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Title of the Session: Knowledge management in development organizations

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Summary

Knowledge management (KM) is practiced in most UN agencies and in many international development organizations. KM in development organizations is more complex than KM in the private sector because development organizations have to work with many stakeholders with varied interests, changing contexts and uneven power relations.

Context

In the private sector, knowledge is managed for creating more value in products and services sold to consumers. In the public and development sectors, knowledge is needed not only for offering products and services directly to the public similar to that in the private sector (e.g. delivering health services and building roads) but more importantly for delivering knowledge products and services to enable citizens and other public institutions to act more effectively (e.g. health advisories to prevent spread of diseases, educational standards and regulations for private schools, capacity building of local governments, new legislation). In short, managing knowledge in the public and development sectors often revolves around enabling effective action of stakeholders.

KM in the development sector has to pay attention to organizational or **internal KM** just like in the private sector, but it has to pay attention also to stakeholder or **external KM**.

In development discourse, enabling effective action of stakeholders comes under the broad term of capacity development. In KM, enabling effective action of stakeholders or of development beneficiaries consists of delivering reproducible units of knowledge called **knowledge products or services**.

In general, a "knowledge product or service" (KPS) is commonly understood as a product or service with very high knowledge content, or a knowledge product or service that was produced using largely information and knowledge inputs.

A more specific definition of KPS is one that enables effective action of its users. In fact, in the health development sector, the term "**knowledge translation**" is the process of converting a less actionable KPS to a more actionable KPS. For example, knowledge in academic and medical research journals are often not directly usable by doctors and nurses in rural villages. In the health sector, the former must be translated into clinical practice guidelines which are more actionable by health workers and other users of the knowledge. Unfortunately, knowledge translation practices have not yet spread to other development sectors.

While development communication generally aims for the first three objectives, KPS should also aim at the fourth objective:

1. To inform,

2. To generate interest,

3. To motivate towards a specific decision or action, and

4. To enable effective action.

The last two are important. KM practitioners are realizing that it is not enough to provide knowledge. To better ensure success, KM must be accompanied by ways and means to motivate knowledge workers. Thus, KM practice in more experienced organizations is often accompanied by change management, employee engagement, incentive programs and the like. Unlike subordinates and staff in an organization, stakeholders are like customers in the private sectors who must be served. Hence motivating stakeholders is a greater challenge than motivating your own knowledge workers.

In the private sector, managing knowledge is in the context of a unitary and vertical or corporate organization. In the development sector, knowledge is managed in a more complicated or complex context:

- Stakeholders are often independent, have their own differing social and other goals, and possess different levels of power.

- The relationships between the development organization and the stakeholders they seek to serve are not permanent or often contractual, at different levels of economic and political power, and from different ideological, cultural and knowledge perspectives.

- Events and situations are not as clearly predictable and understandable nor easily manageable.

As a result, some development institutions are applying complexity theory in their development practice. Because some factors are difficult to know, sense or anticipate such as development in conflict or post-conflict areas, the use of project logical frameworks or logframes may be questionable in these situations. Yet, development institutions have to make funding decisions based on anticipated results, and for accountability, projects have to monitor these results and how their staff are performing to produce those results. This situation creates a tension between the linear cause-and-effect thinking underlying project logframes more applicable in the private sector and open-ended, sense-making and creative thinking in complex development situations.

In the public sector, the context is similar to that of development institutions but somewhat less complex because the government is a rule-setting institution and has a good measure of control over factors that an ordinary development institution or non-government organization can only hope to influence. Aware of this fact, development banks continue to use project logframes and seek to reduce risks and uncertainties by helping governments improve their legal and regulatory frameworks and their capacities to enforce them in order to achieve greater predictability in the outcomes of other development projects and

interventions. Policy advice is therefore an important type of KPS for development banks; it enables governments to more effectively perform their policy making functions.

In the private sector, there are basically two types of knowledge **operations knowledge** (doing the same things well, or productivity) and **strategic knowledge** (doing new and better things, or innovation). In technology-based or innovation-based corporations, **technical knowledge** would be a third type. In the international development sector, four types of knowledge can be identified: operations knowledge (designing and implementing projects well), technical knowledge (thematic knowledge e.g. energy, health, transport, education, etc.), local or **country knowledge** (knowledge of local bureaucracy, language, key decision makers, power brokers and "influencers", local culture, indigenous knowledge, etc.) and strategic knowledge (knowledge to support policy making and national competitive strategies).

In the health development sector, knowledge translation can be viewed as conversion of technical and country knowledge to operations knowledge. Note that language translation is a subset of knowledge translation because it is using country knowledge for more effective operations knowledge.

In the World Bank, President Kim's "**science of delivery**" can be viewed as the best combination and use of technical, country and strategic knowledge to support operations knowledge. By the way, he is from the health sector (he worked at WHO and health NGOs, and he is an MD). Operations knowledge is the most important because it is what creates development results at the local level. Social value is created not when the KPS is produced but when it is satisfactorily delivered to development beneficiaries at the local level. Multinational corporations that operate across several cultures and time zones are beginning to realize the importance of country knowledge; however, corporate tools for managing country knowledge have not yet been the subject of much KM discourse.

In the end, the success of KM in the public and development sectors must be measured in terms of how far KM has contributed to the achievement of desired development results. Wherever project logframes are used or applicable, KM must be explicitly included into a broader "KM logical framework" to be able to link KM to desired project results. The KM framework for the development sector is closely interlinked with monitoring and evaluation (M&E) as well as to knowledge sharing and learning processes inherent in both KM and M&E. In a large international development organization, these three functions are performed all together by a MEAL (M&E, Accountability and Learning) manager.