes in relation to specific KB interventions, such as whether a particular intervention should be continued/funded/scaled up or stopped, or how it could be improved. Broadly, evaluations are generally "summative" (taking place at the end of a project to describe what happened) or "formative" (taking place during the project to help decision making) (Louise Shaxson) although in some cases evaluation is a means of enhancing impact of the process itself (Lauren Klerkx).

The purpose of the evaluation will, of course, shape how it is done and the questions it seeks to answer.

Some of the reasons for undertaking evaluation raised during the discussion are summarised here, where possible with the methodology or approach that emphasises them in brackets/parenthesis:

- To see who was reached through the KB intervention, how they were reached and how they used knowledge (summative or audit function)
- To understand what kinds of changes knowledge acquired/generated contributed to
- To see if the assumptions underpinning the KB intervention were upheld
- To see if the intervention was carried out effectively, as planned and was good value (audit function)
- To understand if the KB intervention was the right thing to do to achieve the goal
- To see what works and in what context, uncovering causal mechanisms (Realistic Evaluation)
- Because ongoing evaluation and reflection are part of the change process and the KB intervention itself (Reflexive Monitoring in Action)

4. UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU MEAN BY IMPACT

A number of participants pointed out that “impact” is a metaphor, it is an elastic term that needs unpacking before it can be explored. The discussion in this area revealed that there are a range of different areas where KBs seek to have impact.

“ Depending on the aim of an activity or knowledge brokering effort, “impact” would mean different things and thus would need to be evaluated differently. (Timo Baur). ”

The kinds of changes knowledge brokers may seek to bring about include:

- **Changes in efficiency, effectiveness, wellbeing or productivity in target groups:** this is often the focus of evaluations in agricultural knowledge brokering
- **Changes in policies:** this has often been the focus of “research impact” thinking and literature which distinguishes between instrumental and conceptual use and impact

- **Changes in human behaviour, attitudes, learning and ownership:** for knowledge brokers this is often around attitudes and behaviours towards engaging with knowledge, this is likely to include relationships, participation and even changes to inertia
- **Changes in organisations and institutions:** such as the way systems behave in relation to knowledge or innovation
- **Changes in environments:** particularly in relation to availability of and access to knowledge and information

There is a lot of scope for identifying synergies around the nature of impact between different types of knowledge brokers and so developing common approaches for exploring and understanding them.

Differentiating between different types of impact

The principle of distinguishing between different types of impact is important. Ritobrato Bhattacharyya argues that *“Results of any development activity, including knowledge brokering need to be classified on the basis on lead time or lag...Output, outcome and impact are three categories based on increasing “lag”.* Immediate, intermediate and ultimate outcomes are also terms used to describe the distance from the initial intervention. It is also important to pick up connections between different kinds of impact, for example, [IDS Knowledge Services analysis of survey data](#) (doc) collected over five years distinguished between different types of outcomes but did not seek to interrogate connections between immediate, intermediate and ultimate outcomes and if/how/under what conditions outcomes were cumulative.

Location of impact

The idea of timelag and nature of impact will affect where we look for it. Often people look for impact “at the end” for example in a policy document or in figures of productivity. However the idea of timelag suggests that the end of a project may be too early to begin to identify long term impacts as they will not yet have happened.

The nature of impact also challenges this idea of looking at the end of the intervention for impact. The important changes your project brings about may be in what was described as the “missing middle”; these are likely to be changes in environment and behaviours rather than changes in policy or productivity. The links and feedback loops between different sorts of changes is also of great interest, for example if someone had a positive experience of interacting with a knowledge broker that led to a change in policy, does that change their knowledge acquisition behaviour in future?

5. THE CHALLENGE OF INDICATORS AND METRICS

Indicators and baselines enable measurement of change and meaningful comparison, they are very important if evaluation is to go beyond a description of what has happened to build up pictures of what works in knowledge brokering. Without any common metrics the best that we can do to understand impact is to try to identify outcomes of specific projects so making it difficult to build up comparative pictures of different approaches.

One of the drivers for this discussion was a sense that there are few good indicators and metrics to quantify and measure the kinds of impact that knowledge brokers are trying to achieve. As suggested in section one, a clear understanding of what you are trying to achieve and what you seek to evaluate will help to set indicators and proxy indicators (Penelope Beynon). For example, because the work of Razia Shariff's Knowledge Exchange team at the Third Sector Research Centre in the U.K. is based on assumptions about the importance of interaction between researchers and policy makers and practitioners, they have developed impact matrices based on [Arnstein's ladder of participation](#). Rick Davies suggested a possible measure of success for his KB work may be that others start making connections that he is currently making independently of him.

Article level metrics (altmetrics) were suggested as a system for evaluating the impact of a given article, is to measure the number of tweets, blogs and emails of a given KB intervention. Key words can be generated (and agreed upon) as a natural outcome of the intervention, which can then be used to measure whether the intervention is generating the intended interest and discussion (Shu Ito). In a similar area, Timo Baur talked about indicators such as web statistics, downloads and email requests but described them as problematic as they do not provide much meaningful information.

Interestingly, Razia and Timo were the only participants in the discussion to refer directly to indicators they are using. It would be useful to explore further whether others have indicators and to what extent they are happy with them and if they can be usefully used/adapted by others. A [DFID workshop](#) (p30-34) led by Louise Shaxson began to develop indicators for different kinds of knowledge brokering work which may be something to build on.

6. METHODOLOGIES AND APPROACHES

A range of methodologies and data collection approaches mentioned during the discussion are outlined below. There may be scope to match methodologies to different types of impact and different types of KB interventions

Surveys: a data collection tool that can be used for many purposes including assessing attitudinal change, often used to help make better sense of data generated by other tools such as web statistics (Timo Baur)

Case studies: an often used tool for understanding impact – Yaso Kunaratnam shared some [case studies](#) (pdf) undertaken by the I-K-Mediary Network members and a [format](#) (doc) for those case studies. Rick Davies suggested case studies could be aggregated through [self-indexing/self-tagging](#) where story providers select their own tags to help us to make sense of and compare stories from multiple locations. Catherine Fisher suggested the potential for using self-tagging to collate stories into a collaboratively created theory of change. Comparison of multiple stories may help to uncover patterns about what works, how and in what context, a principle of Realistic Evaluation and suggested by Louise Shaxson.

Baselines: describe the situation before an intervention as a means of helping to understand what has changed during the intervention period (although not necessarily as a result of the intervention) – for example what is the nature of the knowledge gap before and after the intervention. Challenges around setting baselines are similar to those around metrics and indicators; identifying exactly what to measure is a challenge, and is particularly challenging for KB interventions with large stakeholder groups. There are rarely the resources to undertake assessments of the state of the world before setting up an intervention, meaning that baselines often become inward looking and self-referential.

[Social network mapping:](#) this approach is likely to be particularly useful for knowledge brokers who have an explicit “linking” and “matchmaking” agendas (drawing on the Michaels’ framework).

[Propensity Score Matching \(PSM\):](#) analytical method for impact assessment which compares the performances of indicators of the ‘focus group’ with that of a ‘control group’ and is widely used in clinical trials in the health care sector and is selectively used in other sectors too. (Ritobrato Bhattacharyya) This approach may be useful in assessing changes in attitudes and behaviours.

7. LOOKING FORWARDS

This discussion was always intended to be an initial exploration of the issues, we hope that we will be able to build on ideas shared either through future discussion on the list or in other ways. Some ideas for future work that emerged (or were featured in the background paper) are:

Idea 1: Sharing what we actually do! This discussion was quite theoretical in nature. We could build on this rich theoretical basis by sharing our evaluation plans, theories/frameworks underpinning our work, any matrices and indicators we use as well as any data collection tools (e.g. interview formats). These could be collated on the KBF wiki.

Idea 2: Work together to develop sets of indicators that can be used for different kinds of knowledge brokering. For example if everyone shared the indicators they are already using and the rationale for each, it would take us a long way to building our understanding and basis for mutual comparison.

Idea 3: Build a sector wide bank of impact case studies. If they are generated to a reasonably standardised format they can be more meaningfully compared and synthesised– more ambitiously we could explore the idea of self-tagged case studies that map onto a collaboratively created theory of change.

Idea 4: Create a guide that suggests different evaluation approaches/questions/metrics and methods that are appropriate to understanding different kinds of impact, possibly including customisable data collection tools related to those different purposes and activities. We could collaborate with others working in this area, such as [KMIC](#) to do this.

Idea 5: One idea that did not arise in this discussion but has emerged through discussions within the I-K-Mediary Network is pooling resources for studies at a scale that would not be possible by one knowledge broker alone, for example longitudinal or counterfactual studies.

Building our ability to understand our own impact and to compare our impact will strengthen our work and our ability to bring about change. As outlined in the introduction, the strength of the sector is going beyond demonstrating that specific projects had particular impacts, instead moving towards deeper understanding based on meaningful comparison that helps us to understand why particular projects had particular impacts and what that means for other projects and approaches. While this discussion made progress towards that position, hopefully these ideas will bring us close to realising the potential gains to be made by working together.

8. STATISTICS AND FEEDBACK ABOUT E-DISCUSSION

This was the second in a series of e-discussions organised by the Knowledge Brokers' Forum (www.knowledgebrokersforum.org) which was moderated by Catherine Fisher and Yaso Kunaratnam from the Institute of Development Studies, U.K.

The discussion was open over a three-week period and received 35 posts. 19 members contributed out of approximately 440 members at the time (4.3% of members) - ten contributors were from the UK, two from the Netherlands, two from Canada, two from India and three from Belize, Germany and Zimbabwe. This was in contrast to the first discussion on KB concepts in 2010 which had a fairly normal profile of 10% of members contributing and a greater geographic diversity of contributors.

From off-line discussions and a feedback survey it seems that members did not contribute for a variety of reasons. Some did not have time, were travelling, felt it was too theoretical or did not feel like they had much to contribute and just wanted to sit in and learn. However, the facilitators also received lots of positive feedback about how useful the discussion was:

"I just wish to say that it was an extremely interesting discussion... Needless to say there were lots of interesting items and views, all helping to provide some signposts and alternative experience in a conceptually difficult field."

"This conversation was so interesting. I'm wondering if there has been a space established - wiki/space collating documents/evaluation reports/frameworks etc. that people shared during the discussion."

"This is an area where have not much to share but the discussion was very, timely as we are designing our knowledge management strategy."

"The discussions have helped in progressing my thinking on KE for the third sector. Thank you."

9. CONTRIBUTORS

Thanks to all of the discussion contributors who made this possible:

Catherine Fisher, Capacity Support Coordinator, Impact and Learning Team, Institute of Development Studies, U.K. [<mailto:c.fisher@ids.ac.uk>]

Wilfred Mijnhardt, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, Amsterdam [[wmijnhardt@rsm.nl](mailto:wijnhardt@rsm.nl)]

Laurens Klerkx, Assistant Professor, Communication and Innovation Studies Group, Wageningen University, Netherlands [Laurens.Klerkx@wur.nl]

Tom Barker SDO Network Manager, www.nhsconfed.org, U.K. [tom.barker@nhsconfed.org]

Shu Ito, University of Toronto, Canada [\[shu.ito@utoronto.ca\]](mailto:shu.ito@utoronto.ca)

Penelope Beynon, Monitoring & Evaluation Coordinator, Impact and Learning Team, Institute of Development Studies, U.K. [\[P.Beynon@ids.ac.uk\]](mailto:P.Beynon@ids.ac.uk)

Cheryl Brown, MCIM, Chartered Marketer <http://www.cherylbrown.co.uk>, U.K.
[\[marketinglady@btinternet.com\]](mailto:marketinglady@btinternet.com)

Rick Davies, Monitoring and Evaluation Consultant, <http://www.mande.co.uk>, U.K.
[\[rick.davies@gmail.com\]](mailto:rick.davies@gmail.com)

Yaso Kunaratnam, Network & Partnerships Convenor, Institute of Development Studies (IDS), United Kingdom [\[y.kunaratnam@ids.ac.uk\]](mailto:y.kunaratnam@ids.ac.uk)

Ritobrato Bhattacharyya, Research Associate, Entrepreneurship Development Institute of India (EDII), <http://ediindia.org/>, India [\[rbrato@gmail.com\]](mailto:rbrato@gmail.com)

Charles Dhewa, Managing Consultant Knowledge Transfer Africa, Zimbabwe [\[charlesdhewa7@gmail.com\]](mailto:charlesdhewa7@gmail.com)

John Colvin, Visiting Senior Research Fellow, The Open University, UK [\[j.d.colvin@open.ac.uk\]](mailto:j.d.colvin@open.ac.uk)

Louise Shaxson, Research Fellow, RAPID programme, Overseas Development Institute (ODI)
[\[l.shaxson@odi.org.uk\]](mailto:l.shaxson@odi.org.uk)

Timo Baur, Clearinghouse Manager, Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre, Belize
[\[tbaur@caribbeanclimate.bz\]](mailto:tbaur@caribbeanclimate.bz)

Razia Shariff, Head, Knowledge Exchange Team, Third Sector Research Centre, U.K
[\[r.s.shariff@bham.ac.uk\]](mailto:r.s.shariff@bham.ac.uk)

Ricardo Ramirez, Communication Consulting, Adjunct professor, School of Environmental Design and Rural Development, University of Guelph, Canada [\[ramirez2196@sympatico.ca\]](mailto:ramirez2196@sympatico.ca)

Nick Nathaniels, Independent Consultant, Denmark [\[nicquist@gmail.com\]](mailto:nicquist@gmail.com)

Shamprasad Pujar, Deputy Librarian, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research (IGIDR), India
[\[pujar@igidr.ac.in\]](mailto:pujar@igidr.ac.in)

Isabel Vogel, Independent Consultant, U.K. [\[isabelvogel@me.com\]](mailto:isabelvogel@me.com)