

IKM Emergent in Retrospective

IKM Emergent was a research and communication programme, looking at the creation, handling and use of all forms of knowledge, including formal research, within the international development sector. It ran from 2007 to 2012. It was funded by DGIS, the development section of the Royal Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and hosted by EADI (the European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes).

Starting Points

The programme was founded on a critical analysis of the management of knowledge in the sector which was published in *Development in Practice* in 2006ⁱ. This argued that development depends on a detailed knowledge of the realities it aims to improve and, as importantly, of the perceptions of local people, faced with those realities, on the choices open to them. Without this knowledge, development interventions fail. Development is thus a knowledge rather than a service industry, but it is not managed in that way. The article raised questions of what knowledges are valued or used, of epistemic and linguistic diversity and of the contested choices imposed on development organisations by contemporary informational developments, especially ICT. It then looked at practical issues relating to programme management information, formal research, organisational knowledge management, ICT systems and the (in)capacity to properly absorb information from the grass roots or from participatory work into management information flows. The conclusion was that, at strategic and practical levels, development organisations, of all types, needed to seriously rethink their approach to and use of knowledge in order to support rather than undermine their goals. IKM Emergent was established to help explore what this might mean.

The Programme

IKM Emergent was conceived and managed by Mike Powell and Sarah Cummings and guided by a multi-national steering group, of academics and development practitioners. The work was carried out by a similarly diverse group of researchers, loosely organised into three working groups: Discourses, Dialogue and Translation; IKM Labs (information artefacts); and Knowledge Management. It consisted of a multitude of projects, organised on an iterative basis, some based on study, more piloting new work in real life situations, which sought to illustrate the range of knowledge practices at all levels across the sector, how they would benefit from being seen and supported as part of a whole, and how both actual practices and the ecology of which they were part could be radically improved.

As the programme included attention to how knowledge was expressed and communicated, its outputs took many forms. These included working papers, digital media, visualisations, cartoons, software, open data, talks, workshops, installations, newsletters and annual reflectionsⁱⁱ. It also sought to work in an open and transparent way, engaging collaboratively with other development actors, from government ministries to local NGOs and community groups, throughout its existence. As such, it saw the relationships created through the research process and the dialogues they provoked as, beyond their contributions to the actual content, being central to building an environment for potential change.

Core Themes

Through the life of the programme, three core themes grew.

Multiple Knowledges: the idea that we work in an environment of multiple knowledges became central to IKM's work. This did not arise from the soft option of relativism, but from a recognition that many forms of knowledge, knowledge sources, knowledge roles are invariably present in any development context, including those, such as the desirability of clean drinking water, where the science is not in dispute but where failure of universal application remains a major problem. In particular, the programme concentrated on the importance of local knowledge dynamics: for the contribution of lived experience to understanding the realities in question, for the existence (or not) of cognitive pathways to access and adapt external knowledge, for relating the development process to local cultural, epistemic and political expectations in ways which might build lasting local ownership and support. The role of language and effective cross-boundary translation or traducture was perceived as central to supporting local engagement in development.

Knowledge Ecology: a world of multiple knowledges, including but going beyond the classifications and vocabularies of academic disciplines and information processing, is not one in which anyone is well trained or supported to operate. As such the concept of a knowledge ecology, analogous to the natural ecology on which we all depend, combined an analytic approach to understanding the complex relationships between different knowledges with a practical framework within which they can be discovered and expressed. IKM argued for research and knowledge management policies which included all relevant knowledges, which created linkages rather than disciplinary or institutional silos and which sought to contribute to an inclusive and functional ecology as part of the process of completing individual projects. It explored the design of safe but challenging spaces in which to learn, reflect and innovate and of artefacts which aided rather than constrained the open exchange of knowledges. This led to work on recognising and rebalancing search bias, on exploring the potential of multi-user, multi-purpose metadata and vocabularies, and on the visualisation of knowledge connections. The potential of development related knowledge challenges to be a source of more linguistically and culturally appropriate innovation in ICT, particularly in the global South was also recognised.

Emergent Change: a recognition that development is a process that always takes place in specific local contexts, with multiple actors with multiple knowledges acting simultaneously in the same socio-economic space, implies a recognition of complexity and the fact that approaches based on linearity and predictability are unlikely to be effective. IKM Emergent saw development as an emergent process in which the unexpected and the unforeseen will inevitably create new opportunities and challenges during the course of a piece of work. As such it needs to be planned, accounted for, managed and evaluated within an emergent paradigm. The programme sought to develop such a practice in its own work and also worked to discover and document similar experiences elsewhere, especially in relation to evaluation.

Continuing Challenges

In the twelve years since the formal end of the programme, it could be argued that global trends have accentuated the need for the both the conceptual frameworks and improved practice suggested by IKM Emergent to support cross-boundary co-operation of all types. These include:

- Multiple **environmental crises** and their requirement for new knowledge, shared understanding and joint action across a multitude of boundaries
- A more **multi-polar world**, which will require more effective cross-cultural discourse if global problems are to be resolved jointly and conflicts avoided
- A renewed kick back against the **coloniality** of knowledge production and development discourse, which is echoed in a wider populist discourse which has lost faith in the social impartiality of science
- The ever-increasing reach of **new technologies** into daily life combined with a further centralisation of power within the tech industry and its reliance on social norms and data from the global North in the construction of the algorithms and large language models on which AI is based

In the meantime, people involved in IKM have continued to work on issues raised by the programme.

- Supporting the Knowledge for Development Partnership with the development and promotion of the Agenda Knowledge for Developmentⁱⁱⁱ
- Exploring ways of linking local and academic knowledges at national level in Costa Rica, Namibia and Sri Lanka
- Open data, heterogeneous vocabularies and inter-disciplinary subject mapping
- The theory and practice of promoting epistemic justice

The conclusions of IKM Emergent have major implications for how intellectual work can better support social and economic development and care for the environment, and how such programmes should be managed. This was not a popular message as it requires a fundamental rethink of educational, research and management practice and how they are funded. However, what it offers, not just for development but for all other processes of applying knowledge to practice, is more powerful still – human centred knowledge processes based on open and inclusive discussion and a well nurtured knowledge ecology in which all voices can be heard.

ⁱⁱ Mike Powell, 2006, 'Which Knowledge? Whose Reality? An Overview of Knowledge Used in the Development Sector', *Development in Practice*, 16:6, <https://www.emergentworks.net/node/1847>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.emergentworks.net/index.php/documents>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://k4dp.org/agenda/>