

IKM Summaries

Meta-review and scoping study of the management of knowledge for development

Over the past ten years, numerous reviews have been conducted both in the sphere of knowledge management and knowledge management for development. While the former generally harness a thorough theoretical view on knowledge management, based on corporate evidence, they neglect a number of critical development-related issues such as inclusion. The development tradition, however, might be categorized as empiricist, strongly embedded in practice and providing limited contributions to theory development.

This paper by Julie Ferguson, Kingo Mchombu and Sarah Cummings explores how knowledge is applied within the development sector in general and the role of knowledge within development organizations in particular. It is based on the premise that, even in the wake of the information age, the development sector as a whole continues to overlook the strategic importance of knowledge to its work. As a result, effective responses to the knowledge asymmetries within and between organizations have yet to be developed. To compound the situation further, even when the strategic importance of knowledge management for development (KM4D) is acknowledged, development actors still struggle with the practical challenges of organizing and using information and knowledge.

Much has been written about knowledge management for development and this has generated many literature reviews during the last decade. So, rather than repeating this exercise, the authors decided to conduct their own meta-review - a 'review of reviews' – which they further enriched with links to other fields, namely: generic or mainstream knowledge management; home-grown approaches in the development sector, such as the agriculture and knowledge information systems (AKIS) approach; and related approaches from information management for development.

By compiling this 'meta review' and combining it with a bird's-eye view of the discipline today, the authors aim to build a theoretical framework of knowledge management for development. It represents a first attempt to scope and review the broad field of knowledge management for development. One serious limitation throughout the exercise, however, was that most of the literature about knowledge management for development tends to come from Northern sources. As a result of this, Northern development organizations of all types often lack adequate knowledge of not just the Southern realities that they aim to change but, just as importantly, of the perception of those realities by local populations and by local intellectuals. This issue, although fundamental to the potential effectiveness of all development work, went beyond the remit of this paper.

The authors begin by sketching a broad outline of the knowledge for development field, tracing its origins both within and outside the development sector (Part 1) and placing particular emphasis on the practice-based view of knowledge. Next, they provide an overview of the different stages and models of knowledge management (Part 2): these are key because they show the perceived trends in knowledge management. The bulk of the paper is devoted to a meta-review of literature reviews focusing on knowledge management for development (Part 3), identifying the main issues which need to be addressed in further work on this subject, and exploring differences in knowledge management approaches beyond the Anglo-Saxon discourse (Part 4). The next section (Part 5) collects findings from all the other parts of the paper to identify the key issues that need to be addressed in future research into the following areas:



- The Northern, Anglo-Saxon bias in the dominant knowledge management for development discourse;
- Knowledge management in different constellations of development organizations;
- The human face of knowledge management;
- Knowledge asymmetries; and
- Evaluation and impact assessment of knowledge management.

Several general conclusions could be drawn from the review. First, that KM4D strategies are generally weak in terms of their theoretical embedding, often basing themselves on a cognitive approach while displaying a practice-based view of knowledge. Secondly, knowledge strategies are often overly focused on tools, good practices and methodologies, rather than exploring organizational processes from a knowledge perspective, identifying how individual knowledge 'capital' can be harnessed at an organizational level, and how and where the knowledge strategies can play a role in reaching organizational objectives. As a result, specific contextual aspects are neglected both within the organization and among development partners, which obstructs mutual learning among stakeholders. Thirdly, there is little overall understanding about what constitutes 'impact' from a knowledge management perspective, and what indicators and mechanisms can be used to measure and demonstrate this. If it is not clear what knowledge for development interventions ultimately aim to achieve, there is little chance that coherent, purposeful approaches can be developed. Fourth, five main fields for further research were identified: these are linked to the intellectual traditions of dominant knowledge management for development discourse; the use of knowledge strategies in different constellations of development organizations; to human aspects of knowledge management, and the possibility of upscaling this to an organizational level; to addressing knowledge asymmetries that obstruct mutual learning; and to the impact evaluation of knowledge management for development.

There are many outstanding research issues linked to knowledge management for development, and the theoretical development of the discipline is still incipient. However, the authors believe that development is in fact a 'knowledge industry': the success of development initiatives depends on a thorough understanding of the cultural and socio-economic environment of the intended beneficiaries, and how well knowledge of these factors is applied. Conversely, successful development initiatives should allow people to participate actively and equally in decision-making processes that affect them – possible only if the appropriate knowledge is available to them. As such, knowledge management for development is a field that will gain importance over the next few years. It can be safely stated that it will not be dismissed as a 'fad' and, similar to mainstream or generic knowledge management, it still shows steady growth. Knowledge management for development strategies are still eagerly being defined and rolled out among development organizations across the world, with ambitious budgets to match. Therefore, it is of critical importance that not just 'knowledge officers', but particularly managers and policy-makers, develop a more thorough understanding of the organizational implications of such approaches, and develop more awareness of the epistemic diversity – the *knowledges* – local to their stakeholders: donors, other policy-makers, and development practitioners in the North and the South. Research agendas should give priority to the outstanding issues outlined above, especially those that concern the human face of knowledge management, approaches to bridging knowledge asymmetries, and how to evaluate knowledge management. Through the issues identified and outlined in this scoping paper, the authors have attempted to kick-start this agenda.

About this IKM Summary

This *IKM Summary* provides an overview of the following *IKM Working Paper*

Julie E. Ferguson, Kingo Mchombu and Sarah Cummings (2008) Management of knowledge for development: meta-review and scoping study. *IKM Working Paper No. 1*, April 2008, 45pp.

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