

IKM Emergent

IKM Emergent is a research programme which explores information and knowledge processes within the international development sector. It examines some of the detail of these processes but also seeks to see them as a whole and to consider their appropriateness for the strategic challenges facing the sector.

The programme is based on a critique of current practice. It researches the development implications of cultural, economic and technical changes in the handling, use and exchange of information – known as **informational developments** – taking place in societies both North and South. Its work consists of a combination of action and scholarly research undertaken by an international network of academics and practitioners.

International Development at a Crossroads

The international development sector represents a range of interests and approaches. However, to the extent it can be seen as a whole, recent years have presented a growing number of challenges relating to scope, role, methods, resources and public perception. In general, the sector has responded to this complex and difficult political environment by trying to demonstrate its capacity to make 'development' happen as a predictable and replicable process, making ever greater claims of certainty about what it is doing. It seeks to achieve this certainty through a focus on concrete measures and by imposing more centralised control of what is supposed to happen. Detailed plans are constructed and then delivered, with little space for flexibility, through long chains of suppliers. Management models have been adopted which reinforce top-down, linear and quantitative biases. Faced with real competition for funds or service contracts, development organisations have also increasingly sought to identify and market their unique selling points, thereby putting at risk any sense of collective endeavour, shared learning and the joint construction of global public goods, as well as the local level co-operation which is often essential in practice.

IKM Overview

IKM shares the frustrations upon which much criticism of the international development sector is based, but supports its central argument that the fight against the poverty, exploitation, ill-health, poor education and missed opportunities, which characterises life for so many of the world's people, is a fight which is in everyone's interests and not one which can be left to chance.

The programme's initial analysis of current practice in the sector contended that, rather than being a service industry in which the challenge is to deliver well defined services in a predictable and cost effective manner, the development sector is in fact a knowledge industry in which what is wanted and how it can be delivered constantly change over place and time. This analysis has gradually widened to the point where we would argue that the knowledge foundations of current practice are fundamentally inconsistent with what is actually needed if development is to take place. Key elements of this analysis include:

- In our understanding, development represents transformative change: there is no template or master plan to follow. It may include areas of traditional service delivery – the construction of roads or clinics for example – but always involves innovation and risk. Beyond the inevitable unpredictability of life, the process of change will invariably uncover new insights and possibilities within the human environment being changed. To plan on the basis of certainty, current practice in the development sector, is wildly unrealistic. It is also profoundly pessimistic, even wilfully ignoring the drivers of transformation on the grounds that they spoil the plan.
- Development always takes place in a context of time and place which involves people, history, culture and politics. For that reason, no two development processes are ever identical. Any external intervention needs to be based on detailed knowledge of and continuous engagement with the environment which it is intended to influence, an engagement which needs to take place within the

relevant language and culture. External prescriptions simply do not work in the long term. Indeed, respect for local knowledges and their capacity to adapt to and lead change is a key element in the sustainability of that change.

- Development is taking place in the context of many different types of knowledge and differing perceptions, depending on professional discipline, personal experience, culture and language, or individual role. This diversity is what the programme calls multiple knowledges. The existence of multiple knowledges offers both conceptual and practical information handling challenges to any type of cross-cutting, multi-sectoral, multi-disciplinary endeavour. This is particularly crucial to the development sector which needs to communicate and collaborate across boundaries of culture, gender, space and status, often in a context of highly unequal power relationships.
- Development discourse has many forms and takes place at many levels. Given its multiple locations, languages and disciplines, crossing bridges of understanding is far from easy. There is inadequate support for the role of intermediaries and for both conceptual and linguistic translation. Many of the artefacts used to support development discourse – ICT systems, consultancy reports, journals, web 2 tools – have intrinsic characteristics which conflict with their developmental purpose.

Looking Forward

IKM has been working to explore these issues and possible alternative approaches with people, networks and organisations. As well as its various research outputs, it is discussing with practitioners the implications of its work for innovation in daily programme management. It is trying to do this through posing a series of challenging questions. These include:

- How do you communicate with the local communities you aim to support? What work is done in the relevant (local) languages? How can such work be supported?
- How do local knowledges influence your work at local level? How do you support and value their role in underpinning capacity for locally led development?
- Can your procedures for planning, process management, monitoring and evaluation recognise and adapt to unpredictability and emergence?
- What alternatives exist to assessment based on compliance with pre-existing plans? If flexibility is to be welcomed, how can accountability to both donors and affected communities be assured?
- What information do you make available about your programme work? How do you try to make it accessible and useful to other development practitioners?

Although a relatively small network with no full time staff, we try to respond to interest in our work from the development community. In particular we encourage people to

- Visit <http://www.ikmemergent.net>
- Consult our 'outputs' <http://www.ikmemergent.net/index.php/Documents>
- Contribute to our knowledge management blog at <http://thegiraffe.wordpress.com/>
- Bookmark relevant documents via http://www.delicious.com/tag/ikm_emergent
- Invite us to come and talk to your organisation or network
- Explore ideas for potential collaboration

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