CAPACITY BUILDING OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AMONG RESEARCH INSTITUTES: REFLECTIONS FROM THE GDNET EXPERIENCE

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Abstract: As the knowledge management and research communications arm of the Global Development Network, GDNet builds the capacity of researchers from developing and transition countries to inform global development research and policy. In its early years, GDNet focused on information and knowledge management staff in developing country research institutes, recognising the importance of this group in moving locally generated research into policy. From 2005 onwards, GDNet piloted a series of knowledge management workshops in Africa, and in 2007, organised a two-day conference in Cairo, in partnership with the ACBF and the World Bank Institute, to share and examine its findings with others. Called "Knowledge Management as an Enabler of Change and Innovation in Africa", the conference brought together the experiences and lessons learned from efforts to build knowledge management capacity from across the African continent. In 2007, the discussion centered on two key themes: the need to create an enabling environment for the adoption of knowledge management practices in Africa and the importance of indigenous knowledge assets as inputs to poverty alleviation strategies. In exploring these themes, speakers highlighted several key challenges in "efforts towards building effective communication strategies and building a 'knowledge friendly culture' in the continent" (GDN, 2007). The 20th anniversary of ACBF is a timely opportunity to revisit the discussions of 2007, to question progress made towards meeting these challenges and share with delegates how GDNet's capacity building activities have evolved in the light of the conference findings.

Keywords: *Knowledge Management, Research Communication, Research Institutes, GDNet, GDN.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Global Development Network (GDN) is an organization dedicated to helping social scientists from across the South to generate new knowledge on development. GDN's goals are to build research excellence, promote networking, expand outreach and shape global policy debates in developing and transition countries. GDN's emphasis on building the capacity of researchers and research institutes to generate knowledge is based on the premise that knowledge plays a crucial role in the advancement of the development process[1].

GDNet is the knowledge management and research communications arm of GDN and supports researchers from developing and transition countries to communicate their findings to those making decisions that affect people living in poverty the world over[2]. GDNet does this through its online platform, which works as a knowledge hub, bringing together and communicating policy-relevant research from the Global South and by building the capacity of southern researchers to communicate their own research more effectively. More recently, GDNet's capacity building

workshops have been targeted at researchers, either on a single communication theme or in the form of 'writeshops'. So far more than 1100 researchers have benefited from GDNet regional knowledge management and research communications training events in Africa, Latin America and South Asia. In its early years, however, GDNet's capacity building focused more on information and knowledge management staff in developing country research institutes, recognizing the importance of this group in moving into policy, research that has been produced locally. This paper revisits the conclusions of a two-day conference organized by GDNet in Cairo, in 2007 (GDN, 2007) on capacity building of knowledge management in Africa, and explores their continued relevance[3].

CORE ARGUMENT/ESSENCE OF PAPER

From 2005 to 2007, GDNet ran a series of capacity building workshops in Egypt, Uganda, South Africa and Burkina Faso, aimed at providing training and skill building in knowledge management. These were delivered in partnership with organizations such as the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF),

Bellanet, Busoga Rural Open Source and Development Initiative, Centre d'Analyse des Politiques Economiques et Sociales, the Development Bank of Southern Africa and the World Bank Institute. The series culminated in a two-day conference in Cairo in June 2007, which aimed to use findings from the prior workshops as a foundation for sharing and examining lessons learned with a wider audience from across the African continent in particular, as well as other regions in the developing and transition world. Entitled *Knowledge Management as an Enabler of Change and Innovation: A conference for policymakers and practitioners*, the event brought together experiences from those people and organizations endeavoring to build knowledge management capacity across Africa.

Although debates continue over the definition of knowledge management and whether knowledge itself can be managed (Ahmed, Ghoneim and Kim, 2009), a useful definition of knowledge management for this paper is that given during a GDNet Capacity Building workshop in 2006: "the systematic process of identifying, capturing, and transferring information and knowledge that people can use to create, compete, and improve" (GDN, 2006, p.1). To that end, the conference explored knowledge management through a number of lenses including: its role in stimulating innovation; knowledge networks; indigenous knowledge; organizational, sectoral and cross-regional approaches. The social, technological and institutional aspects of knowledge management were all given attention.

Across these perspectives, the discussions in Cairo centered on two key themes:

- the need to create an enabling environment for the adoption of knowledge management practices in Africa;

- the importance of indigenous knowledge assets as inputs to poverty alleviation strategies, (GDN, 2007).

In exploring these themes, speakers highlighted a number of challenges inherent in developing effective communication strategies and a "knowledge friendly culture" in Africa. In the conference report (GDN, 2007), these were summarized as: synergy, prioritizing resources, ownership of

the knowledge creation process, sharing knowledge-sharing experiences, equity in knowledge, and partnerships. These six challenges are presented below, with a brief review of the extent to which they are still relevant today to those seeking to build capacity in knowledge management among African research institutes.

Challenge 1: Creating synergy between technological and social approaches to knowledge management

At the time of the conference, delegates noted that knowledge management initiatives typically featured the practice of importing information and communication technologies (ICTs) from the North, without adaptation for the context into which they were being introduced. These ICTs may not be appropriate for developing countries or allow for the various means though which knowledge is created (tacit, explicit, indigenous, modern, etc.). Danofsky (2005), as cited in Ahmed, Ghoneim and Kim (2009) highlights the fact that even the more ubiquitous ICTs are beyond some African people's reach, with millions never having made a telephone call. Some made the case for the need to understand knowledge

management as a social practice, based on people-to-people interactions. An argument was made for technology to be used to facilitate the way people already work rather than be the means by which a new way of working is imposed. In 2007, the view was that countries in Africa needed to develop an appropriate set of tools which facilitate a people-friendly knowledge management approach while still increasing investments in research and development in technology, education and infrastructure.

How have things changed? In just the last two or three years we have witnessed a proliferation of online means of creating, storing and sharing knowledge that are freely available and easier to use and adapt than ever before e.g. wikis, social networking sites, blogs. Is technology still driving knowledge management approaches in developing countries? How often do we hear about a new website where people will be able to upload their learning or a new forum where they can share their views; but these technology-enabled opportunities to document and share knowledge do not lead automatically to widespread adoption[4]. Lack of access to and familiarity with technology

is a significant barrier in itself but if the motivation to share knowledge does not already exist then these innovations become more ways of *not* managing knowledge. Adoption of knowledge management tools often implies a change in behaviour or working culture which may be a significant barrier to some. GDNet's own recent experience with piloting an online community space for its members is that uptake of this kind of tool is more successful when there is a clear objective for its use e.g. the production of a group authored report rather than being used as an ongoing forum, to motivate members to work in a new way. In terms of access, the picture is improving but still has a way to go. According to the ITU (2010), at the end of 2009 an estimated 64% of people in developed countries were using the internet, but this was true of less than 20% of people in the developing world.

Challenge 2: Prioritizing resources

Linked to the challenge of introducing appropriate technology and investing in the necessary infrastructure to support it, was the challenge of persuading governments to invest in knowledge management. In 2007, the conference delegates noted that governments in the region faced increasingly daunting challenges, such as high illiteracy rates and unemployment in their efforts to alleviate poverty and deliver economic growth (GDN, 2007). Against this picture, it was difficult to see how knowledge management tools, especially those centered on technology that might only be accessible by a minority, could be viewed by African governments as sufficiently important to be adequately resourced. However, when considering sourcing funds from donor organizations for knowledge management and research communication, the prospect was more positive.

If anything, resources within developing country governments are under even greater pressure than they were at the time of the Cairo conference. The financial crisis has also put donor organizations' budgets in jeopardy or at least, refocused where and how money is allocated. While some donors have reduced their overseas aid budget, Ireland's 2011 budget for example saw a 35 million Euro reduction (Department of Finance, 2010) others are able to maintain the same level of funds but are under pressure to

use these more efficiently and demonstrate impact on poverty reduction. In the UK, an Independent Commission on Aid Impact has been introduced to assess all overseas development assistance spending for value for money and effectiveness. More than ever, those making the case for maintaining, or even increasing, spending on knowledge management need to find compelling arguments for how it leads to poverty reduction, and find ways of measuring results and demonstrating its value. Some progress has been made in recent months to review and share lessons learnt in evaluating research communication and knowledge management programmes for development, but these studies also tend to highlight the challenges of demonstrating impact[5].

Challenge 3: Ownership of the knowledge creation process

The Cairo conference concluded that generating "home grown solutions" to development strategies was a key part of an effective knowledge management strategy and Steinlin, in particular, pointed to the largely untapped potential for indigenous knowledge to help a broader group of people

(Ahmed, Ghoneim and Kim, 2009). In order to build capacity in knowledge management, one would need to also address the capacity to generate and capture knowledge which reflects local realities and which is therefore more likely to be relevant to local policy processes. A number of delegates highlighted approaches that could support this aim such as that given by Enrica Porcari (GDN, 2007) from CGIAR of engaging farmers in the research process from the outset to ensure that recommendations made by researchers were appropriate to their contexts and to involve them in innovation processes. At an institutional level, sustainable research institutes driven by local needs, rather than donor agendas, were seen to be of major importance. This need to support local knowledge generation for local solutions also emerged in the workshops leading up to the Cairo conference.

Capacity building of local researchers remains high on several donor agendas and delivered through a variety of interventions. A DFID working paper from 2008 cites an ODI study which found that 49 organisations had "strengthening southern research capacity" in their mission statements or key objectives (DFID,

2008). Building the capacity of Southern researchers to inform global development research and policy is at the heart of GDNet's current work program. GDNet continues to support those working in knowledge management in research institutes through online tools including hosting of organizational research for those institutes lacking an online repository, but also aims to build capacity of researchers themselves. Recognizing the importance of supporting local research capacity, as well as raising the profile of Southern research globally, GDNet's activities include: providing researchers with access to journals and datasets, circulating news on funding opportunities, an online platform which showcases southern researchers and their work, and organizing a series of research communication capacity building workshops. These workshops are run with regional partners and often facilitate inter-regional learning, for example, inviting Latin American researchers to present their experiences with developing policy briefs at a workshop for African researchers.

Challenge 4: Sharing knowledge sharing experiences

The delegates in Cairo valued the opportunity presented by the conference to exchange their insights with others working in the same area but were conscious of the need to find ways to integrate the experiences of the stakeholders involved in knowledge management: government, businesses, networks, academic institutions, nongovernmental organizations, etc. (GDN, 2007). Monisala Ola, from the Center for Population and Health Research, Nigeria highlighted the need for learning from the tacit and explicit knowledge of others, so that "the collective learning experience of others could be used by those who wish to improve their own organizations" (Ahmed, Ghoneim and Kim, 2009, p.19). Gelase Mutahaba, Chief Technical Adviser, of the President's Office, Tanzania, warned of the dangers of not having a coherent and coordinated approach to knowledge management: public institutions duplicating efforts, initiatives becoming expensive and unsustainable and being mostly donor driven (GDN, 2007). In Tanzania, this led to the development of the Public Service Knowledge Management Secretariat, although this still lacked sufficient power to prevent duplication. Furthermore delegates felt that the experiences of other countries could

be used to speed up the development of knowledge management practices in Africa if mechanisms existed to support this.

As this 20th ACBF conference demonstrates, the demand to learn about the experiences of other organizations and other countries in implementing knowledge management programs is still present. The KM4Dev network[6] of practitioners in knowledge management for development continues to thrive and its peer-reviewed journal *Knowledge Management for Development*[7] is in its seventh volume. Since 2007, a number of forums that aim to share good practice in knowledge management and exchange ideas have emerged or become strengthened. One of the most recent of these is the Knowledge Brokers Forum[8] which aims to "foster a global community of peers interested in [Knowledge Brokering] from a diversity of sectors and practices, consolidate information and resources on intermediaries and help promote experiences and refine practices in knowledge brokering and knowledge translation". While the ACBF Conference is taking place, entries into the Knowledge Management Impact Challenge[9] (a USAID-funded competition to identify good practice in measuring the impact

of knowledge management) are being evaluated. The top case studies will be presented at an event planned for March 2011 in Washington DC, aimed at encouraging exchanges between knowledge management practitioners.

GDNet itself has continued to organize workshops that build capacity in knowledge management and draws on the experiences of other organizations in the region, and beyond. 'Spaces for Engagement' is a partnership between GDNet and the Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth (CIPPEC) in Latin America, that uses knowledge management to improve the link between research and policy. Outputs include study papers, a handbook on knowledge management and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the influence of research in policy, an online course on policy influence planning and a regional workshop on M&E involving leading think tanks in the region to facilitate the sharing of experiences.

Challenge 5: Equity in knowledge

Issues of equality in knowledge creation and use for development

were of particular concern to the participants of the Cairo conference. Keynote speaker, Ismail Serag Eldin, Director of the Bibliotheca, Alexandrina referred to the ever increasing gaps between "the haves and have-nots in the knowledge creation process" (Ahmed, Ghoneim and Kim, 2009). Factors such as unequal access to and ability to use technology, and lack of nurturing of innovation in education systems, were identified as problems in ensuring that there is a level knowledge playing field and attention was drawn to the dearth of articles authored by African researchers within journals focused on African research (GDN, 2007). In GDNet's experience, one barrier to publication in academic journals is access to the international research journals needed for referencing; something it aims to overcome through partnerships with JSTOR, Project MUSE and the British Library for Development Studies that give free access to journals for southern researchers in southern research institutes.

This inequality between the "haves" and "have nots" in development research creation and use continues and is a major driver for GDNet's work program. A recent study found that the "African contribution to international academic research in ICTD [ICT for development] is very low, typically between 1% and 9% percent of publications across subdisciplines," (Gitau, Plantinga and Diga, 2010, p.5) suggesting that theories about ICT for development in Africa are being formulated without local research informing them adequately. In a domain dominated by development research from the North, GDNet helps research from the South to become more visible by providing southern researchers with a platform to profile their work and opportunities to engage with others working in development policy and practice. Developing relationships and establishing links with decision makers is a natural step in the policy making process. GDNet encourages researchers to reach out to policy makers and offers advice on how best to engage with them on a range of issues. GDNet also provides southern researchers with guidance and support on how to write policy relevant materials. Particular emphasis is placed on monitoring and evaluation in the current GDNet work program with baselines being produced to measure indicators such as the level of use of southern research, attitudes to its quality, and the

challenges experienced most by southern researchers.

Challenge 6: Partnerships

Not so much a challenge, but a critical success factor for developing innovative and creative knowledge management strategies, is cooperation according to delegates in the Cairo conference (GDN, 2007). Examples were presented of how cooperation between those working in knowledge management could support learning in this area, for example the sharing of monitoring and evaluation data to enable benchmarking. Another important partnership opportunity identified for researchers was that offered by Ghoneim, of knowledge intermediaries who can amplify their research messages, help them to reach new audiences, add credibility, etc. (GDN, 2007). Examples were given of where cooperation between different parties had reaped rewards, such as that contributed by Reinie Beisenbach, of the Global Research Alliance Nerve Center, South Africa who related a pilot project in Tanzania where herbal medicine was piloted to treat people with HIV which led to studies being conducted to learn more about the herb's properties and how it could be used efficiently (GDN, 2007).

Much of GDNet's regional work is carried out in collaboration with other organizations. Whether it is sourcing materials for one of the Regional Windows on the GDNet Knowledgebase, contributing to research communications capacity development workshops or participating in pilots for new means of exchanging and creating knowledge online, GDNet depends on the cooperation of partners to achieve its objectives as much now as it did in 2007. For its 2010 to 2014 work program, partnerships are key to GDNet's ambitions to broaden the journals and data it makes available to southern researchers, to expand its regional training and knowledge sharing events, and add to the store of lessons learnt about knowledge brokering.

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Cairo conference took place less than four years ago, however the environment in which knowledge management and research operates changes quickly. It is likely that if the delegates were reunited today, they would identify the same challenges as existing, and note that some, such as the need for evidence to support allocation of resources on knowledge

management, are more pressing than before. Linked to this, the need for cooperation and learning from each other's experiences in knowledge management is even greater than in 2007, to ensure that restricted budgets can be spent more wisely and duplication can be avoided. Forums and events that facilitate sharing of experiences around knowledge management and research communication within and between regions in the Global South should be encouraged and designed to create peer-to-peer relationships for ongoing collaboration and knowledge sharing.

Based on the review of the challenges identified in 2007, and from GDNet's experience, the implications for planners and funders of capacity development of knowledge management are:

- capacity building works when it is demand-driven and guided by local contexts; this is all the more important when the programmes involve partnerships between North and South,

- knowledge management capacity building programmes need to take place within a clear monitoring and evaluation framework, aligned to development

outcomes and with specific measurable indicators,

- policymakers and donors should look for opportunities to support building the capacity of local institutions which can then provide the enabling environment so necessary for capacity development at other levels,

- coordination is needed among donors that fund knowledge management programmes to avoid duplication of effort and to agree to share learning on measuring its effectiveness.

- increased support is required from donors for communication by local researchers of the research they fund, such as building capacity of research communication and knowledge management within African research institutes and requiring research proposals to include appropriate budgets and plans for communication.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Sherine Ghoneim is Director, GDN Cairo Office and Director of GDNet, a program which builds southern researcher capacity to inform global

development research and policy. She has more than 15 years experience in knowledge networks, knowledge management and research communications capacity building within development. Sherine is the lead person on strategic development and management of the GDNet program since 2001 having previously worked as Information and Communications Manager at the Economic Research Forum for five years. Sherine holds a PhD in Information Management (The Management School, Imperial College, UK), an MSc in Management (Boston University, London Campus), completed a number of studies towards an MA in Economics from the American University in Cairo and is a BA in Economics, minor Computer Science from the American University in Cairo. Sherine's academic experience as part-time Faculty Staff at the Faculty of Computers and Information, Cairo University is in teaching strategic planning, information systems project management and national strategies for developing information systems and e-business solutions. During that tenure teaching assignments with the American University in Cairo, The Management School were also undertaken.

Cheryl Brown is a lecturer, consultant and facilitator whose work focuses on using the theory and practice of marketing, communication and behaviour change in development research, communication and social change. She has nine years of experience working with online information and knowledge intermediaries in the development sector and specialises in strategic planning and using social marketing approaches to encourage uptake and sharing of development research. Her research interests include the use and dissemination of research and adoption of web 2.0 tools among development researchers, practitioners and policymakers, particularly those in developing countries. Cheryl has a Postgraduate Diploma in Marketing from the Chartered Institute of Marketing and has been a Chartered Marketer since 2007.

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NOTES

1 See http://cloud2.gdnet.org/cms.php?id=about_gdn for more about the Global Development Network.

2 See http://www.gdnet.org/~gdnet for more details of the GDNet programme.

3 In summarising the key challenges identified by delegates this paper draws on the conference report (GDN, 2007) authored by Sherine Ghoneim (GDNet) and Ronald Kim (World Bank Institute). See also Ahmed, Ghoneim and Kim, 2009, which also considers the six challenges identified, and presents a summary of the key presentations of the GDN Conference in Cairo.

4 A recent study from the UK (Research Information Network, 2010), a country in which researchers typically have reliable internet access, looks at the rate of adoption of web 2.0 tools by UK researchers and finds a number of barriers to uptake among this group.

5 See for example, *Research communication: Insights from practice, a working paper of the Research Communication Strategy Group*, edited by I. Carter and K. Paulus, 2010, http://www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/SearchResearchDatabase.asp?OutputID=185051

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