

Local Knowledge, Local Content

Introduction

We brought the three years research around Local Content for the IKMemergent project to a conclusion during 2011.



A small group of people were invited to a write-

shop in Nairobi, all of whom had worked with IKM during the programme. Participants were mainly from the NGO sector but also included three farmers from rural areas in Kenya who have been working with ALIN over a long period and had attended the October 2010 AgKnowledge Africa ShareFair in Addis Ababa. As in all IKMemergent workshops, the participants defined the event through what they brought in terms of experience and outlook as well as in their interactions.

The group developed a distinctive dynamic, different to our previous workshops. That was partly because it was small, and we spent a lot of time introducing ourselves, our work and our experience of local content. But mainly it was because the mix was different: Julius Matei, Flora Nzambuli and Francis Kiarahu had worked with ALIN as facilitators and animators within their own communities and had also been exposed to the NGO workshop world. So although they had a clear understanding of the *narrative* about Local Content, around its importance and role in rural livelihoods, as practising farmers it was something with which they worked directly in their own lives. While all of the other African participants had experience of working with farming and rural communities they approached the topic as practising Development intermediaries rather than as currency within their own lives. That meeting of experience and perception grounded our discussions differently than in previous workshops and meant that ideas and experience were constantly tested against the reality of living and working in resource-poor small communities in marginal lands.

What next?

Everyone who has been involved in this research believes that it should continue in some form or another. While those organisations which work effectively at a community level in rural areas will continue to work with people in ways that respect their local content and its role in facilitating change, we want to find ways to attract resources to continue our work of

connecting those organisations and promoting both their work and their approach to Development.

This document summarises some conclusions and introduces proposals for future work that have emerged. It is drawn from the write-shop report, from contributions by three central participants¹ in the IKM emergent research activities, Charles Dhewa, Ednah Karamagi, James Nguo. It is also informed by material gathered throughout the project from a wide range of participants and correspondents. To contextualise the proposals we first re-visit the concept of Local Content from different angles in an attempt to capture its complexity.

Perspectives

“I first got involved in working with local content as a child; and if I remember correctly, before school going age. This I was taught by my father.



My father is very proud

of his culture and he tells endless stories to anyone who cares to listen. His stories are diverse, but at the end of the day, informative, educative and often with a lot of humour. In his stories, he uses a lot of proverbs and sayings of the wise; and normally the message behind his stories is “behavioural change” and “cultural explanations and adherence”. He is dramatic and often gets pulled into the stories ... like a real movie. This is the gentleman who raised me. This is the gentleman who got me hooked to culture and its norms with diversity.

As I grew older, I remember bragging for fellow students in class about my knowledge of who I am, where I come from and what

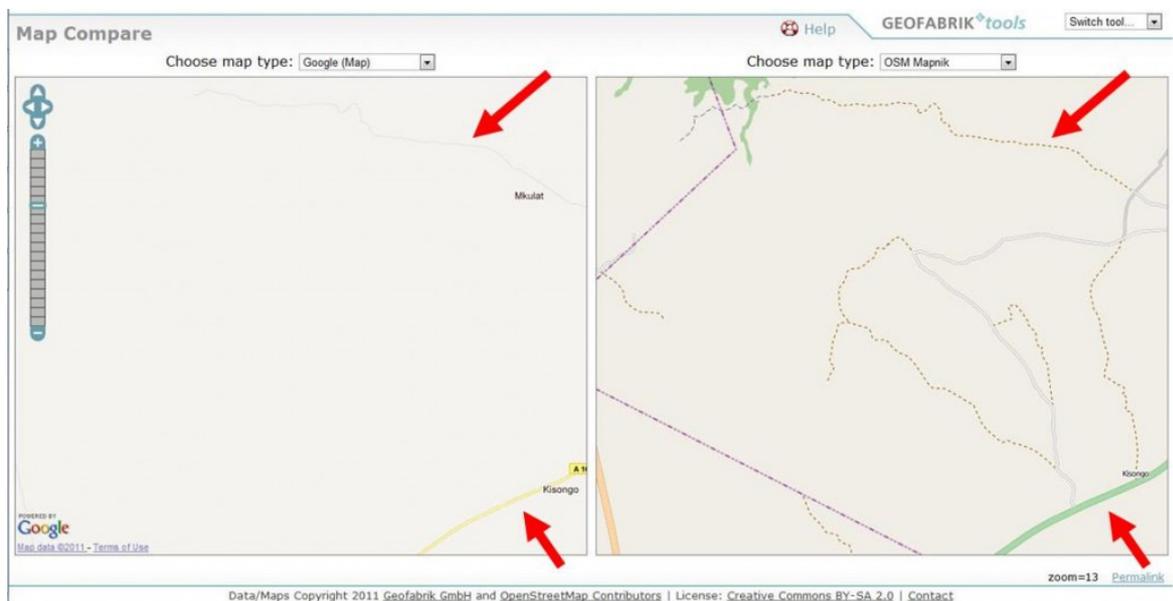
“Local content has been my software from childhood when I started walking and talking. Only that we did not call it local content because there was no other content we knew and could compare it with. Local practices and languages such as Shona and Ndebele have been the conduits for my conception of local content. I grew up enjoying the benefits of pulling information and knowledge from elders through local myths, metaphors, fables, epics, and paradigms. Each of these sense making resources contained a good story. When I started going to school and became exposed to English language-based subjects such as mathematics, environmental science and geography, I became aware of other content besides our own local content. At school, there was a sense that what we were learning was superior to our local knowledge used at home and in communities”. (*Dhewa*)

“As I grew up in a rural village in eastern Kenya, I developed a hobby; I used to sketch cartoons and other line art to tell stories that I had heard from my mother and uncles. Some of the cartoons were quite humorous since they depicted people who never existed such as giants and ogres among them. It could only take a creative mind to turn these stories into art. I was not sure who would validate the stories once the cartons were out. However the elder people would

cultural connotations are associated with me. I would challenge them to tell me their versions and I for sure do not remember any that threw me on my back in that aspect.

I could already identify plants and crops used for healing; or at least explain how one goes about a persistent headache for instance. I remember being a proud owner of a rose flower garden in the city and a bean garden in the village; where I used to use fertilizers to increase the nutrients in the soil. All this was courtesy of my father". (*Karamagi*)

assist in getting facts right and this meant redoing some of the cartoons. I also learnt that the process of validation took more than one person and in most cases all needed to be present in order to argue a point and agree. What I learnt in the process of doing this was there was a lot of knowledge resident in people's mind which needed to be captured and preserved." (*Nguo*)



To outsiders the knowledge landscape of any grouping or community looks a bit like the map on the left, with only main features or landmarks visible. The map on the right is an accurate representation of dirt roads in that part of Tanzania. The map was generated from the journeys taken by drivers for the NGO. It drew upon a travel-log recorded by a mobile phone application, using the phone's GPS function to interpret the movements onto a map. We all interact with our environments, build up mental topographic maps like these but we also build hugely more complex constructions that enable us to make sense of our world and proceed through life with some confidence that we will be able to respond to situations, new or old, on the basis of our learning and ability to reason. As individuals living and working together with others we pool that knowledge and collective ability, constructing the culture that binds and distinguishes us from other groupings. We express that culture any way we can, using artistic, intellectual, and sensory languages or tools, producing short-lived and permanent artefacts as well as spontaneous artistic and other forms of expression, now including digitally recorded and stored material. Local Content is a term that has been used

2 Comparison Map. <http://africasoils.net/labs/mobile/reducing-transportation-time-and-costs-with-open-street-maps-and-locus/> Eric Coupar

to describe this outpouring of local knowledge. It is both how we make sense of the world and how people can make sense of us.

Local Content and Development

A dynamic, respectful engaging with this content and culture is a pre-requisite for genuine engagement with the people at its centre. That this has to be stated in 2012 is the issue. The best community development practice, for example, builds methodologically from this perspective. It remains at the heart, ideologically and practically, of many Civil Society and Government organisations working 'at the grassroots'. This is for the simple reason that it delivers results, slowly and on a small scale, but in an enduring and sustainable way. But the attention of the Development world rarely stays focused on the local, the small-scale, the slow and steady accretion of experience and skills which characterises development proceeding from an attention to local knowledge and content. Our aim in the programme has been to gather stories and experience so that we can communicate the power of this approach in an attempt to attract attention from development interest and funders.

Reflections and Outputs

There's a curious circularity about much that we have been doing, illustrated perhaps by the story told at the write-shop by Damas Ogwe of how he and his colleagues in Western Kenya used SMS to stimulate conversations about the most appropriate crops to use for arid, drought-prone marginal lands. Using the package *SMS Frontline* they asked questions to group of small farmers about what crops people were growing and how they were faring in the dry conditions. Unprompted one farmer mentioned traditional crops, like cassava and sorghum, with which they had suffered less than the current trend to planting maize. Damas picked up on the comment and led the conversation into a discussion on similar crops and the utility of traditional methods of planting and water harvesting. The combination of 'hearing' other farmers and professionals endorsing traditional ways was different to previous communications and there was a marked change in practice over the following months.

In much the same way, we have been 'rediscovering' the kind of good practice that engages dynamically and respectfully with people and their local knowledge, whether articulated as content or deep inside individual or village memory. And to people like Ambrose Ngetich a District Agriculture Officer for the district around Kyoso in Kenya, there is no other, sensible way of working. During a discussion in August 2011 on how they are working with communities around the local ALIN Maarifa³ on the impact of climate change he began by summarising their overall approach:

"Sample what is being done, and examine the indigenous traditional knowledge (ITK). Then strengthen their knowledge base".

This is the story we have been telling for three years. We have mini-case studies from all over Africa: from telecentres in Rawanda, Kenya and Mozambique; Community Radio stations in Tanzania and Uganda, knowledge sharing organisations working with rural communities like ALIN (Kenya), WOUUNET and BROSDI CELAC (Uganda), SAFIRE and

³ The Swahili term for Knowledge Centre used by ALIN

Knowledge Transfer Africa (Zimbabwe) respectively; University Departments in Kenya and Uganda' and larger international organisations such as CABI, ILRI. We know from our previous work that we could update our case studies in most other parts of Africa, and indeed other parts of the world. This is the way that organisations which stay the course and achieve impact in rural development carry out their business. The basic elements of the approach are clear:

- At its heart is a respectful engaging with people and their knowledge
- Infomediaries play a central role: without a human intermediary of some kind, who does not necessarily need to be a professional or indeed local but must be able to inspire trust in the participants
- Activities supporting people to tell their story and share their knowledge, for example, farmer field schools, using all the cultural forms available and appropriate to the context.
- Testing and validating content and then feeding it back
- An open but willing embrace of whatever technology is available and appropriate to support communication and knowledge sharing of the content

The wheel

Two examples from other meetings we held in 2011 illustrate how the wheel is constantly being reinvented, and that people often take time to recognise what makes it turn

1. At a Knowledge Café at the ILRI Campus, where the write-shop participants met Nairobi based development workers, we heard from Infonet-Biovision, a project funded by a Swiss philanthropist. It repurposes scientific material for use in Africa, published online. There is a lot of material available but too complex for ordinary farmers, according to one of the ALIN community intermediaries, Julius Malema, who had experimented with it. After building up a large database of content, the project only began making headway when in one location they employed a local intermediary who was able to introduce local farmers to the material. Farmers appreciated the information once they were made aware of it. On the one hand this is simply a story of a new project, with laudable intent, learning the basics of how to work in development. On the other, it represents a lot of wasted energy and resources that could have been better used if the founders of the project had begun in partnership with an organisation like ALIN, who could have helped them steer the development. It's unlikely that they would have approached a project in a Swiss Alpine community in quite the same way. What needs to happen so that European (and other Northern) individuals and organisations channel their money and good intentions more humbly and productively?
2. The meeting at the iHub in Nairobi illustrated a Kenyan version of this distanced and insensitive approach to the local. There our already diverse group of participants met urban, young, ICT specialists who had responded to the call for a solutions exchange. The ideas around SenseMaking and FarmAfripedia which we had developed in our three day write-shop were presented to the Nairobi based group, who were given time to talk together and come back with their own ideas on how technology might be used to address the situation. That there were no immediately original ideas was perhaps predictable and there was a good exchange of ideas. However, what

was striking to me as a complete outsider was how fixed the technical specialists were in their conviction that they would be able to develop tools which would improve the situation, and how shallow their questioning was of the people present in the room who lived in rural environments. It was hard to escape the conclusion that, without moving to and living among rural communities, the gap will remain as wide between urban elites and rural communities as it is between Kenyans and Swiss.

How important is local content as an issue?

“The importance of local content for development cannot be exaggerated. The future of thousands of rural dwellers in Africa depend on useful local knowledge. At the moment, there is no nucleus or synergy for various activities from diverse actors in agriculture and rural development. Our local content approach based on sense making is enabling farmers and other stakeholders in the agriculture sector to revive cultural practices and also stem the decline of oral tradition as a way of sharing knowledge. Through action research, the sense making theory is grounded in contextual exploration with emphasis on participation. This aims to enhance self- awareness among farmers rather than encouraging over-dependence on ‘expert’ advice.

Farmers need to have confidence, self-belief, and a dynamic culture and society in order to selectively and intelligently borrow knowledge from elsewhere. Totems and clan names are the basis on which farmers dig into the history of their families. Farmers learn about their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing the consequences. They simultaneously try to shape and react to the environments they face. Ubuntu as one of the greatest wisdom traditions in Africa can be used to promote local content through enhancing farmers’ identities.

Local Content continues to be important, especially in Africa where we have become consumers of everything from information to

I was privileged to attend a forum in Luweero district where they were discussing “Soil Fertility”. One farmer stood up and proudly explained the essence of the “lablab weed”. He said that if you have a garden and it is not bringing any yields, it is because there is a night dancer bewitching it – but this weed can help. If you plant it around the garden, only those areas will yield fruit in the next season because the night dancer will jump the weed and bewitch the inner parts of the garden. He went on to say that if you want to get rid completely, plant it in various parts of the garden leaving him no space to dance.

I derive a lot of joy in seeing a poorer person climb the ladder of success ... does not matter however minute the step is. What makes me even happier is if this person or group of people use less effort to take that step. Local content involves people using traditional materials, many times of which they are not bought but rather obtained “freely” from their surroundings. These materials are also more readily available. The poorer in society have limited incomes and so cannot afford to invest heavily. They need an investment plan that does not require huge sums of money ... use of local content does this. (*Karamagi*)

To me, local content was ‘that knowledge which was kept and passed on among people who live close to one another sharing common resources’. Most of this knowledge revolves around solutions to day-to-day

goods from everywhere. The internet is full of foreign stuff, yet we have interesting ideas that could benefit the world. While we live in a globalising village, it is important to have a sense of identity and this is where Sense Making becomes very important for developing local content. Africans can use technology such as Web 2.0 or Web 3.0 to promote their own knowledge rather than just be consumers.

Local content has a vital role in underpinning human action. We can only function through our knowledge. Any possibility of development should be enhanced through regaining confidence in local knowledge. African languages like Wolof, Shona, Ndebele and Hausa should effectively speak to each other. The world needs multi-dimensional perspectives as opposed to the current situation where development is seen as a transfer of knowledge by powerful agencies such as the World Bank. Due to the colonial narrative that knowledge moves from those who know to those who do not know, local indigenous knowledge is invisible because it is from the powerless who are often willing to ignore their knowledge in order to accept gifts from foreigners. Through raising the profile of local content, poor communities in developing countries can be empowered to think of themselves as owners of solutions and problems.” (*Dhewa*)

challenges and most of it is passed via social networks within communities.

“In northern Kenya most of the formal meetings among the elders occurred outside the settlement or manyatta and under a tree and this is where important decisions were made. As I came to understand local content more, I realised that this forum was an important source of tacit knowledge. It was important to for me to understand the culture, in terms of who had access to this knowledge and how it was passed and how it was preserved. It would have been strange for a visitor to just walk there and expect to get content since this would have been rude and unacceptable. I had to work with infomediaries who understood the local language. [..]

Most of the projects that aim to make knowledge available to poor people are supply-driven and fail to reach the sources of information that poor people commonly access. This can be seen in the growing amounts of content available on the Internet which does not address local needs. Common criticisms of these projects are that they are top down, the information is not readily accessible, the information is in the wrong format, in the wrong language and is not appropriate to the local context. ..I’m a firm believer in local solutions to local problems. Local content can offer this and save on time and resources. There are many locally found solutions but with a largely oral culture especially in Africa, most of the local knowledge is lost over time. (*Nguo*)

Local Content 2015 and IKMemergent 2.0

It’s fascinating to revisit the material we developed as our contribution to the G8 DOTForce programme in 2002. The IICD contribution authored by Peter Ballantyne has this as its summary:

[Local content is] “about the way people value their own culture, traditions, and languages. It is also about local capacity limitations and the way global content is pushed. It is linked with local and global market forces. [We need]:

1. To stimulate all kinds of local content expression for local application and use.
2. To stimulate eContent creation and communication for local and global use.
3. To develop eContent exchange and broadcast systems.
4. To strengthen the 'synthesis and adaptation' capacities at the interfaces between 'global' and 'local' content."

In the IKMemergent research we have been re-engaging with this agenda. One of our unstartling conclusions is how accurately the 2002 material describes both the current context and the work that still needs to be done. The proposals which emerged from our write-shop, the culmination of the Local Content work, are addressing precisely those recommendations from the G8 DotForce Local Content report.

How to promote Local Content

We asked, "What would you like to do in the future that promotes it?"

"I would like to use the Maarifa centres and create ownership among the people living around it. This would encourage them to share stories and document local solutions to local problems without having to engage in knowledge banking as is the case.

In many of the forums in have attended, you get people with solutions who do not wish to share their knowledge because they are afraid of 'losing' it to people who can sell it for other gains. The key issue among many rural people in regard to sharing knowledge is related to immediate benefits. Development projects should consider building in a compensation for good local content so as to encourage its documentation and sharing." (*Nguo*)

"I wish our government and many others would encourage the adoption of local content. This I say because for us all, the rural population percentages are high. Whereas we all claim to be involved in projects that are directed to help them improve, what is the point if it is not sustainable? I believe we are sinking money in a bottomless pit." (*Karamagi*)

"I am on a crusade to localise western knowledge including technology. In the future, I am considering working with young people who badly need to know where we are coming from. Sense Making should become an integral component of community development - starting with what communities know. Through KTA, I want to have a huge knowledge hub where we incubate Sense Making ideas. We have begun documenting African idioms, metaphors and fables which are the main tools our ancestors passed on knowledge in a more memorable and enduring way. Our modern educational systems require these if knowledge is to be internalised and sufficiently converted into action.

I want to promote language, sculpture and dance as critical components of local content. If farmers know what they think by seeing what they say, then the variety, nuance, subtlety, and precision of that saying will affect what they see, question, and then pursue. Linguistic competences enable them to spot, label, and understand issues. They are able to reveal the hidden messages or knowledge that lurk in actions through the very same language that earlier enabled them to discover that knowledge or messages. Asa development practitioner I

would want to increase the variety of languages with which we work in order to reveal knowledge patterns in agriculture and rural development.” (Dhewa)

Proposals

Project proposals have emerged around two sets of ideas:

- a. Ednah Karamagi, working with a small group, has developed her idea of a *Local Content Wikipedia*. This has been developed into a working prototype. Work continued after the workshop and the resulting, stable illustrative platform can be viewed at <http://farmafripedia.ikmemergent.net/>
- b. Charles Dhewa, building on his learning from the IKMemergent traducture theme had worked on a synthesis of these, ideas from the Knowledge Management literature and his own experience working with rural communities to develop a new perspective on the integration of Local Content into community development. We developed from Charles' framework a workshop format for sensitisation and capacity building; a proposal around stimulating demand for local content; and ways in which the framework could be used in monitoring and evaluation.