

IKM Summaries No. 10

'Things can be other than they are'. Understanding the limitations of current management thinking and knowledge practice for work in the development sector.

Western ideas about what type of knowledge is valuable, and what type of knowledge is not, have tended to dominate the development sector. This is still true, even today, as little room is given for the different cultures, languages and knowledge paradigms of developing countries in the South during discussions about knowledge sharing and information management. All of this is having a long-term, detrimental effect on the sector, particularly on those working at the grassroots level. In this respect, Mike Powell's article 'Which Knowledge? Whose Reality?' (2006) represents a long overdue wake-up call. The author explains why, and argues Powell's case from another perspective.

Outdated 'thinking toolkits' from 200 years ago

Like Powell, the author advocates a fresh, new approach towards knowledge and information management in the development sector. However, unlike Powell, Jenkins looks at the issue not from a postmodern, post colonial viewpoint, but from the very nature of knowledge and the way it is applied to problems.

For the last 200 years, management approaches in the West have been heavily influenced by the same knowledge system. This system consists of a web of assumptions, processes and behaviours shaped by a particular view of the world dating from the nineteenth century. However, as we move into the twenty-first century, we face a very different set of problems and this outdated, analytical 'thinking toolkit' is ill-equipped to address them. Therefore, to thrive in today's knowledge economy, a very different 'thinking toolkit' is required.

Development work is a knowledge industry

Drawing on the proposition that development work is a knowledge industry, Jenkins argues that an alternative knowledge system based in the ancient art of rhetoric provides a different set of tools for creating and communicating information; one that is far better aligned with the real-world situations of those working in the sector.



Pressure from donors

In the development sector today we are witnessing a growing tendency by donors to pressure development agencies into meeting strict reporting requirements and comply with unsuitable information practices. Yet there is widespread ignorance about the strengths and weaknesses of such approaches to managing knowledge. Consequently, development agencies are often caught in a dialectical tension between the experiential understanding and know-how they develop in the field, and the demands placed on them by funding bodies in the Western/Northern world for information that demonstrates objective evidence of success. This is unlikely to change without the capacity to highlight the limitations of the analytical mindset from *within* the intellectual traditions of Western/Northern culture, rather than just from outside.

The way forward?

The author argues that the way forward for development agencies may well be to accept Mike Powell's proposition that development work is fundamentally a knowledge industry, to recognize how different a knowledge landscape this involves, and then to rediscover the ancient toolkit of rhetoric which he argues is far better placed to lead the way in generating and communicating useful knowledge in a fluid, non-linear, culturally-diverse world. The author believes that a rhetorical approach would not only lead to more effective information outcomes, but there would be a far greater degree of natural compatibility between these modes of thinking and the socio-cultural assumptions and practices of the developing world. Adopting this alternative 'knowledge system' to play a leading role in shaping information practices in the development sector would create a genuine prospect of alleviating much of the tension that currently exists between 'work in the field' and 'management practices in head office', and provide the opportunity for a more sustainable approach to achieving the objectives of development work.

A wealth of information creates a poverty of attention

The volume of information today is seen as overwhelming, the effort of producing it is often onerous, and the dividends generated in terms of creating useful knowledge fall far short of what we would desire. If nothing else, the global financial crisis highlighted the huge gulf between the amount of information we have at our disposal, and our capacity to make good and wise decisions for our own self-interest, let alone the good of society in general. In short, the current 'system' that we have created for ourselves regarding knowledge and information is highly inefficient and not fit for purpose. Yet, as monolithic as this prevailing 'knowledge system' may seem, it is by no means unchangeable. Like any human system, the way we engage with information and seek to create knowledge is the result of specific choices that have been made at certain historical points; other pathways could have been chosen, and options still exist for us to change the knowledge system.

About this IKM Summary

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

Julian Jenkins (2010) 'Things can be other than they are'. Understanding the limitations of current management thinking and knowledge practice for work in the development sector.

Knowledge management and multiple knowledges: A multi-case study within the Netherlands. IKM Working Paper No. 10, July 2010, 28pp.

http://wiki.ikmemergent.net/index.php/File:Working_Paper-10-Julian_Jenkins-July2010-final.pdf

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