

Knowledge Management Practices in Development and Humanitarian Aid Organizations in Ethiopia

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Effective delivery in the fields of development aid relies on freely flowing knowledge and its communication as well as reach of dissemination. Through Knowledge Networks and communities of practice development organizations can promote partnership, teamwork, with the free exchange of knowledge and best practices between the organization, operational partners and international agencies. Development assistance organizations, practitioners and stakeholders are considered as key actors in the production and communication of knowledge. Knowledge exchange among practitioners in development assistance is now at the forefront of global development policy formulation. This is also true in Ethiopia where a multitude of development agencies interact, produce knowledge and share among themselves to meet their development assistance objectives in support of the country's growth and transformation plan.

To better understand the ongoing state of knowledge management (KM) in development aid organizations, this study adopted the perspective of Kruger and Synman (2003) to assess and describe the process in which knowledge management is defined, managed, controlled and implemented in knowledge-intensive Development Aid Organizations in Ethiopia.

A defining key role development aid organizations have is building the capacity of beneficiary entities to process and use knowledge to engage effectively in substantive development debates and decision making processes (Keeble, 2002). This mandate requires development organizations to have quality learning and knowledge management systems. In addition it calls for knowledge-based aid and the globalization of knowledge requiring development organizations to reflect on how their internal Knowledge Management and learning systems interact with external information flows and policy trends (King, 2001).

In Ethiopia, development aid organizations play a crucial role in accelerating development assistance. The critical roles of these organizations are coordination of aid efforts, supporting development planning, building development capacity, investing in infrastructure and humanitarian aid.

Where knowledge sharing is concerned, the working culture of most of these organizations in Ethiopia is in a way that the focus is on practical questions of day-to-day work rather than on lessons being learned at a strategic level. It's usually hard to find good examples of a coordinated

and strategic approach either to knowledge dissemination or knowledge strategy in the non-profit industry. The information services in these offices are mainly supply oriented, and user needs do not always coincide with the way information is made available.

Most of the time, the problems associated in this regard are not what technological platform to use but how to manage the vast amount of knowledge generated in a way that satisfies stakeholders, peers and government counterparts as a strategic asset for development assistance.

Although some development organizations try to actively align their work processes with a knowledge management component, these segregated tools (intranets, shared network drives etc), case studies and best practices are not always available to other similar organizations. They merely serve as knowledge repositories for the specific organization's internal and usually mandate specific purposes.

The above stated challenges are main causes for the lack of known solutions to have a unified knowledge management practices where management, program staff, technical working groups synthesize their knowledge to reach development aid objectives.

Furthermore, there is an extensive and rich literature on knowledge management and its implications worldwide but most of these studies are conducted in the context of the profit making industries. There's little evidence, if any, regarding practical applications of knowledge management in development aid organizations in Ethiopia. It's critical to explore and implement knowledge management's relevance and impact on aid effectiveness in a development aid organization (Ramalingam, 2005).

It is essential that non-profit organizations working in the country have a viable strategy to manage and share their knowledge as well as learn from themselves. Without such a mechanism:

- Much knowledge must be re-learned in each region, project or programme, wasting costly time and resources
- Aid Organizations do not learn what is working and what needs to be changed in order to make their aid efforts more effective in Ethiopia.

To alleviate this, it is mandatory that an effective knowledge management initiative is in place which can be measured for effectiveness when considering enhancing the efficiency of development assistance. In order to establish an effective measurement of the impact of knowledge management we must first evaluate the structure of the knowledge flow and make up of knowledge sharing practices in the development aid organization in the country.

In light of the above, the primary objective of this research is to assess Knowledge Management maturity of development aid organizations in Ethiopia, and as a result to provide an insight for the development of a concise baseline. To achieve this, the study explored the following research questions:

- How do development aid organizations in Ethiopia use ICT and information management as enablers of knowledge management?
- Do development aid organizations in Ethiopia put in place strategies and policies to manage knowledge resources and/or to leverage existing knowledge?
- To what extent are development aid organizations in Ethiopia aware of the importance of knowledge management as a strategic enabler?
- To what extent do development aid organizations in Ethiopia rely on external knowledge sources to carry out their development assistance objectives?

The study assessed the level of knowledge sharing activities and suitable arrangements in place to facilitate the implementation of knowledge management initiatives in their respective organizations. Majority of the respondents indicated that their organization has strong knowledge sharing mechanisms even though not all mechanisms are yet systematic and well organized. Almost all respondents (90%) felt they have adequate ICT infrastructure in place that could support current or future KM initiatives.

The majority of the organizations who participated in this study recognize the importance of managing knowledge and claim to be making serious attempts to establish active KM initiatives. Respondents felt varying degrees of current and future KM initiatives represent a significant opportunity to improve their current work performance. Responses to a question on key challenges impeding effective knowledge sharing fell in the realm of lack of time or resources, some staff members being reluctant to share knowledge, concern that sensitive/confidential information becoming public and most importantly lack of formal organizational guidelines on proper knowledge sharing and management.

While the overall lack of well-defined KM strategies is a challenge, there are good practices and respondents have shared that their organizations are rapidly moving towards building on and further developing their knowledge management practices in the coming few years. Based on the responses gathered the study concludes by recommending action points that enhance conducive conditions for effective knowledge sharing in support of development goals.

Significance of the study

This study aimed to explore factors that influence the exchange of knowledge in aid and development organizations. The finding of this study demonstrated ways of putting in place effective knowledge management strategy and implementation in the development aid sector in Ethiopia. Output from this study will also strengthen sharing successful KM initiatives, learnt from the staff experience, both successes and failures, emerging from survey responses of experts.

The result from this research is expected to help in:-

- Assessing knowledge resources of all actors and concerned stakeholders in a way that guides reaching development aid objectives.
- Identification of information/knowledge needs, which will be compared with knowledge assets, followed by preparation of respective action plan.
- Expanding ways in which information and knowledge are disseminated, using explicit and tacit knowledge to solve practical problems.
- Capturing and sharing best practices and lessons learnt.
- Systematically include KM in development programmes of aid agencies in the country
- Give way to a development aid Knowledge Management Strategy, Streamlining management practices by institutionalizing KM or blending systematically KM processes with normal work processes.
- Strengthen government oriented capacity building operations.

Methodology followed

This study followed qualitative research methods via an online survey in the belief that this will achieve greater understanding and validation of results. This method was chosen due to the reason that the nature of the research problem calls for a description and identification of factors that portray existing conditions.

The research targeted development aid organizations in Ethiopia that have planned, implemented, or evaluated (to a certain extent) Knowledge Management related work processes and activities. The selected development aid organizations were identified on the basis of perceived relevance and access, giving priority to those that have relatively better internet availability, ICT infrastructure and relevant information management and knowledge management practices. They were selected based on the above criteria indicated either through professional partnerships,

personal interactions and online professional communities with interests relevant to Knowledge Management.

In light of the above, the researcher decided to use purposive sampling for this research to be able to focus on the most relevant respondents for this study based on the principle that the selected respondents would most likely be significantly and directly interested in and/or involved in the phenomenon under investigation and hence provide a well-informed response. Therefore the sampling technique was selected to provide breadth of coverage.

The following organizations and country offices participated in the survey

- Action Aid Ethiopia
- Adoption Advocates International
- DKT Ethiopia
- Food for the Hungry
- GIZ Energy Coordination Office
- GOAL
- ILO
- International Food Policy Research Institute
- International Institution for Communication and Development
- International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI)
- International Rescue Committee
- Jhpiego
- Pact International
- Save the Children – Ethiopia
- United Nations Economic Commission for Africa
- UNICEF
- United Nations Office for the Africa Union
- United Nations Population Fund
- United Nations World Food Programme
- USAID
- Water Aid Ethiopia
- World Bank
- World Learning Ethiopia
- World Vision Ethiopia

Data collection

Using quantitative research methodology, the study focused on empirical answers from knowledge management practitioners in the context of their organization's knowledge sharing practices. Structured data input were collected from the questionnaire that were distributed for this purpose.

After examining various research and practice-oriented publications including the Capability Maturity Model of the Software Engineering Institute (SEI) that many writers refer to, the researcher found that most knowledge management maturity models in the literature are ad hoc, and have not been empirically tested (Ehmset al, 2002; Harigopal et al, 2001)

To compensate for this shortfall, a knowledge management maturity measurement instrument developed by Kruger and Synman (2007) was used. The rational in using this survey instruments is two folds. 1) The researchers (Kruger and Synman) adhered to a research design that adequately combined theoretical propositions of knowledge management with practical applications while designing the knowledge management maturity questionnaire. 2) The questionnaires designed were not only benchmarked against known maturity assessment survey instruments, but also were thoroughly pre-tested and validated in collaboration with a team of knowledge management experts.

The above mentioned rational ensures that the survey instrument put in place can validate this research's empirical inquiry to rate factors that influence the success of Knowledge Management activities in development aid organizations in Ethiopia.

The online survey principally consisted of questionnaires specifically designed to measure knowledge management maturity. The instrument is composed of 101 descriptive questions under six sections namely;-

- ICT as an enabler of Knowledge Management
- Information Management in organizations
- Formulation of Knowledge Management principles, policy and strategy
- Implementation of Knowledge Management
- Ubiquitous knowledge transfer
- Assessment of Knowledge Management Growth

Each question was measured against a four-point scale with labels of *Yes definitely*, *Yes but not significantly*, *No but probably within the next 5 years* and *No* respectively.

Data were collected using primarily online survey questionnaire. The online tool Survey Monkey was used to collect survey responses. The questionnaire was sent to 30 selected individuals as a link via an e-mail containing all relevant information and expressing the strict confidentiality of their responses outside of the research interest. A mandatory consensual statement which verified that all participants are above 18 years of age was used to ensure that voluntary responses are based on adult judgment.

The on-line survey, based on Kruger and Synman's measurement instrument, queried many different aspects of capabilities for knowledge-sharing and management, which are summarized and discussed as follows.

A total of 24 organizations responded to this survey from a selected 30. The 30 organizations identified are based on the sampling criteria discussed earlier. By using the online data collection tool, the questionnaire was distributed to the 30 targeted organizations of which 24 responded via their national and international staff members who are responsible for knowledge management and communication practices in their organizations. These organizations have implemented at least a working information and knowledge sharing strategies that primarily serve an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 staff members as well as development partners and stakeholders.

Prior to answering the questionnaire the respondents were provided with an outline detailing the purpose and nature of the study, what the study focuses on and how the findings will benefit the non-profit industry in the country. In addition, the fact that the questionnaire was distributed over the internet resulted in wider coverage of the target population placing a great deal of convenience to many respondents at ease to participate in the survey. Face to face meetings, telephone conversations and e-mail messages were used to encourage participants to respond to the survey in a timely manner.

Findings

Despite being based on a small number of targeted population, the researcher believes that this paper has demonstrated the value of applying assessment in relation to knowledge management. The survey comments served to confirm the researcher's belief that the Kruger & Synman KM maturity assessment instrument and the general knowledge management maturity model (G-KMMM) by Pee & Kankanhalli provide a useful framework through which to assess knowledge management.

Through a technique similar to critical success factor analysis, the three lenses of inquiry – information communication technology, strategic input and implementation issues - provide a rational and visible mechanism through which to conduct a knowledge management maturity and thereby assess an organization's current capability in relation to KM. With further research and development it is envisaged that the Kruger & Synman KM maturity assessment instrument will prove to be a useful diagnostic tool for those development aid organizations currently engaged in, or considering embarking upon, a knowledge management initiative.

Looking at the relations between the two chosen models used for this study (Kruger & Synman assessment instrument and the G-KMMM), even though one is a model and the other an assessment instrument, the fundamental issues discussed by both authors have similarities. G-KMMM emphasizes maturity levels against key performance indicators of three core pillars: (people, process and technology). Each pillar is described by a set of characteristics that explain specify practices that, when collectively employed, can help organizations accomplish the goals of the particular maturity level they most likely resemble. The GMMK has five maturity levels that are measured against the key performance indicators namely, initial:- where little or no intention of KM is exhibited, aware:- Organization is aware of and has the intention to manage its organizational knowledge, but it might not know how to do so, defined:- basic infrastructure is put in place to support KM, managed:- KM initiatives are well established in the organization and optimized:- where KM is adequately integrated into organizational processes.

While Kruger & Synman focus on 6 main areas of assessment when evaluating KM in an organization. Kruger and Sunman's model incorporates the three main pillars of the G-KMMM in that the first two critical success factors:- ICT as an enabler of Knowledge Management and Information Management's role for knowledge management in an organization describe the technological readiness of the organization. Similarly the two other success factors of Kruger and Synman namely Formulation of Knowledge Management principles, policy and strategy in an organization and 'Implementation of Knowledge Management in an organization' touch upon the processes involved for the smooth implementation of KM. The two factors assess the organizational processes that are essential for establishing a successful knowledge management initiative.

Kruger & Synman instrument also emphasizes on ubiquitous knowledge transfer which elaborates on the soft issues of KM implementation that primarily involve people's perception of KM processes and their behaviors towards it which directly relates to the GMMK's core pillar.

Based on the exploratory survey conducted, it appears that the vast majority of the firms examined are doing at least some initiatives in the name of either Information Management and/or Knowledge Management. It was found that higher levels of organization readiness for KM were indicative of more commitment and less pessimism about KM.

The majority of the organizations who participated in this study recognize the importance of managing knowledge and claim to be making serious attempts to establish active KM initiatives.

Despite this enthusiasm, the actual implementation of KM still tends to be conducted on an informal, ad hoc basis with little evidence of effective co-ordination among departments.

The major findings of this survey can be summarized as: -

- There's a rapidly growing interest and engagement to develop an effective KM initiative as an enabler of development assistance objectives within the non for profit sector in the country.
- Most organizations possess adequate ICT infrastructure that facilitate the implementation and growth of knowledge management initiatives.
- Most organizations have already in place a working knowledge management and information sharing systems even though a lot of them don't yet follow a systematic, well organized mechanisms of retaining and disseminating knowledge.
- Staff and knowledge workers in these organizations are actively involved in sharing information and knowledge resources as and when required for speeding up working processes. This positive attitude towards knowledge sharing with colleagues and stakeholders is a key conducive behavior to boost growth of KM.
- Albeit incomplete, development aid organization have put in place at least the basic prerequisites and strategic arrangements that enhance the sharing of knowledge within and outside their organizations.
- KM implementation challenges are well defined. The majority of the respondents find the absence of proper organizational guidelines on knowledge sharing, lack of knowledge of what colleagues need, and shortage of time and resources to facilitate knowledge sharing hindering their desire to share knowledge with colleagues within and outside the organization.
- Development aid organizations are actively involved in social mobilizations and group learning activities with their stakeholders through various communities of practice that frequently interact through face to face meetings.
- Despite all the above mentioned achievements, devising and implementing KM strategies aligned with the organizations' strategic priorities to guide future KM directions is still at a very early stage.

- Matching analysis of the results of the study against the G-KMMM model, most organizations fall under the third maturity level of the model titled ‘Defined’ (see Table 2).

While many of the respondents appeared to be critical of their respective organizations’ development of KM strategy, they did feel that KM initiatives, current and future, represented a significant opportunity to improve their current work performance. Issues such as lack of time or resources, some staff members being reluctant to share knowledge and concern that sensitive/confidential information becoming public were mentioned as major hindrances to active knowledge sharing practices.

Recommendations

Like most development assistance programs around the world, international NGOs in Ethiopia face the need to improve the content, process and inclusivity of impact of their development assistance efforts. Most of these organization are knowledge based, processing data and key information for decision making on a daily basis. It is therefore pertinent that these organizations are capable of increasing knowledge in the development sectors they operate and/or leverage existing knowledge to meet development goals. This calls for an efficient knowledge management strategies coupled with acquiring the necessary leadership and support for implementation.

Looking at the diffusion of KM initiatives throughout an organization using a change lens, the process of implementing KM would be expected to unfold through a series of stages. Readiness, the initial stage, would occur when the organizational members’ attitudes are such that they are receptive to a forthcoming KM effort. Adoption occurs when the organizational members alter their attitudes and behaviors to conform to the expectations of the KM effort. Institutionalization occurs when KM becomes a stable part of employees’ behavior and fabric of the organization. According to the responses, most organizations are at the readiness level.

Because knowledge management implementation and integration is a cultural change process, which involves changing the hearts and minds and work habits of staff, it can’t be done overnight. It may take at least a couple of years before KM is fully institutionalized across the entire organization. To achieve that development aid organizations need to continue their dedicated implementation efforts, focused on breakthrough and delivery of new ways of working, which lasts until they start to establish rules and disciplines for KM, a knowledge management strategy.

Based on the survey results and considering the observed KM readiness of the organizations who participated in this study, the author forwards the following recommendations that further enhance conducive conditions for effective knowledge sharing that support development goals and in the long run can integrate leveraging organizational knowledge within strategic directions.

- Initiating formal trainings (including e-learning based), peer learning, experience sharing and similar other formal and informal learning interactions, through knowledge management initiatives, to meet the knowledge needs of the majority of staff.
- Provision of regular training and practical opportunities aimed at building and sustaining the different knowledge creation and sharing skills to all staff of different levels. Establishing knowledge sharing skills development strategies as well as programs to popularize knowledge sharing among the staff of the organizations.
- Strengthening peer learning schemes using different mechanisms (such as communities of practices and regular e-discussion) that best allow bringing together the knowledge of staff members with experts from outside of the organization to ensure that continuous and focused learning takes places within and outside development aid organizations.
- Virtual communities of practices could also be used for facilitating exchange of knowledge across units. Initiating discussion forums, composed of face-to-face and e-discussion, to create the platform that would enables sharing experiences and lessons in turn building an environment of trust with all its stakeholders and partners on a regular basis.
- Building knowledge sharing environment by combining the already popular knowledge sharing mechanisms (such as face-to-face meetings and e-mail) with those not widely used e by the respondents (such as e-discussions and virtual CoPs) in a balanced way to make the most of available knowledge sharing mechanisms.
- Encouraging the use of e-mail based e-discussions. The organizations could then build on the skills, experience, and interest that staff would have acquired in using the e-mail based e-discussions to introduce and popularize web-based e-discussions and virtual forums.
- Making accessible knowledge resources (both tacit and explicit) to encourage self-teaching (including e-learning resources) particularly on those areas of knowledge identified as strategic

input. Training and resource building by the organization therefore should be built around meeting the knowledge needs of the staff.

- Making sources of knowledge relevant to the development objectives of the organization more accessible both physically and electronically visible to encourage more use of the sources. Making accessible knowledge products such as lessons learned documents, best practices documents, peer learn files, and after action reports to all stakeholders involved in common areas of concern are one of the key strategies that the knowledge management program has to consider to strengthen discussions and exchange of knowledge across units of the organization.
- Making knowledge products easily accessible from centralized repository of easy to use interface that can be accessed from different locations as prioritized by the knowledge needs and other relevant criteria that the development assistance programs require.
- Strengthening and financing units responsible for knowledge management to facilitate further identification of knowledge needs, training needs, barriers to knowledge sharing, and so on.
- Although the positive attitude towards sharing knowledge is an important asset for development aid organizations in the country, more work needs to be done by the organizations to develop the appreciation and enthusiasm in all staff to engage knowledge sharing with experts and stakeholders outside of the organization as well. It is important for the organizations to instill the value of the importance of knowledge sharing across the board to make knowledge sharing a norm. Creating awareness as to the personal and organizational values of knowledge and knowledge sharing, provision of incentives for engaging in organizational knowledge sharing (through institutional recognition of time spend on knowledge sharing, making knowledge sharing as one area of competence the performance of staff would be assessed for, and so on), and provision of tools and skill sets required to engage in knowledge sharing are the primary measures that the organization has to take in order to improve knowledge sharing.
- Putting in place proper organizational guidelines, proper tools, and identification of the knowledge that need to be shared should be considered as one of the primary measures to be taken by the organizations to build their knowledge management programs on solid foundations. This can be addressed through developing knowledge management strategy as one of the first steps.

The researcher hopes this investigation serves as a building block for subsequent research that not only explores other facets of KM maturity assessment in development aid organizations, but also advances the level of sophistication of the research.

Future research efforts can use this work to guide studies that examine the entire process that organizations might go through as KM is introduced. It is envisaged that future studies, based on these findings, will build on providing a pre and post implementation assessments of the success of KM initiatives, hopefully with wider scope and coverage. Furthermore, an in-depth research is needed to evaluate the direct or indirect relation between the knowledge management practices already in use and the implementation effectiveness of development assistance objectives.

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