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Power, knowledge and development – putting KM in context

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The article “[Aid is a knowledge industry](#)” by Mariëtte Heres in issue 5 gives a good overview of recent discussions and developments in the area of knowledge management (KM) by development organizations. However, it paints only part of the picture. In [his letter to the editor in Broker issue 6](#) (and the longer version on the website), Mike Powell added some important elements. In an attempt to contribute further to our evolving understanding of the issue, in the following paragraphs I add a few more. Powell identifies a need to make room for multiple ‘knowledges’ in development. This piece aims to affirm and enrich his analysis by exploring what makes the inclusion of different knowledge so difficult, and what paths may be followed to overcome those difficulties.

Like much of the literature on KM in development, Heres makes it sound like a largely technical issue. While making an important distinction between a ‘stock approach’ and a ‘flow approach’ to KM, the article still seems to suggest that if we can only get the systems right and find the right ‘instruments’, then knowledge will flow to the right user and practice will benefit. However, KM in development is not merely a technical issue. It is shaped by power, structures, relationships and personalities. In this response, I touch upon several issues that complicate KM in the development field: the lack of attention paid to the participation of development players in the South; unequal capacities for knowledge production; the imposition of a particular discourse by those who are in a position to make policy and distribute funds; the importance of face-to-face interaction; and the need to change how capacity building is viewed and implemented.

Knowledge is not an unchanging commodity that can be filed and accessed, but something that is continuously developed, updated and refined in an interaction of views and findings. As Powell notes in his response, there are multiple ‘knowledges’ and perceptions, and these need to be ‘managed’ in interaction. Heres touches on this when she quotes Wenny Ho and Russell Kerkhoven on the ‘importance of interactive learning’: ‘If you bring knowledge holders together’, says Kerkhoven, ‘they can create new knowledge’. Interactive learning is particularly relevant to the rapidly changing contexts of development and conflict (think of Kenya, for example), in which knowledge cannot be static and learning never ends. Updated, useful and locally relevant knowledge can only be generated in a continuous exchange among all players in development – researchers, policy makers, practitioners, and the intended beneficiaries of projects – whether they reside in the global South or North. Thus, interaction has to take place across geographical and cultural boundaries.

In contrast with this ideal picture, however, most of the KM policies of NGOs in the global North are internally-focused rather than outwardly oriented. An annotated bibliography of organizational learning in the development sector produced by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in 2003 found that ‘Northern

NGOs have so far implemented KM to alleviate their own information blockages – based on the same rationale of efficiency and profit as corporate businesses – rather than using KM to address key questions of how they can contribute to knowledge development in the South.’ Another ODI study concluded that ‘[l]earning between agencies, between agencies and Southern partners, and between agencies and beneficiaries, is a clear gap in the knowledge and learning strategies’ of international development organizations. In his above-mentioned response, Powell writes that ‘[s]tudy after study of development research, of monitoring and evaluation processes, of knowledge management in development organizations report problems with the flow of information from the grass roots upwards, particularly of types of information not already prioritized by senior managers’ (Broker issue 6). ‘Yet,’ he adds, ‘without such information, how can decision makers really know what the reality is on the ground which their intervention is supposed to improve? As importantly, how can they have any confidence that local populations, on whose involvement and co-operation the outcome of most interventions depend, will respond in the way predicted?’ Indeed, if we agree that ‘aid is a knowledge industry’, then should KM not be at least partly about connecting Northern policymaking with the knowledge of Southern partners and ‘beneficiaries’? And if so, then how can this be done?

The problem is that the lack of attention in the knowledge strategies of development organizations for interaction with Southern actors is not simply something that NGOs happened to accidentally leave out. Rather, it is the result of structural inequalities in North-South relations that have various dimensions. One of these dimensions is that there are large differences in the capacity for research and knowledge production between people and institutions in the North on the one hand and people and institutions in the South on the other. Southern knowledge institutions have relatively low research capacity (with all attention presently going to the Millennium Development Goal of primary education, institutions of higher education and research are often neglected), as do Southern development practitioners. As Powell describes in his response, the latter group is embedded in global development funding chains that increasingly emphasize the need to deliver concrete, measurable and short-term results – at the expense of less measurable and longer-term processes of learning, reflection and documentation.

This has profound implications. Not only do Northern ideas and research findings dominate debates, they also frame them. Northern researchers and policymakers largely determine what constitutes ‘legitimate’ knowledge (for example, written information is preferred over oral information and quantitative data over qualitative data), and what knowledge is used for policy. The development industry has created a distinct discourse with specific terms that influence how processes of development are viewed. Southern actors that hope to gain access to development funds have learned to mold their proposals into the necessary formats and use the necessary discourse, whether they feel it reflects the reality on the ground or not. Policy trends (such as the post-9/11 emphasis on security in peace-building policies) trickle down into the funding chain and influence what information is considered relevant, and what information is not. Development organizations have the best intentions and they often have a genuine desire to include the voices of their Southern partners and of the beneficiaries of their programmes. However, they at the same time come with a list of policy themes and principles, many of which originate further upwards in the funding chain in ministries and multilateral organizations. This leaves little space for open discussion. An additional complication – repeatedly mentioned in the interviews I carried out with Southern NGO staff during my PhD research – is that in exchanges with Northern donors and policymakers, Southern actors are often unable to present their knowledge in the form in which it is sought. This weakens their position in exchanges with Northern actors. Due to a lack of capacity for, and time allocated to, activities like research, reflection and exchange (which do not fit into the direct impact trend of current development policy), the knowledge of Southern development actors largely takes the form of ‘tacit’ ideas and intuitions that have not yet been tested, developed, or documented. Oral traditions in many developing societies contribute to this. This finding has implications for capacity building programmes. Rather than transferring pre-determined knowledge, such programmes could pay much more attention to strengthening capacities for (action) research, documentation and dissemination by Southern development practitioners and local researchers.

Parallel to strengthening research and documentation skills, existing capacities for oral exchange could be tapped into more. Although technological communication tools can be very helpful to facilitate interactive learning involving people located in different parts of the world, there is evidence that at least part of the

necessary exchange needs to happen face-to-face. It is only through direct personal interaction that so-called 'tacit knowledge' (the experience-based knowledge that people possess without realizing it and without having documented it) gets discovered and shared. In rapidly changing situations, documents quickly become outdated and making space for continuous exchange and joint learning is highly relevant. In my research I found that Southern NGOs are quite adept at tacit knowledge exchange through face-to-face interaction – although not with all players in development but primarily with colleagues from other organizations, with whom they have formed many networks. This represents a potential that could be strengthened further, for example by linking up these local networks with international ones.

Recently, some North-based development organizations have indeed started paying attention to the need to both strengthen and include Southern knowledge. A text box in the article by Heres on knowledge activities by Dutch NGOs mentions some hopeful developments: Hivos has launched a series of research programmes together with universities in North and South, while the new 'knowledge infrastructure' of Oxfam Novib explicitly includes its partners in the developing world. It will be valuable to follow these developments as they progress and draw lessons for wider application. On the face of it, it would appear that coupling the two types of initiatives (i.e., strengthening capacities for knowledge generation while opening up avenues in which such knowledge can be channeled) is an important next step. Part of this could be to facilitate the creation of links between Southern researchers and Southern development practitioners. This would help to strengthen Southern knowledge infrastructures and thereby enable a more equitable exchange between North and South.

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