IKM: Working with Change

A reflection on participants' experiences of working with the IKM Emergent Programme by Hannah Beardon and Daniel Guijarro

Introduction:

I know that I speak for many who have been involved in the IKM Emergent programme when I say that it has been an invaluable space and opportunity to explore and reflect on how our assumptions and understanding of 'knowledge' affect our practice, and from there the development sector as a whole. Knowledge management is so often treated as a technical or logistical exercise, the frustration of getting information and perspectives 'captured' and 'stored', those pesky practitioners who are too busy working to stop and document what they have been learning, and those audiences who just won't access and use the stuff we produce… IKM was an opportunity to look behind these practical concerns, exploring our behaviour and values, concepts and assumptions, cultural and political concerns which affect the ways in which knowledge is understood and used. In particular it gave us with the concepts of 'multiple knowledges' and 'emergence' to play with.

I have been a part of a kind of amorphous community, which doesn't have its own name or discipline but has feet in the ICT4D community, in the KM4D community, in community informatics, but also in transformative, rights-based community development work. We look at how knowledge is used in development from the point of view of whose 'voices' and 'expertise' are heard and valued, and used. We bring issues of power, equality and politics back into the management and use of, and access to, knowledge and information. We might do this in research or evaluations, in system or project design, in methodology development, in community development processes or in organisational development. We might be consultants, IT people, HR people, community workers, academics, KM people… some of us are technology whizzes, others are mostly interested in social dynamics and participation – but the work includes us all. There are very fruitful conversations we can have, but it is rare to find a community which can bridge language and practice barriers to allow these to take place.

IKM has been such a community. I have met people who are working on things I don't understand, not only technology and tools, but the infrastructure behind them. Others are exploring the language of development, and the relationships and mental models which underlie knowledge sharing. Often we have been working in isolation, only occasionally have we had the chance to meet and get to the root of how our work connects, but – as this paper shows - we have come to very similar types of conclusions.

My own work within the programme, 'How Wide are the Ripples' researched flows of knowledge from grassroots participatory processes into INGO organisational learning and

practice. This process has introduced me to new people (including my co-author Daniel) and ideas and fundamentally influenced my own practice as a consultant. I will talk a bit more about this later. As the programme matured, Mike and Sarah (the people who keep the programme together) noticed that, like me, by exploring concepts of multiple knowledges and emergence many of the people working on the programme were coming up with practice-changing insights and conclusions.

They tried to make sense of these 'implications for practice', in the form of 'signposts' for 'practice-based change' in the development sector. But one thing that I learned in the Ripples process, and I know is reflected in other strands of work in the programme such as 'traducture', is that the process of making sense of, or aggregating, different perspectives and bits of information is not neutral, but informed by our own intentions, interests and understanding. Several practical implications arose from this, including using participatory methods of making sense together, and negotiating or explicitly stating the biases or purposes which inform the sense-making process. So my reaction to these 'signposts' was that they were Mike and Sarah's take on what was coming out of the programme, and shouldn't be presented as a general overview. Their reaction was to commission me, along with other pieces of work, to involve other IKMers in a process of reflection, to broaden the participation in making sense of the practical implications of the programme. This document is a result of that process.

This process:

Together with Daniel Guijarro, who was involved in the Ripples process, we reviewed the literature outputs of the programme to get a sense of what our IKM colleagues were thinking and finding. Despite the wide range of issues and areas of work, we found common threads in terms of exploring emergence and multiple knowledges. Strong themes emerging from the IKME programme include:

- critique of the overly analytical, linear and results-focused approach to knowing;
- acknowledgement of hierarchies of knowledge, and attention to the implicit power relations underlying knowledge sharing and use;
- a focus on organisational dynamics and enabling environments for situated and collective learning;
- the importance of interaction, negotiation, conversation and listening in the learning and knowledge sharing process.

These themes closely reflected our own thinking and findings from the Ripples process, yet we still found ourselves feeling uncertain and somewhat critical of the programme. It seemed that there was strong critique of existing practice in the development sector, for example:

- where Western academic traditions and definitions of rigour permeate knowledge seeking behaviour and attitudes, weakening the voices of the poor and non-'experts';

- where donors apply mechanisms of control (with which practitioners comply) which translate into over-planned projects measured against pre-determined results, encouraging practitioners to seek information which confirms their assumptions rather than broadens their understanding;
- where an overly technical approach to knowledge management strips information of important contextual meaning and power.

However, we did not get a real sense of the alternative. What does emergence mean, other than 'not that'? Is there anything solid to hold on to, or is everything up for grabs? Does IKM stand for anything, or is it an open space where anything goes?

What's more, we found that, despite the strong critique of these linear, analytical and exclusive models underlying development thinking, we were still applying them in our work within IKM. Knowledge was still conceived, or at least talked about, as a solid thing, or 'asset' which could be managed and transferred. We were still applying assumed linearity and causality in our thinking, 'if we do this, that will happen'. We were still looking for answers, still making sense within the dominant knowledge paradigms. We struggled with the link between theory and practice, and despite being provided with an open space for reflection and exploration, many of us were feeling a bit lost, yearning for more direction, more structure to facilitate connections …

We had the opportunity to interact with some of the people who had worked within the IKM programme at the Development Studies Association conference in York in September 2010. We took all of these doubts and criticisms with us, and set up a table within the IKM art installation/ stand to reflect and converse with these informal colleagues of ours. To say we were surprised or inspired would be an understatement. Through our conversations we discovered a wealth of insights which not only helped us to understand the practical implications of the research, but drew us into an active process of reflection on our own practice and behaviour way beyond our expectations. Of course, we struggled and struggled to process and communicate all of this rich learning and practice-changing thinking.

From our interaction with other IKMers, we did indeed identify lots of examples of concrete changes in practice as a result of the thinking and exploration they had undergone in the programme:

- Some, like Robin and Dejan, had diversified their team to include people with different (and contrary) perspectives or types of knowledge.
- Some, like Kemly and Hannah, had been able to continue a process beyond what we originally considered to be the end;
- Some, like Sarah, had become more honest with their colleagues about what they are doing and why, 'no more guerrilla tactics' she said;
- Some had noticed that they were more aware of the limits of their own knowledge, they listen more, engage in more collective sense-making, and consider their own accountability to grassroots actors.

- Some, like Kingo, had been able to open up similar flexible spaces in their own institutions and organisations.

These changes 'emerged' from working in awareness of complexity, diversity, emergence, uncertainty. But they spring completely from the context, the role, personality and interests of the practitioners themselves, and the opportunities available to them. We felt that gathering examples of concrete changes was not going to be that useful for others. Instead we wanted to look deeper into common patterns behind these changes – what was different that made change happen in the practice and context of these people?

We learned that our practice changes as we change ourselves, and that to be effective, structures and systems must be imbued with meaning and intention. Given that, we felt that a standalone set of guidelines would not be the most effective way to create meaningful changes in practice in the development sector. So what we are writing here describes the process, shares some of the stories and theories which have influenced our thinking, and describes some of the changes we have found ourselves making, with the intention of stimulating reflection which can really inform practice.

Now, two months on from the conference, after several meetings in which we just got deeper into our analysis, several attempts at developing a paper or framework which just got longer without getting better, several inspiring conversations with others about what we have been thinking and how it applies to our practice, and several opportunities to apply this learning to our own work, this is what we have been able to write. The intention is for this document to serve as a basis for further reflection with people working in the development sector, at a workshop in London in February 2012.

Stories of practice from IKM:

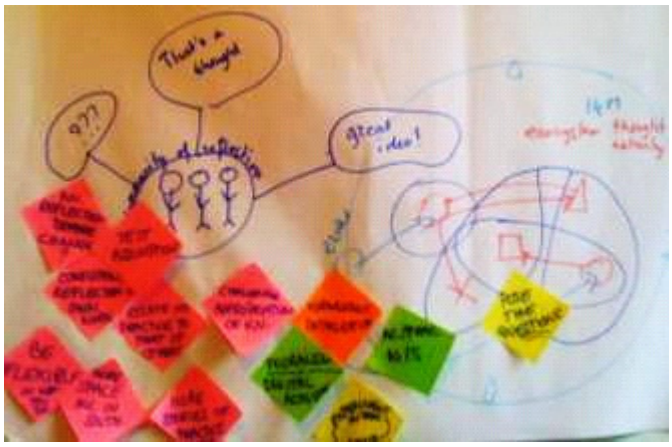
At York, we asked people about what they had done within IKM, and how that had influenced their own practice. We asked people to think of a metaphor for IKM, and as we talked we drew and made notes on flipcharts and post-its, some of which are shared here. The conversations flowed freely, we shared experiences, thoughts and ideas, but were also guided by our own questions derived from our understanding of the purpose of this piece of work. One of these was a concern to understand the identity and purpose of IKM from different perspectives – in response to our concern that it was clearer about what it is critiquing than what it is proposing. Another was to identify examples of change in people's own practice, and the implications this might have for the sector more widely. Here we present our take on these conversations, in alphabetical order, and in very summarised form.

Dejan Dincic: welcome diversity and contrarians

Dejan works for the Diplo Foundation in Geneva, and has been looking at the types of terminology (and processes which define them) underpinning how data are linked and found in emerging and current information infrastructure. Awareness of multiple knowledges requires us to critically consider whose understanding and knowledge is represented in these infrastructures. Without careful attention and active intervention, he is concerned that the structures underlying the way we access information on the web will reflect and reinforce existing hierarchies of knowledge.

He has also worked with others to explore ways of diversify the voices reporting on key development processes, and influencing discourse, including the use of social media by young people from the South at a policy event. This has made him very aware of the need to use different methods and means of communication to engage different perspectives and audiences. noted that the notion of multiple knowledges had an impact on the way he designed courses, bringing in different speakers including some 'contrarians' who challenge accepted ways of thinking or knowing. He considers that the concept of multiple knowledges needs to be articulated and shared more widely.

Josine Stremmelaar: recognise where change happens

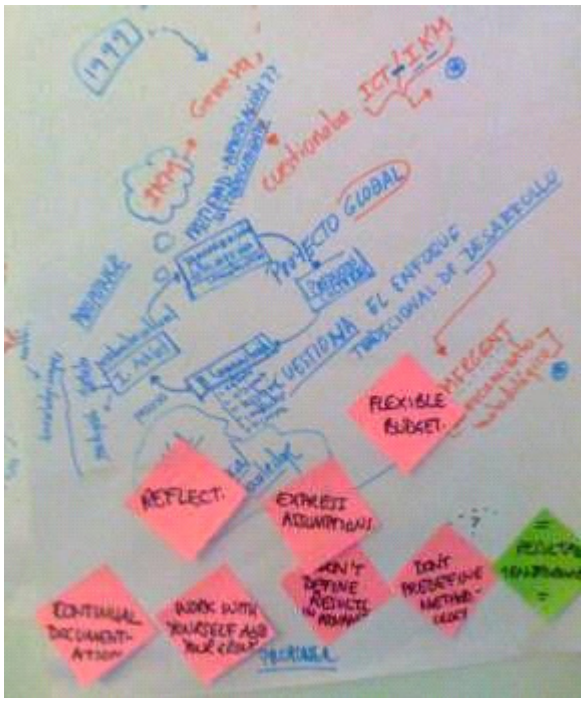


Josine is the coordinator of the knowledge programme at hivos and with ikm explored the role of the information intermediaries (including academics and practitioners in north and

south) in facilitating knowledge integration and flow, to facilitate more pluralism in the development sector. she found ikm to be a valuable space to reflect on and challenge her own practice, making connections with others from different areas of work and organisations, which she could then bring back to her own working environment.

Josine considers key to facilitating pluralism is to provide space for diverse groups to allow different kinds of connections, with questions to facilitate collective reflection, discussion of experiences and theory, and to test assumptions. In this way the process is in itself a result, the relationships you build support learning in what becomes a transformative approach. She recognises that reflection brings about change, but also that colleagues who are more focused on action often need to see the direct link to the impact their work might have. This requires good communication of how this type of work links to the quality of our practice.

Kemly Camacho: "el valor de lo propio" (Value what's ours)



Kemly has been working for more than 15 years exploring the social role of ICTs in Central America. As well as participating in working group 1, she has conducted action research with communities in Costa Rica into local knowledge processes and online tools which challenged traditional methodologies and the traditional development focus on access to, and appropriation of knowledge. The process was designed to develop and explore existing local knowledge in these communities, to create a community base of local information resources and ultimately new digital information artefacts. However, the focus shifted as the process evolved. People wanted to use well known and trusted media with a focus on internal audiences in the process of consolidating and constructing collective narratives, valuing their own knowledge rather than seeking to take on information from the outside. This led them to open and facilitate collective spaces in the community to reflect on and challenge what they know, and create new cultural products. This, in turn, strengthened the foundation for further work to create and document local knowledge, possibly strengthening

opportunities for seeking new information from outside, or online, but with a clear value of its own.

This adaptive approach was possible, Kemly says, because of the flexibility of the programme, starting with assumptions and allowing methodologies of work to emerge in the process. By focusing energy in creating space to reflect and work both with herself and the group, instead of starting with predetermined results, she was able to experience different ways to bring about transformative changes in communities' awareness and use of their knowledge. In this sense she defends that reflection is an objective in itself.

Kingo Mchombu: recognise the limits of what you know:

Kingo is Professor of the University of Namibia in the department of information and communication studies and Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, and has been involved in IKM working group 3 and conducted research into the knowledge management practices of governmental and non-governmental development actors.

He found that having the space and awareness to explore concepts of multiple knowledges provoked new insights into his work on community development, and more awareness of the limitations of his own knowledge. He considers that this awareness requires us to reflect on how we relate to others, who we listen to and how we understand and value knowledge. It also requires us to take time to allow relationships and thinking to mature. As a result, he recognises the need to listen more, and to a wider range of people, in order to reach a deeper understanding the reality on the ground and create a stronger basis for effective and transformative action – what he calls 'development from within'. He considers that the appropriate structures can leverage innovation and creativity, and as a senior manager in the university, is now able to create space for others to explore these issuesin their own work. However, he also feels frustrated that, by taking this position, he is less able to work on the ground himself.

Mare Fort: share stories of emergent and flexible organisational practice

Mare, a Regional Director for Care in Asia, has been part of the IKM Emergent steering committee, and has been instrumental in promoting reflection on lessons learned for practice. She has followed and contributed to the programme, particularly from an INGO perspective, and actively sought opportunities to feed this thinking into processes in her own organisations.

Mare found that by challenging the traditional knowledge value system and becoming more aware of our own roles in the knowledge chain, we can make an effective and meaningful contribution to development and social change. Key to this, she feels, is to ensure that there is space for collective reflection and learning, and to develop common discourse with diverse groups. This kind of debate and thinking is very live at all levels of her own organisation, but to allow more flexible and emergent ways of working require large-scale change in organisational structures and relationships, perhaps even scaling down operations, and strong evidence and examples from practice are neededto make the case for this type of

large scale process to happen.

Michael David: make the space to work with integrity

Michael is a journalist and community digital activist who has been involved in IKM's working group 1, working with communities in Sri Lanka to develop digital storytelling as well as using digital stories to communicate some of the work of the programme itself.

Michael has found the IKM programme very valuable as a space (with funding) to further develop his work on digital storytelling processes in Sri Lanka. He recognised that the trust placed in him allowed him to respond to the needs of the programme and participants on the ground, rather than spending time adapting decisions and reporting to meet donor expectations, but also that this also depended on his own integrity in using that space. He explained how different interaction with other IKMers has helped him to focus his work and explicitly recognise that there are no formulas for social change. He likened IKM to a field of flowers, 'letting a thousand flowers bloom'.

Mike Powell: have faith in (good) people

Mike is the director of the IKM Emergent programme, involved in much of the work but spending more time on overall management and reporting. He spoke about IKM as a space for discussion and experimentation about what emergence or complexity means in practice, and recognised that his own understanding of emergent practice has developed significantly since the programme started. Managing this kind of programme requires having faith in people to work in flexible and emergent ways; allowing people to follow their ideas and define relevant areas of work; and allowing things to happen that you wouldn't have thought of yourself. This has required him to take risks, but the risks are less when there is trust between colleagues. Although he did not set criteria for people to join the programme, except interest and motivation, on reflection he has found that these types of spaces work well with people with personal qualities such as generosity and preparedness to listen.

Robin Mansell: accept paradox pragmatically

Robin is Professor of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics, and has been part of the IKM Steering Group, as well as conducting research into the terminology used to describe ICTs and Knowledge in the UN system.

Robin has appreciated the opportunity she has had in IKM to get to know people from different sectors, who use different approaches such as action research. This has given her new insights and ideas, and influenced the direction and style of her work, without having to step outside of or leave behind her own institutional culture and structures. She feels that there is a strong downwards influence on institutions such as hers, primarily from donors, around acceptable expectations of valid knowledge and rigour. She has found that by bringing the 'multiple knowledges agenda' into her work and analysis she has been able to act with more intention to counter that flow, to include, value and document diverse types of knowledge, bycreating more space for practice-based research and recruiting team members from different backgrounds. She commented that this makes her own work more exciting, as she is exposed to different kinds of inputs and reflections.

She stressed that this has not signified a rejection of academic institutional culture, she is still working from within it. We cannot work in uncertainty, we need some structures and systems in place, to be guided by some kind of vision or direction in order to act. The key is not to allow these to solidify and become the reason for action. This is the type of paradox we are working in, and she warned against trying (and failing) to resolve them, but shared her own example of moving within them more freely. This is discussed in more detail below.

Sarah Cummings: Value individuals and the connections between them

Sarah is the communications coordinator of IKM Emergent programme, works on issues related to the development knowledge ecology, and edits the KM4D journal. She talked to us about the importance of IKM as a space based on respect, shared values and fairness, which evolves and reflects the ideas – and most importantly the people - within it. Individuals matter, and the connections between them are the basis for new ideas, relationships and practices to emerge. This has (we have?) had great impact on her own practice, allowing her to follow her own ideas, and giving her professional confidence to follow her instincts and be driven by her own values and sense of ethics. As she put it: “No more guerrilla tactics!”

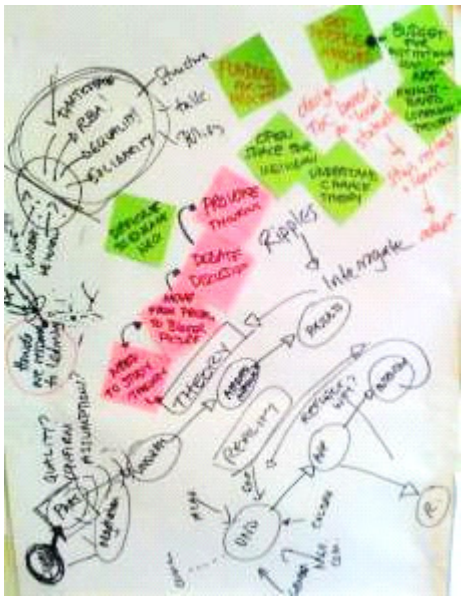
Sebastiao Ferreira: introduce ‘cognitive disturbance’

Sebastiao works on local knowledge and cognitive divides and considers IKM Emergent to be an important partner in reflection on issues of emergence and knowledge divides. He has published an article on the knowledge commons in the KM4D journal.

Sebastiao has been researching the idea of a knowledge commons, and to understand the

'cognitive divides' which limit the flows and sharing of knowledge between people and communities. He considers that development processes focus too much on the supply of knowledge, for example in ICT4D projects, but pay little attention to demand, and the absorptive capacity of different communities to access, understand and apply new and different types of knowledge and expertise.

Sebastiao mostly works with grassroots communities in the South, to create the conditions to combine local and external knowledgetowards greater (locally appropriate) innovation and creativity. He described a group process to share different (and often conflicting) ideas, perspectives and knowledge and develop a collective narrative, but then takes this further to introduce information from the outside (which he calls a 'cognitive disturbance') which might add to, or challenge this narrative, and foster broader understanding and new interpretations of a given situation. This, he has found, inspires information seeking behaviour, or demand, and greater creativity and innovation.



We reflected in our conversation that this process is just as valid and important in any community, including a team in the northern office of an INGO or a learning network. This ties in with comments from others such as Kingo about recognising the limits of your own knowledge, and listening more. The concept of 'cognitive disturbance' has also proved very helpful as a process in our own practice, testing and challenging the assumptionsof different players in the development sector (ourselves included!).

Steve Kirimi: plan based on thorough understanding of reality

Steve was involved in the IKM 'How Wide are the Ripples' research, looking into the knowledge flows in INGOs in Kenya, particularly the storage and use of knowledge generated through participatory processes. He found that this is not well stored or easily accessible, but perhaps more concerning he considers that INGO practice in communities is rarely based on the kind of thorough understanding of context that can be informed by this type of material.

Steve warned that many development interventions fail, or worse, because they are planned based on insufficient understanding of context. More debate and discussion is needed to provoke new thinking about how to understand context and how our interventions might then play out, and reflection during implementation to look at how the plans are working out and understand why they lead to different changes than anticipated. Steve sees a strong need to engage practitioners to in an open space to 'stop, reflect and learn' together. Wstrong processes to systematise and communicate local knowledge, the relationship with outside actors such as NGOs is skewed from the start, as these communities can then only respond to the questions they are asked.

This assertion is also repeated in the parallel IKM research conducted in Northern offices of INGOs[1]. Here we found the additional complexity of negotiating meaning across context, between outside actors, INGOs and communities. This shows links between the type of work Kemly and Sebastiao discuss, with organisational processes in international development organisations.

What we made of the conversations: working in paradox

The conversations showed that working in awareness of multiple knowledges, with flexibility to allow processes to emerge, has had a significant impact on the way we all work, and understand and negotiate our roles in development. Some things cropped up again and again in the conversations:

- working with integrity and honesty to be a proactive and empowered agent of change whatever your role;
- the importance of having space, trust, flexibility to listen to others and respond to learning;
- reflecting regularly on what we are doing, why, how and with whom;
- recognising the limits of our own knowledge and disciplines and critically examining our assumptions and the models and paradigms we apply in valuing knowledge.

We understood IKM as a model for the type of practice we need, free from the perceived constraints of donor control in the name of accountability. But, to begin with, we were driven by a need to deal with our own uncertainty about what IKM stands for (as opposed to against, which was clearer). We asked people what they thought we had in common, tried to get to the bottom of the unifying, positive, driving principles which unite us. We found some answers, coalescing around principles (reflected in our attitudes to knowledge) of equality and transformative development which recognises and addresses unequal power relations.

It wasn't until we spoke to Robin, who talked about paradox and pragmatism, that we realised that we were falling into a trap of dualistic, polarised thinking which fits neatly within the models we were critiquing. We had been thinking 'if its not that, it must be the opposite'. If it's not linear, it must be emergent. If it's not certain it must be uncertain. If it's not pre-

[1] Ref How Wide are the Ripples

determined it must be open, not based on results but on processes and relationships. If it's not positivist, it must be relativist. We agreed with the principle of multiple knowledges, and saw the impact of that way of thinking on power relations in development processes. But it was hard to let go of ideas of universal knowledge which, for example, allow a pilot to land a plane. Which side should we come down on?

What we discovered in talking to people in York, was that within a space with flexibility and trust to experiment and respond to learning, people did not reject wholesale the structures, systems and models we had critiqued. For at the opposite of one caricatured extreme is another one. Planning as if the world is simple and predictable may not be realistic, or effective, but trying to deal with the whole complex mess, without any structures or guiding direction, is no more effective – it saps our energy and morale and we lose agency. People could no more be meaningful actors without any structure as they could with too much.

Understanding paradox:

As we left York and began to try to make sense of the wealth of stories we had shared, we started to see patterns in the stories in terms of tensions between different approaches, such as individual/collective, linear/emergent, reason/intuition, results/processes, explicit/implicit, control/risk. We drew them up as a 'paradox mirror', with linear and certain tendencies at the top, and emergent ones at the bottom. Then we realised that we instinctively liked, and thought of as good practice, those at the bottom, and rejected those at the top – and we started to look at them in more relational terms.

McGilchrists' descriptions of left/ right hemispheres	
narrow	broad
attention to detail	sustained
concrete	embodied world
categories	implicit
disembodied	context
de-contextualised	individual
fixed, static	emotional expression,
isolated	metaphor, body language
virtual,	changing, evolving, living
technical,	interconnected
bureaucratic	in context of the lived world, in relationship
abstract, perfect but empty of meaning	

We were very inspired and influenced at this point by two frameworks we came across independently. The first, Hannah heard an RSA Animate lecture by neuroscientist Professor Iain McGilchrist called 'the divided brain', where he explained the different and complementary functions of the left and right hemispheres of the brain[2]. The table (right) has some of the words McGilchrist uses in his lecture to describe the two hemispheres, which fitted with, and expanded, the paradoxes and dynamic tensions we had spotted in our conversations . Daniel found further parallels in organisational theory such as Bruner 1986, who describes 'two modes of cognitive functioning, two modes of thought, each providing distinctive ways of ordering experience, of constructing reality." Bruner explains that "The two (though complementary) are irreducible to one another. Efforts to reduce one mode to the other or to ignore one at the expense of the other inevitably fail to capture the rich diversity of thought'.

[2] You can watch the video here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFs9WO2B8uI

Bruner's two modes of thought		
	Logical-scientific	Narrative
Objective	Truth	Verisimilitude
Problem	To know truth	To endow experience with meaning
Strategy	Empirical discovery guided by reasoned hypothesis	Universal understanding grounded in personal experience
Method	Sound argument Tight analysis	Good story Inspiring account
Key character-istics	Reason Aristotelian logic Proof Top-down Theory driven Categorical Abstract De-contextualized A-historical Non-contradictory Consistent	Association Aesthetics Intuition Bottom-up Meaning-centred Experiential Concrete Context-sensitive Historical Contradictory Paradoxical, ironic

Although we couldn't explore these theories further, they helped us to make sense of our paradox mirror quite differently, seeing clear parallels with current development sector attitudes which try to control external processes and require simplistic analysis, measurable

results. But we could also see that the opposite was not the alternative. The intuitive, embodied, experiential side of our practice has been undervalued in this rational, analytical context. But it does not provide us with information or approaches for action. Pure uncertainty and complexity started to sound like depression and paralysis. We need to be able to compartmentalise, but we must not lose the context which gives that meaning.

We looked into the meaning of paradox. Stacey (2003) states that it "may mean a state in which two diametrically opposing forces or ideas are simultaneously present, neither of which can be resolved or eliminated. Indeed it is this conflict that gives rise to transformation (...)"According to this definition, change is not about shifting from one paradigm to the other but acknowledging both of them and actively experiencing conflict. These types of theories reinforced our feeling that emergent practice is a question of complementarity, of finding a middle ground from where we could act with integrity and meaning. We began to identify a circular (or spiral) iterative process of reflection and action, experience and theorising, individual reflection and collective sense-making. The opportunity and freedom to do this was what had really enabled developments in people's practice.

Really there is nothing new in 'making space for reflection', and we desperately wanted to be able to share some nuggets of advice for transforming practice, but this is what it really seemed to come down to: mindfulness, awareness, critical reflection, respect, listening, openness… We began to recognise important principles of conversation, as opposed to individual analysis and 'information', where you share your own views and ideas but are open to new information and insights which might challenge or deepen them. These are well described and discussed in Julian Jenkins' working paper for IKM[3].

We realised that we don't want, or need to throw out structures, or even control mechanisms, but that these should be negotiated to enhance effectiveness. They should work for us, not us for them. And we need to ensure that we are able to respond to different pressures (such as sticking to the donor contract or responding to learning from the ground) in accordance to our values, not only their relative power and influence. In fact, reflecting on our own practice as independent consultants, we saw how we had ourselves begun to build structures around ourselves such as networks to support individual and collective reflection on our experiences, interactions to introduce 'cognitive disturbance' to our thinking, and regular processes to help us to systematise our knowledge and develop theories to draw on it more systematically.

What the stories of change tell us: working the middle ground

As the authors of IKM working paper 5[4] put it, talking about integrating different types of knowledge, this practice is "More of an art than a science, requiring considerable amounts of judgement and luck." We looked again at the stories shared with us in York, and the IKM papers, and began to spot signs of these individuals working to integrate the solid and linear with open and emergent ways of working, and of understanding knowledge – reassessing and renegotiating the parameters which an overly linear way of working sets us.

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[3] Reference
[4] Reference

We present them here in a somewhat linear way, informed by Sebastiao's description of bridging cognitive divides through a process beginning with your own knowledge, and introducing different perspectives to promote critical reassessment and information seeking behaviour, creativity and innovation. That is not to say that is how change happened in each case, or intended as a framework to make change happen in future. But it seemed to us the best way to understand and communicate the connections between the stories. The relationship between the individual and the collective runs throughout, with a strong emphasis on change happening from the inside out.

Start with what you know:

Many of the stories highlight that change begins in ourselves – our own learning from our own experiences is the basis of collective and organisational learning. Kemly and Sebastiao both described processes of working with communities to recognise and draw together 'local knowledge'. This process, which includes facilitation in order to recognise and deal with conflicting information and perspectives, and develop local knowledge artefacts, builds an important foundation for seeking further information, and communicating with others including development actors.

Other conversations highlighted the importance of reflecting on our own knowledge as practitioners: as Mare pointed out, we need to understand our own role in the knowledge chain, and the ways in which we value knowledge. Understanding what you know, the limits of what you know, and the paradigms we apply to knowledge, has been fundamental to much of the change we have been told about. We were concerned about the use of the term 'local' applied to knowledge, and the implicit assumption that this refers to grassroots communities, particularly (in an international development context) in the South. Yes, we are dealing with transforming asymmetries of power, and the knowledge of these communities is likely to be the most marginalised. But if we don't also see our own knowledge as 'local', then aren't we still failing to put ourselves in the picture, and ignoring the fact that change comes from within? Kingo put it nicely when he talked about recognising the limits of his own knowledge, and the resulting urge to listen more to reach a deeper understanding. We also noticed that this kind of personal reflection on what we know, what we have learned through experience, helped us to get more meaning out of theories and approaches 'out there', such as feminism and post-modernism.

Looking at the emerging 'paradox framework', we can see how linear approaches allow us to externalise change processes, removing ourselves from the picture. We need to simplify and abstract, but we also need to recognise and test the assumptions behind that. By focusing on our own knowledge, and helping others to do the same, we are building a strong foundation for action and more equal relationships to share and communicate ideas and 'knowledges'. We are not starting with the intended result, whether community development or organisational learning, but with our own capacity to act, like Sarah says, with integrity, driven by our ethics and values, and make the most of connections that may happen.

Create space for reflection, challenge and negotiation

Most of the stories point to the importance of space for reflection, and most of us recognise

how difficult that is, considering the drive for productivity and results. We heard from Josine that there is a danger that reflection can be considered the role of organisational evaluation and learning people, while others get on with their work supporting change processes in the South, for example. But we found clear signs of an iterative process in all of our work, where we reflect on our experiences in order to theorise and more systematically bring our learning into future work. We connect with others to reflect together, to share experiences, perhaps be challenged and have our assumptions questioned, and further develop our theory – and so it goes on. Kemly talked about this happening in the communities where she works. When this happens between colleagues, organisational change is happening.

What we heard in York is that IKM has been exactly such a space, allowing people to experiment, reflect on their experiences, theorise, make connections with others, and bring this learning into their own practice and organisations. In an iterative process, the interaction of IKMers is giving meaning to concepts such as 'multiple knowledges' or 'emergence', and that is at the same time changing the practice of these individuals.

IKM has been especially useful as it allows people to leave their organisational identities and labels outside the door, and just represent themselves. The multidisciplinary and diverse nature of the group also created opportunities for people to recognise and challenge their own knowledge value systems. Kingo noted how hierarchies obstruct the flow of knowledge, and it can be very helpful to step outside our organisations to reassess how we are understanding and using knowledge. We can notice when we are acting as information processors rather than actors in a process of negotiating meaning, and recognise our multiple, changing identities. With luck, we can bring this fresh perspective back into our daily work.

In fact, that is what happened to us when writing this paper… we struggled to make a clear and perfect analysis for a long time, until we realised that we were being false, making it up if you like, and in the process excluding others from being part of the sense-making process by concealing all of our workings out… which was just about where we were up to. In order to make sense of all of this we need more conversations, more inputs, more collective sense-making with people who can say what it means to them in their own contexts.

The conversations, and our own experience with the 'Ripples' process and traducture theme, also highlighted the importance of collective spaces for 'co-constructing' knowledge. We had tended to understand flows of knowledge in terms of how well things are documented, stored and moved between one place and another. But as we reflected and discussed our concerns, we started to see that everything depends on the connections and links – and that is people. Take a piece of information out of context and it changes its meaning, a large part of which is given to it by the receiver. We began to understand that knowledge is not 'transferred' it is reconstructed. A clear example was given to me in recent work with a multidisciplinary research group in UK universities. I asked the group whether the research coming from their colleagues was more relevant, and one replied that no, it was no more relevant than any other peer reviewed research on the issue (older people and ICTs), but it was more useful, because they could talk to the researchers about the process, the context, not just the findings – they could make sense of it together, in a new conversation with slightly different objectives.

We are now very aware of how important the sense-making process is, and think much more carefully about who is included– for example ensuring that we hold workshops to share preliminary findings in our evaluation processes. Kemly and Sebastiao's work is a clear example of allowing collective sense-making within communities, but we got the sense that many people working in institutions and organisations struggle to find collective space to do this inside.

Act with intention and awareness– negotiate your role

More than once the word 'schizophrenic' came up in relation to organisations, who seem to talk in one way and act in another. The 'paradox framework' helped us to make sense of why this happens, a first step to changing it perhaps, as 'linear' approaches dominate and relationships are based more on control than trust. We noticed that as a space for experimentation, reflection and challenge, IKM had enabled people to explore these paradoxes, gain awareness of the paradigms they are applying and explore different ways of managing the tensions between the different modes of thinking. This empowered us to act less as bureaucrats and more as activists, as Sarah so neatly expressed.

Individual confidence and agency allows us to renegotiate and reshape the structures and systems in which we operate, so that linear structures are derived from, and complemented by, emergent ways of working . Kemly described such a process: whereby she planned a community process based on assumptions and theories derived from her existing knowledge, but as the process evolved she re-examined these theories and changed the project accordingly. This plays out differently in different people and contexts, with some of us working to renegotiate our own parameters and expectations of our work, and others working to change wider institutional structures and approaches. Mare is taking this awareness to influence her own organisation from a position of relative power, choosing her battles and preparing for the right time to act strategically.

During the 'Ripples' process we found that many of us internalise the pressure to conform to donor or organisational 'expectations', even when we feel this is not right for what we are trying to do. Amazingly, it seemed we rarely even try to negotiate or explain, just assuming that donors prefer us to complete and fulfil a logframe than meet our objectives. Yet we also heard examples of people and organisations, not usually very wealthy or seemingly powerful ones, empowered by nothing more than their internal conviction, challenging this assumption. For example, small Latin American civil society organisations who have turned down the offer of funding from the World Bank for political reasons, or a consultant in the UK who felt that the government consultation he was being asked to facilitate was too narrow, and changed the questions to allow more 'upstream' public engagement[5].

Just like Mare described, the 'Ripples' participants reflected on our own roles in the knowledge chain, in making sense and giving meaning to information coming from others, and recognised the need to play that role with integrity and intention, reflecting on our own biases and openly negotiating them with others involved. As such we are agents of

[5] http://pubs.iied.org/G02854.html

organisational learning, for which we need structures and systems which help us to bring our personal changes and learning into our work, and our relationships with others. But we also have the power to shape and create those structures, within our organisations and in our wider relationships with communities and donors, to fit our context and our needs. Robin and Kingo both talked about their ability to create spaces to challenge assumptions about knowledge.

One example of an enabling structure, for Hannah at least, is a 'Theory of change' - much talked about in development at the moment. A good, collectively constructed and validated, theory of change enables us to relate linear with emergent approaches. By thinking first about the changes we want to see, and work towards, we can see the big picture in its complexity, with many players and processes influencing change. We make our assumptions about how change happens explicit, and we clarify what we consider to be our (project/ organisation's) role in that. From there we can abstract our (linear) process and expected results, but also understand our relationship with other players and processes. We can plan based on this abstracted or simplified element of the predicted change process, but we can assess our progress and spot changes we might need to make by zooming back out to the bigger picture. I have found this very useful in policy advocacy planning and evaluation, for example, where the focus can be on very technical policy detail, and the link between this and changes to people's lives can easily be lost. However, it was interesting that Steve talked about theories of change as donor requirements, which require capacity building of development professionals who want to tap into their funds. This shows how enabling structures can solidify and lose meaning and value, but also provides an opportunity to engage donors in different ways of working which rely more on trust and shared values than control.

Broaden knowledge base(s) for your practice and development

Many of the stories show that, while your own knowledge is a starting point, the idea of 'multiple knowledges' implies recognition of the limitations of our own knowledge. Sebastiao pointed out that it is through confronting new information that we change and develop our understanding, and become creative and innovative and enthusiastic seekers of new information. In this way we are developing the demand for new information and others' knowledge, and encouraging integration and interaction between different types of knowledge. Steve painted a clear picture of the dangers of operating based on too little, narrow knowledge and incomplete understanding of context. Kingo talked about 'development from within', as a process based on integrating new knowledge into strong local processes. It follows, then, that our own processes should lead towards behaviour which recognises the value of different knowledges and actively seeks them out.

The interaction between different knowledges prevents us from narrowing or excessively solidifying our 'truths' about how development and social change happen. Here knowledge needs to be appropriated instead of being understood as a property, a commodity or simply data. Appropriation implies that knowledge is nothing without people making sense of it or making it theirs. This means that knowledge is changing while people make sense of it.

In recent discussions about knowledge flows with the UK 'organisational learning network',

we saw how these aspects all link together. There is a big difference between seeking information to answer a question you have clearly framed, and drawing your questions from what you are hearing from others. In the former, we seek and fit the evidence to our conclusions. For multiple knowledges, especially those marginalised in the powerful academic/expert knowledge paradigm, to have influence in development processes we need to do more of the latter. We need to be able to have conversations between different actors, make sense together, in order to derive development policy and priorities from it. This requires grassroots participatory processes to be more 'upstream', allowing participants to define the questions and issues being discussed. But if there are not spaces for reflection within development organisations, we are being driven to produce the results we planned for and meet the targets we set ourselves, we have no space to join that conversation. One of the people present at the meeting commented that an review of his organisation had recommended that they did 30% less work, with the same staff capacity. This would allow more 'downtime', for informal and accidental conversations and connections to take place – within the office, and in the field. The recommendation was not followed, perhaps because of a sense that this downtime was not productive, and the imperative to raise funds. But at the very same meeting two colleagues had met for the first time and discovered that one had experience of the very thing the other had been struggling to do for nearly two months. So it seems that reflection, connection, space is not so unproductive after all?

Further reflection

Areas of practice we could explore

Questions for reflection – how to draw out 'signposts' – can we do it without being too predictive and directional? Could they work without the underlying attitudes?