*IKM Summaries*

## Learning networks for bridging knowledge divides in international development: aligning approaches and initiatives

*In today's knowledge economy, the asset of knowledge is just as important as more conventional assets such as land, labour and capital. The two pillars of the knowledge economy are universal access to information and knowledge, and freedom of expression. Consequently, the problems arising from knowledge divides will remain unresolved unless these two pillars of the knowledge society are strengthened by revisiting public and private, as well as formal and informal, modes of knowledge production, exchange, regulation and application.*

Knowledge divides remain a challenge for international development. The underlying causes of knowledge divides in the contemporary knowledge economy are the disparity in stakeholder capacity to access knowledge assets, both public and private, as well as differences in capacity to participate in learning and innovation processes.

This study by Laxmi Pant of the University of Guelph, Canada, identifies and describes approaches and initiatives to bridge a complex array of knowledge divides in international development, specifically the differences in learning and innovation arising from multiple realities and multiple knowledge of a myriad of stakeholders, from multi-lateral and bi-lateral organizations to diaspora communities, civil society organizations (CSOs), and destitute local communities.

### Learning networks

The author identifies systems approaches, specifically innovation systems thinking, as a potential candidate among a basket of choices to address the complexity of knowledge divides. Based on a review of the relevant literature, a convergence model of Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (SI&E) has been developed and provisionally tested using the evidence from the contemporary blossoming (or in some cases mushrooming) of the practices of forming epistemic communities, communities of practice, communities of interest, learning communities, learning alliances and learning networks, both globally as well as locally. These are various terminologies for similar processes of learning across conventional boundaries, although finer differences are possible between these communities. Recognizing semantic ambiguity of the use of the terms, this paper posits the concept of *learning networks,* as a corollary to the concept of *learning organizations,* is inclusive of all kinds of learning communities in international development.

There is a need for further research on stakeholder engagement in *learning networks* as a potential initiative to bridge knowledge divides, specifically using the convergence model of SI&E as a conceptual framework. This framework would be useful to understand the processes of social innovation and entrepreneurship, from local to global levels. An effective learning network should entail a holistic perspective on the convergence of actor structures, resources, processes and values, not just integrating the ways of knowing and addressing the nature of being. In other words, this study argues that a higher order goal of value convergence is necessary to bridge divides arising from multiple realities and multiple knowledge systems. Subsequently, this study develops principles of managing learning networks, with a focus on individual actors, and outlines a few research questions to illustrate this. The questions, however, are not exhaustive and need to emerge through researchers' interactions with the members of the *learning network* in question.

The paper is structured as follows. It begins by presenting the complexity of knowledge divides by grouping them into analytical categories along four dimensions: technological divides, social/cultural divides, ontological (nature of being) divides, and epistemological (ways of knowing) divides. It then

proceeds to review various systems thinking, the latest being innovation systems thinking. Based on a review of the literature, a convergence model of Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (SI&E) was developed, recognizing a need to move from bridge building - the hardware metaphor - to the convergence of actor structures, resources, processes and values along a three-dimensional innovation platform – *the nature of being*, *ways of knowing*, and *long-term strategy* - as an effective strategy to address knowledge divides. The term '*convergence'* in this model refers to the coming together of public and private actors, developing a synergy of resources available in both sectors, and achieving overarching goals, but at the same time maintaining their inherent public and private values. The second section of the paper (Part 2) presents the strengths and limitations of contemporary initiatives to bridge knowledge divides in international development. It also provides detailed definitions of different types of learning communities and the contact details of 13 key learning communities in international development. The third section of the paper (Part 3) outlines some of the basic principles of managing learning networks such as 'Focus on individual actors rather than their organizations', 'Engage policy-makers and government officers in learning networks' and 'Stimulate interaction *outside* the group of like-minded people'. Next, this section suggests further research areas on social innovation and entrepreneurship through learning networks. Finally, the study recognizes the gap between conceptual approaches and prevailing practices, provides a set of recommendations, suggests further research in this field of knowledge and innovation management for development, specifically using the convergence model of SI&E, and presents its conclusions.

**Conclusions**
The study revealed that the existing body of literature on knowledge management for development is very small, and specifically focuses on integrating multiple knowledge systems without enough treatment of multiple realities; but in practice the latter often complicates the former. Most actors in knowledge networking initiatives, however, seem to agree at least in principle that knowledge is not an entity or commodity, but in practice such networks often fail to appreciate that knowledge is socially constructed. The author goes on to advocate engaging in negotiation, not just about multiple knowledge and multiple realities but holistically about the convergence of actor structures, institutional set-ups, available resources and infrastructure, knowledge management processes, and stakeholder values. However, he warns that this provisional conclusion needs to be validated through further research. Finally, the current preoccupation with paradigm-based science, policy and practice should be reconsidered because a paradigm is not a blueprint, but an organizing principle and a conceptual framework.

To this end, the role of a learning network should be to engage its members in continuous processes of learning and innovation, often thinking beyond what is obvious and working on the edge, often through continuously spanning the traditional boundaries. Although in principle the importance of integrating Western paradigm-based science, policy and practice with the knowledge and realities of Southern scientists, practitioners and local communities is increasingly being realized, unfortunately in practice there is still a long way to go before we see meaningful impacts in the field of international development.