

Knowledge Sharing in Development Agencies: *Knowledge Fortress or Knowledge Pool?*

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Summary

This paper² considers some of the inherent limitations of knowledge management approaches designed to share knowledge within organisations. It highlights the duplication problem across agencies and the tendency to create “knowledge fortresses”, which have the effect of restricting the flow of knowledge into and out of the organisation. An alternative approach of “knowledge pooling” is examined, using as examples four different knowledge sharing initiatives that the Institute of Development Studies has been involved in: BRIDGE, Livelihoods Connect, the DFID Governance Resource Centre, and the DFID Health Systems Resource Centre. It argues that knowledge pooling using external partners as facilitators has some important advantages in terms of flexibility, openness and credibility with users, and that in some situations this may be a more appropriate and effective solution that can complement other forms of knowledge sharing.

Introduction

Knowledge management thinking within development agencies³ has come a long way since the concept first crossed over from the private sector in the late 1990s⁴. The World Bank was the first big agency to embark on an ambitious knowledge management programme. Since then most other development agencies have taken steps in this direction, though approaches have varied quite widely, as has the terminology used⁵, and the levels of investment made⁶.

The need for better knowledge sharing within and between development agencies is glaringly obvious. Project documents getting lost, evaluation lessons being ignored, consultant reports getting buried, research being bypassed, field experience being wasted when staff move on, organisational learning being blocked by hierarchies or internal structures, agencies not knowing what each other are doing, and local stakeholders being left out of the loop: these are familiar problems that most agencies are only too aware of.

In addressing this challenge, the starting point for most agencies has been to begin at the organisation level by getting their own house in order. This is the default approach within the corporate sector. But is it necessarily the best way of encouraging knowledge sharing in a development context? And what are the alternatives?

How is the development sector different?

The private sector has had a strong influence on how knowledge management thinking has evolved, and provided a variety of models (and associated jargon) that knowledge management champions in development agencies have looked to for inspiration and ideas. But there are important differences between the private sector and development world that tend to be downplayed yet have an important bearing on what approaches will work best. Three in particular stand out:

- **Accountability:** the fact that companies are driven by a financial bottom line and are accountable to their shareholders provides a direct way of measuring performance and motivating change. Development agencies have a much more complex set of goals and are less directly accountable. So the benefits of knowledge sharing, or the costs of failing to do so, are less immediate, either at the individual or organisation level. Put another way, development agencies can get away with not learning from their mistakes for longer.
- **Intellectual property:** companies succeed by gaining a competitive edge and see knowledge as a private good to be captured and deployed for commercial advantage. Development knowledge is (or should be) more of a public good, which organisations should be sharing rather than attempting to capture and monopolise⁷.
- **Culture:** the development and private sectors attract people for different reasons, and organisational cultures vary quite markedly. What might work well as a way of motivating knowledge sharing in a fast-moving, well-managed multinational company will not necessarily be so effective in a development agency, where many individuals have a strong personal commitment to development, but are often operating within a slower-moving and more bureaucratic set-up.

For the private sector it is entirely natural for the boundaries of their knowledge management system to be set at the organisation level. Some go further and share some knowledge with key clients or business partners, and hinting at their extensive experience is a classic marketing approach. But very few businesses would gain by making everything they know publicly accessible.

Development agencies may at times be competitive, and image conscious, but they have less reason to be protective of their knowledge, or to restrict their knowledge management horizons to the boundaries of their organisation. However there are practical factors that encourage agencies to take this approach.

Setting boundaries– the advantages of keeping KM in the family

Setting the boundaries of knowledge management systems at the organisational level has obvious pragmatic advantages. The audience is well defined and most staff can be reached these days using common ICT systems, wherever they are in the world. Since staff are also covered by the agency's training, appraisal and career development schemes, it means that knowledge management can potentially be tied into these, providing way of incentivising staff, monitoring performance and encouraging good knowledge sharing practice.

Keeping the boundaries close also allows KM systems to be closely matched to institutional goals and agendas, either at the agency or department level. There is no need to clear material with stakeholders outside the organisation, negotiate priorities, or enter into complicated cost-sharing arrangements. It also makes it easier to share sensitive material, which may be particularly important when one is trying to encourage learning from failures, not just successes, and where confidentiality is essential in building trust.

These provide good reasons for keeping knowledge management “within the family” to a considerable extent, and this is the route that most development agencies have gone. But there are also drawbacks in this approach that need to be considered, notably the problem of duplication of effort, and the “knowledge fortress” tendency.

The duplication problem

Some of the knowledge that needs to be captured and shared by development agencies is quite clearly organisation specific. Details of an agency's staff appraisal policy, guidelines

on how to prepare internal budget submissions, background on the agency's dealings with a particular partner - these are all examples of 'internal knowledge' that agencies need to share effectively, and which needs to stay within its walls.

But a great deal of the knowledge that staff would find useful in carrying out their jobs is not organisation specific. Anything to do with the development process itself – their core business – is potentially of interest to many others as well. A list of useful websites on the forthcoming WTO negotiations, a set of key background documents on the PRSP process in Uganda, a practical toolkit on how to undertake participatory monitoring and evaluation, or a directory of individuals and organisations with experience in HIV/AIDS prevention – this kind of substantive information is being prepared by development agencies all the time. If the job is being done well, it will be of relevance to people outside the organisation too.

If agencies go down the track of creating their own in-house systems to organise and make available this kind of knowledge there is therefore a real danger of duplication. Though agencies often have their own particular take on development issues, and their own sectoral and geographic priorities, there is a large degree of overlap in the issues that agencies are dealing with and the problems they are addressing. If anything, there has been a convergence of agendas in recent years with the shift towards sector wide approaches (SWAPs), budgetary support, and the Poverty Reduction Strategy approach, so there is more overlap than in the past. The whole 'donor cohesion' agenda has been pushing in this direction for some time.

The more ambitious and comprehensive in-house systems are, the greater the degree of duplication of resources. Perhaps more of a waste, however, is when agencies half do the job and because of budget constraints or lack of specialist staff are only able to construct a very basic system which takes up resources but is not substantive enough to really add value for agency staff. Many development agency intranets are littered with examples of brave attempts to capture and organise knowledge on particular themes, but which never reached critical mass and have been allowed to wither on the vine, getting out of date and rarely being visited.

This is not intended as a criticism of development agencies; it is an entirely understandable and hard to avoid tendency that applies to almost all organisations that have invested in websites and intranets in the last five years, not least IDS. The point is that development agencies need to learn from this so that in their next generation of efforts they can deploy their resources more effectively.

The Knowledge Fortress tendency

A second limitation with organisation-centred KM systems is the tendency for them to become isolated and inward looking. By concentrating on internal knowledge there is a danger of constructing barriers around the organisation that can turn it into a "knowledge fortress". This may not be deliberate, but the more elaborate KM systems are, the greater this tendency seems to be.

Fortresses may feel like safe places to be, but they have a number of disadvantages in knowledge sharing terms:

- **It is hard for knowledge to penetrate from outside** – agencies that have a strong expertise of their own and generate a lot of their own content can become too self-sufficient, to the extent that they become blind to external perspectives and viewpoints. This is a criticism that has been levelled at the World Bank, where staff have such an extensive array of high quality internally-produced information at their fingertips that staff

have little need or incentive to look elsewhere⁸. This can have the unintended effect of stifling diversity and reinforcing received wisdom.

- **It is hard for knowledge to get out** – if KM systems are very internally focused, knowledge can become trapped within the organisation. This is particularly the case with systems that rely heavily on intranets. These are very convenient for staff that have access, but they tend to lock out other stakeholders who might benefit from the information, such as consultants and project partners. The problem can be solved to some extent using extranets, but in any system where access is restricted there are problems of permissions and security as well as the potential criticism of lack of transparency⁹.
- **Field offices can feel excluded** – the majority of KM initiatives are led from the centre and many have problems in engaging staff based in field offices who, rightly or wrongly, tend to dismiss initiatives from headquarters as being top down and out of touch with the realities on the ground. UNDP has been unusual in deliberately basing part of its knowledge sharing system, their Sub-Regional Resource Facilities (SURFs), in regional offices. These have the task of providing advisory and research support to a cluster of country offices, so are able to respond directly to local concerns and interests¹⁰.

The fortress tendency applies to systems which capture explicit knowledge in its various forms but also to communities of practice aiming to tap into the softer, tacit knowledge, held in people's heads. If communities or practice are set up to cover just agency staff, or particular groups within the organisation, they can work well, and help to support teamwork and cohesion within that group. The danger, however, is that they can become rather narrow and constrained as a result, missing out on people who could both contribute and benefit from the exchange of knowledge that results¹¹. Obviously a balance needs to be struck somewhere. A community of practice that is potentially open to anyone may be difficult to get off the ground, so some degree of focus may be needed. But the organisational level is not necessarily the best or the only place to begin.

An alternative approach: Knowledge Pooling

There is another way of constructing knowledge sharing systems. Instead of starting within the organisation, initiatives can be placed outside or on the boundaries of the organisation, and be designed to pool knowledge in a broader and more inclusive way. This is not the solution to all knowledge sharing problems, but it does have some significant advantages.

Since the early 1990s, IDS has been involved as an external partner in managing a number of knowledge sharing initiatives of this kind on behalf of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and other development agencies. These have come about for mostly pragmatic reasons - agencies have recognised the need for knowledge support in a particular area and have looked outside for help because they wanted to move fast, and realised they would have trouble getting a service off the ground themselves.

Here we focus on four of them: BRIDGE, Livelihoods Connect, the DFID Governance Resource Centre (GRC) and the DFID Health Systems Resource Centre (HSRC). Though they have some overlapping elements, they are all distinct in a number of ways to present a set of case studies of how this kind of knowledge sharing approach can be organised. In the following section a snapshot is provided of each of these services, before considering some success factors and common lessons that can be drawn from this experience.

Four Case Studies

1. BRIDGE	
Origins	Set up in 1992 in response to a request from the OECD/DAC Working Party on Gender which recognised the need for information support in helping to introduce new thinking on gender and development into their organisations. IDS was approached because of its established research background in this area.
Objectives	Original aim was to assist gender mainstreaming by helping bridge the gap between research and policy making on gender and development issues. In the past 3 years the focus has shifted to also include an emphasis on linking to and supporting gender practitioners working at field level.
Knowledge model	<p>Initially the service was entirely demand led. Agencies paid an annual fee which made them eligible for a number of days of tailored knowledge support from a dedicated unit established at IDS. This was a form of information consultancy. Bridge specialised in drawing together latest thinking on a topic, synthesising it intelligently, and presenting it in a digestible form designed to meet the specific needs of the requesting agency. Outputs were shared with contributing agencies, as well as being made available free of charge to Southern organisations and being sold through the IDS bookshop.</p> <p>The service evolved subsequently, and in its most recent phase has taken on a more proactive approach in determining and agreeing what are the priority topics to cover. Bridge produces a range of outputs on cutting edge issues of special interest to the gender community, as well as several websites providing access to a broad spectrum of gender knowledge. It has an international advisory group that helps guide its work.</p> <p>The service is supported by a consortium of mainly bilateral agencies who contribute via a combination of grants for specific activities and subscriptions for a package of services, which includes provision of a number of days of dedicated knowledge support for that agency (in the past 3 years Bridge has been supported by the governments of Canada, Denmark, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK, and by the Commonwealth Secretariat).</p>
Main Elements/ Outputs	<p>In Brief – a 6 page briefing paper on a key gender theme.</p> <p>Cutting Edge Packs – consisting of a package of outputs on a particular gender topic, produced in collaboration with partners.</p> <p>Commissioned reports - e.g. country gender profiles, toolkits, bibliographies, subject reviews.</p> <p>Bridge website – providing free downloads of Bridge publications.</p> <p>Genie – a website providing access to development agencies' own reports on gender, and an associated gender consultant database.</p> <p>Siyanda – an interactive website aiming to capture practitioner experience.</p>
Primary Audiences	<p>Staff involved in gender mainstreaming in development agencies</p> <p>Gender practitioners have become a new priority in the current phase</p>
Staff team	Currently 5 full time staff
URL	www.ids.ac.uk/bridge www.siyanda.org

2. LIVELIHOODS CONNECT	
Origins	<p>Emerged in 1999 following a policy decision by DFID to adopt the people-centred sustainable livelihoods approach to poverty reduction¹². A support office was set up within the Rural Livelihoods Dept with a mandate to promote sustainable livelihoods thinking across DFID. A team of UK research and consultancy organisations were chosen to form a 'resource group' to support the initiative. Livelihoods Connect came from discussions on how best to assemble knowledge on the subject and encourage dialogue and learning.</p>
Objectives	<p>To assist DFID and its partners in the development and implementation of sustainable livelihoods (SL) approaches to poverty reduction.</p> <p>To provide a 'learning platform' to encourage sharing of knowledge and networking between policy makers, practitioners, researchers and others involved in implementing SL approaches.</p> <p>To explain and promote the SL approach to other broader audiences.</p>
Knowledge model	<p>Livelihoods Connect provides a web and e-mail platform for gathering, organising and sharing practical lessons, experience, contacts and new thinking. For its first three years, Livelihoods Connect staff worked in very close partnership with the SL support office in experimenting with different approaches, working with DFID staff, consultants and other partners to understand their interests and needs, and animating exchange on SL issues.</p> <p>Following the major reorganisation of the DFID Policy Division in 2003, SL approaches are being mainstreamed and the support office has been closed. Livelihoods Connect will continue and take over the focal point function, with its role evolving so it can support SL projects in country programmes, and continue its learning and information exchange role but with a broader group of stakeholders.</p>
Main Elements/ Outputs	<p>Information resources – a range of carefully selected materials including guidance sheets, a distance learning package, key documents, a hot topic section, lessons from experience, a practical toolkit, plus information on training opportunities, web links and events.</p> <p>Post-it Board – where anybody can contribute news or queries.</p> <p>E-mail update – a monthly update highlighting news and developments.</p> <p>Advice – on knowledge sharing around SL to DFID projects and partners</p> <p>Enquiry Desk – a personalised signposting service (restricted at present to DFID staff and consultants), with associated FAQ section.</p> <p>Private discussion areas – password protected areas can be set up as needed for sharing material among partners on work in progress.</p>
Primary Audiences	<p>DFID staff in offices around the world, both natural resources specialists and others (a key objective was to extend SL thinking beyond its original home in the natural resources sector).</p> <p>DFID consultants and in-country partners in government and other agencies.</p> <p>Development agencies, researchers and others interested in SL approaches.</p>
Staff team	Currently 2.1 (FTE) staff
URL	www.livelihoods.org

3. GOVERNANCE RESOURCE CENTRE (GRC)	
Origins	In 2000 the DFID Governance Dept put out a tender for an external resource centre on governance issues. IDS was part of a successful bid led by the International Development Dept (IDD) at Birmingham University.
Objectives	Initially the prime objective was to support DFID governance advisers in meeting the growing demand for governance advice and expertise within DFID, by providing tailored knowledge support. The objectives have since expanded to encompass a broader knowledge sharing mandate, including a public information service (the GRC Exchange) aimed at a global audience.
Knowledge model	<p>A dedicated unit was set up at IDD and IDS to provide a combination of proactive and responsive knowledge support. Summaries of carefully selected key readings are provided, and a range of other support services offered. But the main emphasis has been on responding to specific queries from DFID governance advisers through a Help Desk.</p> <p>Help Desk staff conduct detailed searches, follow up with specialists in the field and write intelligent briefings that provide a background to the topic, outline key debates, and point to the most important sources. IDD and IDS researchers are an important first port of call for advice, but GRC staff gather inputs from a wide range of external experts (over 400 so far). It provides an effective method for harvesting tacit knowledge in response to specific user needs, and preserving it so it can be made available to others.</p> <p>The GRC is in the process of broadening out so the knowledge and services it provides become available to other audiences within DFID, and elsewhere. Different models for charging for the Help Desk service and for opening it up to counterparts in developing country government, or other agencies, are being discussed.</p>
Main Elements/ Outputs	<p>Help Desk – providing high quality tailored responses to particular questions from DFID staff.</p> <p>Online information resources – the website includes summaries of key documents with links to full text versions, a list of key organisations and websites, a guide to training opportunities and upcoming events.</p> <p>Library support – through the British Library for Development Studies, based at IDS, and the DFID Library.</p> <p>Yellow pages – an in depth synopsis of governance advisers' special interests, recent experience and contact details.</p> <p>Email update – a monthly bulleting highlighting what's new.</p> <p>GRC Exchange – a new public interface to the GRC which makes available all of the content that is not confidential (the help desk and yellow pages are in a separate password-protected site).</p>
Primary Audiences	<p>Help Desk service was initially restricted to DFID governance advisers (approximately 70 individuals). It is now broadened to serve other DFID staff.</p> <p>The new GRC Exchange is aimed at a broad global audience interested in governance issues, in particular DFID partners in developing countries.</p>
Staff team	Currently 7.5 (FTE) staff (5 in Birmingham, 2.5 at IDS)
URL	www.grc-exchange.org

4. HEALTH SYSTEMS RESOURCE CENTRE (HSRC)	
Origins	The DFID Health and Population Dept has subcontracted consultancy management and policy support work to external resource centres for some years. In the most recent round of tendering in 2002, the terms of reference for the Health Systems Resource Centre included a much more proactive knowledge management element than in the past. IDS was part of a 7 member international consortium, led by the Institute for Health Sector Development (IHSD) in London, that won the bid.
Objectives	Supporting DFID in building capacity for pro-poor health policies, financing and services, through a combination of consultancy services, policy support, training and capacity building, and knowledge and information support.
Knowledge model	<p>The knowledge & information component consists of two main strands: a knowledge programme producing syntheses, case studies, and analysis around key themes in response to specific demands from DFID (this is managed by IHSD); and an information component aimed at assembling and disseminating a broad range of information on health systems issues (which is managed by IDS). The two strands are connected, so they can draw on each other both as an input, and a way of disseminating outputs.</p> <p>Rather than setting up a stand-alone website, the information component has been built around Eldis, the well-established online gateway on development hosted by IDS. A new Resource Guide was set up on Eldis covering health systems, which links to a separate HSRC website that focuses on the rest of the Resource Centre's work.</p> <p>This piggy-backing approach has two big advantages: it means health systems knowledge can be placed in a much wider development context, and it allows the HSRC to take advantage of the existing Eldis technical platform, its experience, and its substantial audience base (over 75,000 visitors a month).</p>
Main Elements/ Outputs	<p>HSRC website – a public access site providing information on the DFID-focused aspects of the project, including new knowledge outputs (toolkits, briefing papers, etc.), and news of training and capacity building.</p> <p>Information support – the IDS team provides assistance to HSRC partners and DFID contacts in conducting specialists searches and provision of library material (through the British Library for Development Studies, based at IDS).</p> <p>Eldis Health Systems Resource Guide – provides access to a wide range of information resources on the topic, including key readings, weblinks, databases, etc.</p> <p>E-mail newsletter – a fortnightly summary of what's new on the topic</p>
Primary Audiences	<p>DFID health advisors, consultants, and partners involved in health systems issues</p> <p>The Eldis Resource Guide is aimed at a broad global audience including NGOs, health practitioners, policy advisors, researchers, students, and others</p>
Staff team	Currently 2.5 (FTE) staff on the knowledge and information components
URL	www.healthsystems.org www.eldis.org/healthsystems

Success Factors

The HSRC is still too new to be properly assessed, but the other services are now well established and have received generally very positive feedback in user surveys and external evaluations. Some of the common factors underlying their success have been¹³:

- **The deliberate efforts made to get close to users** in order to understand their information needs and the working environment in which they operate, and build personal rapport and trust. This includes getting to know staff in field offices, so the service is seen as relevant to them and not just another top-down initiative coming out of headquarters.
- **The close relationship that have been built with the agency funding the service,** and the individual staff involved. This is essential in creating a sense of joint ownership and shared risk taking. It ensures there is a champion for the service within the funding agency, and helps to keep the service aligned with the agency's priorities¹⁴.
- **The attention given in maintaining quality standards.** Each service has its own quality control loops but they all aim to ensure that users can rely on getting the latest and best material on the subject¹⁵. This is essential in building user trust.
- **The emphasis that has been put on good communications and organisation,** so material is easily found, logically structured, available through different channels (e-mail is key vehicle, and print is still valued), and clearly presented in non-academic language. Efforts are also been made to translate key materials into other languages to ensure accessibility to wider audiences.
- **The staff team behind them.** Each service has a number of dedicated staff who work on it, and who have formed into a very focused and motivated team. Doing this job well requires a mix of skills – research, communications, information management, and technical – so a team approach is essential.

There have of course been difficulties and challenges along the way in managing these services. Each has had to carve out its niche, build up a staff team, develop practical ways of working, and establish its credibility with its particular user group. But in knowledge management terms, they have all succeeded in meeting their main objectives and establishing a loyal and growing user base.

Advantages of Knowledge Pooling as an Approach

Using external partners to manage knowledge sharing systems, and taking a broader approach in pooling knowledge, has a number of intrinsic advantages. The first is practical. By going outside for help, agencies can tap into skills that exist elsewhere and are either in short supply within the agency or are hard to mobilise¹⁶. This means that services can be set up more quickly and can be more flexible in trying out new approaches. It also avoids bureaucratic constraints that limit hiring of internal staff, but allows work to be subcontracted because it can be classed as project expenditure rather than administrative costs.

Secondly, by situating the centre of gravity of a knowledge sharing system outside the agency it makes it easier to open it up to inputs from elsewhere, and reach out to a wider group of potential contributors and users¹⁷. It means knowledge can be shared across agencies, and made available to consultants, in-country partners, researchers and others who can both contribute and benefit from the service – rather than being locked out. This enriches the “knowledge mix” and also helps from the point of view of transparency.

A third advantage is that by locating the service with a well-respected external partner or consortium this can help in establishing its credibility. Users, even those within the agency, are often suspicious of corporate websites, because they expect them to stick to the official

line and reflect agency policy, rather than the more messy reality of development assistance in practice. It is far easier to establish a reputation for independence and openness if one is operating in neutral, or at least semi-neutral¹⁸, territory rather than being too closely tied to the sponsoring agency. It can be helpful for the agency, too, allowing it to be more relaxed about releasing documents that would have to be vetted and officially cleared before they could appear on their official website.

Requirements and Limitations

The external knowledge pooling approach is obviously not appropriate in all situations. Some of the key requirements for it to work are:

- **An agreed focus among contributing agencies and a shared agenda.** Different perspectives on issues can be accommodated, and can indeed contribute to a healthy debate. But if agencies have widely differing views on what the priorities are in particular sectors, and the best way of tackling them, they are unlikely to agree on how best to share knowledge about it.
- **A reasonably relaxed attitude towards branding and ownership of ideas.** Agencies may want to take a lead on an issue, and help to promote it by producing information and encouraging knowledge sharing about the topic – as DFID has done with Livelihoods Connect. But if an agency wants to tightly control the agenda, and use it as a way of projecting its corporate image and identity, this is unlikely to work as a recipe for broad-based knowledge sharing.
- **Competent and credible external partners to work with.** Running these kinds of services is a demanding job, requiring a range of skills and the ability to tap into a wider network of contacts in order to bring together relevant knowledge and expertise. It helps a great deal if the organisations involved already have a good reputation in the sector, and a basis of experience and contacts on which to build. It is an area where research organisations have a natural advantage, if they can complement their strengths in the subject area with the necessary information management and technical skills.
- **A reasonably long-term planning and funding horizon.** Any knowledge sharing service takes time to set up so needs to be seen as a long-term investment. There is a lot of work to be done in establishing a staff team, setting up systems, deciding how best to organise and present material, assembling a critical mass of relevant content, marketing the service, and building up a trust relationship with contributors and users. A pilot phase can be a useful way of assessing demand and testing out ideas. However, it takes at least two or three years to properly establish a new service, and longer to really start to get the full payback on the investment made.

Investing in external knowledge systems involves an element of risk for the agency involved. It has to put faith in the partners it chooses to work with and cannot exercise the same degree of day-to-day control as it might if it was operating an internally-based system¹⁹. Though password protected areas can be established when needed to restrict access to certain material or to work in progress, it is probably not the best solution for storing highly sensitive internal documents, for routine document management, or for hosting internally-focused discussion groups. In such cases the agency intranet is generally a more secure and practical environment to be working in.

Another potential risk in setting up a series of knowledge sharing systems on different topics is the tendency for them to become isolated and to not talk to each other. This is a particular challenge given the cross-cutting nature of most development problems. It applies to internal as well as external systems but needs to be considered carefully if duplication is to be avoided, and potential synergies gained. While a degree of integration is both desirable

and achievable²⁰, a balance needs to be struck because if systems are too integrated there is a danger of them becoming monolithic and losing their focus and edge. Adopting common data sharing protocols, such as being developed through the IDML initiative²¹, is one way of dealing with this problem, allowing information to be exchanged between information systems in a flexible way without requiring a high degree of system integration.

Maintaining continuity is also a challenge. Most agencies issue contracts for up to three years at a time, and a maximum of five. By the time services have established themselves, they may have to go through the uncertainty of fundraising again, and the contract may be put out to competitive tendering. This is disruptive for the organisations providing the service, and risks undermining the momentum, the staff team and the user confidence they have managed to create. And if the contract is awarded to another consortium, this may mean starting again from scratch. This presents a genuine dilemma for development agencies, since good practice from the point of view of encouraging open competition is in contradiction to what is best for the continuity of the service itself. This points to the need for good forward planning, and where possible longer term funding horizons.

Conclusions

Being involved in developing these kinds of knowledge sharing services has been an interesting and generally very positive experience for IDS. It builds naturally on the Institute's research background and its commitment to development information work. It also provides a valuable interface between the academic world, and worlds of policy and practice. Researchers get to feed their ideas in to the heart of development agency thinking, while also learning about what is happening on the ground and what are the latest hot topics among development agencies. There is a lot of talk about linking research to policy: this is one way that it can actually happen.

External knowledge pooling should be seen as a complementary approach, rather than a substitute for internal-based knowledge sharing systems, since there are clearly many situations where it would be inappropriate. How far this approach can be extended is open for debate. Based on our experience, and that of comparable services such as the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre²², and the WELL Resource Centre Network for Water, Sanitation and Environmental Health²³, we believe it has a lot of mileage. It addresses some of the intrinsic weaknesses of internal-focused knowledge management approaches, and while it involves some risks in handing over responsibility to external partners, the potential benefits in terms of greater openness and a richer knowledge sharing process are substantial.

The merits of internal versus external knowledge sharing approaches have yet to be fully assessed. Nor has it made a real entry in the knowledge management for development debate. Now that some experience of both approaches has been gained, it would be a good time for this analysis and debate to begin.

Notes:

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² This paper draws on the combined experience of a number of IDS information staff as well as that of colleagues in IDD, Birmingham, and IHSD, London. Inputs from Kate Brinklow, Laura Hutchings, Carl Jackson, Leah Murphy, and Hazel Reeves have been particularly helpful.

³ The main focus of this paper is on multilateral and bilateral development agencies, though many of the points made will also be of relevance to the larger non-governmental organisations working in international development.

⁴ This evolution is nicely documented on the Bellanet "KM4Dev" website. Bellanet has been active in encouraging new thinking on knowledge management, and has facilitated a series of international seminars on the topic, as well as an active discussion list. See www.bellanet.org/km

⁵ In this paper, I sidestep the debate on knowledge management terminology. The terms knowledge management and knowledge sharing are used interchangeably, and there is no attempt to make a rigid distinction between what constitutes knowledge as opposed to information.

⁶ A recent summary of knowledge sharing approaches is provided in a paper by Kenneth King and Simon McGrath (2002), "Knowledge Based Aid: A Four Agency Comparative Study", Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh (see <http://www.ed.ac.uk/centas/4agencies.pdf>).

⁷ In reality, or course, there is competition between development agencies, but it is less intense than in the private sector and is something which enlightened knowledge sharing systems should be trying to break down, nor reinforce.

⁸ This was a criticism that some World Bank staff accept and recognise as a problem, according to feedback received during a series of user interviews conducted with Bank staff in early 2003 (see separate paper by Alan Stanley, et al.)

⁹ Many development agencies advocate transparency for developing country governments as part of the good governance agenda but are wide open to the criticism that they fail to practice what they preach.

¹⁰ For details of the SURF system see: http://open.bellanet.org/km/modules/Downloads/uploads/Workshops/The_Hague_2002/9

¹¹ The World Bank has had most experience is following the community of practice approach, and has around 80 "thematic groups" designed to encourage knowledge sharing on particular topics (down from a peak of 125 groups in 1999). Groups range in size from 25 to 200. They vary in how successful they are in terms of active participation. Some have a few external non-Bank members, the vast majority of members are Bank staff, and the most active participants tend to be from headquarters.

¹² Sustainable livelihoods approaches are centred on people and their livelihoods. They prioritise people's assets, their ability to withstand shocks, and the policies and institutions that reflect poor people's priorities, rather than those of the elite.

¹³ Most of these success factors are similar to those behind successful internal knowledge sharing initiatives – these are some of the core elements of good practice across the board.

¹⁴ The extent of alignment with agency priorities varies between the examples. The GRC is probably the most tightly linked to the sponsoring agency's (ie DFID's) agenda, whereas BRIDGE is at the opposite end of the spectrum. It has a looser connection with its funders and is more focused on generating knowledge as a public good, rather than a dedicated service.

¹⁵ As an example, the Governance Resource Centre team sift through over 100 newsletters, email updates and journals each week to select the most relevant material to highlight. Quality standards and maintained with the help of a Content Advisory Group made up of specialists in the area, from within DFID and the academic community.

¹⁶ One area where many large agencies face challenges is in coordinating and managing website and intranet development work. Staff in policy units may have ambitions to create their own mini-websites or other knowledge systems but often need technical assistance to set them up. Technical staff within the agency tend to be busy with other work, however, so cannot always move quickly. And for legitimate reasons may be reluctant to encourage stand-alone systems that are not standardised and may be hard to maintain in the longer term.

¹⁷ Taking the case study services as examples, an indication of the size of their respective audiences is provided in the following figures. The Bridge publication *In Brief* has a combined circulation of 6000 (e-mail and paper). The Livelihoods Connect website gets around 40,000 page requests a month from 5700 discrete visitors, and its

email newsletter goes out to 1400 subscribers. The GRC audience expanded substantially when its public interface was launched. In its first month, the GRC Exchange website received 20,000 page requests and 600 people signed up to the e-mail newsletter, from at least 115 different organisations. The Eldis Health Systems Resource Guide, which is 8 months old, has over 700 e-mail subscribers

¹⁸ There is no totally neutral forum for knowledge sharing, and academic organisations have political baggage and critics like any others. But they are generally perceived as being a more independent than most so have a head start in establishing trust with external audiences.

¹⁹ All of the case study examples mentioned have their own steering committees and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to check on quality and service standards and guide the overall direction of the service. So sponsoring agencies can maintain close oversight, despite the fact that day-to-day control has been delegated to external partners.

²⁰ DFID's newly reorganised Policy Division is now facing the challenge of integrating its knowledge support services. Under the previous organisational structure, different advisory departments (governance, health & population, economics, etc) set up their own resource centres using a variety of different models and external partners. These were not connected in a very coherent way, so although a lot of good work has been done and useful experience gained, there has not been much exchange or synergy between the various resource centres, and the organisations managing them.

²¹ Details of the International Development Markup Language (IDML) initiative can be found at www.idmlinitiative.org

²² The U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre is managed by the Christian Michelson Institute, in Norway, in collaboration with Transparency International. It is jointly funded by the four bilateral agencies that form the Utstein Group – from Germany, Netherlands, Norway and the UK. See www.u4.no

²³ WELL is managed by the Water, Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) at Loughborough University, in the UK. See www.lboro.ac.uk/well