

HOW KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT COULD TRANSFORM THE UN DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

Steve Glovinsky

Over more than 70 years, the UN system has accumulated a substantial amount of knowledge, particularly in the development domain. If captured and mobilized, it could greatly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the world organization. Yet, while most UN entities would describe themselves as “knowledge organizations,” there actually are few examples of effective knowledge management, in large part because of the transformations required. One of the UN’s knowledge managers describes his experiences and offers views on what would it take to succeed.

If knowledge is what one knows, then knowledge management (KM) is expeditiously getting what you know to the person who needs to know it. In practice KM has been a challenge for the UN development system (UNDS), whose value lies primarily with what its people know and can apply. Few UN organizations have been successful in achieving KM, in spite of repeated efforts. The UN’s Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) is about to issue the results of its second study on KM in the UN system (the first was in 2007), “based on the conviction that knowledge is a valuable core asset of its organizations and its best comparative advantage.” The study has been extensive—some 175 people were interviewed and over 6,600 staff returned questionnaires. Twenty organizations were identified as having some aspects of a KM strategy, and some were working well. But overall the study concludes that “knowledge management remains a challenge for the United Nations system organizations in their attempt to systematically and efficiently develop, organize, share and integrate knowledge to achieve their cross-cutting goals.”¹

Why is knowledge management so important to the UN system, and why has its introduction been so difficult? This briefing briefly describes three UNDS initiatives. It offers insights about why they ultimately failed, and it suggests what could and should be done to improve the UN’s management of its knowledge.

WHY THE UN NEEDS KM

Knowledge is acquired through study, observation, sharing, and one’s own experience. It is not to be confused with information—whereas information informs, knowledge adds value by benefiting learning both individually, as one person gains knowledge from another, and organizationally, as an organization gains knowledge from its staff. Furthermore, knowledge itself cannot be “managed”; rather, KM refers to the management of *knowledge flows*—into, through and out of an organization. As such, KM enhances overall organizational effectiveness by consolidating collective individual knowledge and applying it to new situations and environments, continually improving and refining what works and what does not in a given context.

Three characteristics of knowledge make KM critical to improving the effectiveness of the UN system, and particularly organizations concerned with development:

- *Knowledge is needed to improve professional competency.* Only practitioner knowledge can improve the effectiveness of a practice—the processes that make up the features of a profession. For development professions, then, knowledge is required to improve development effectiveness.
- *Experiential knowledge is as important as expert knowledge.* Knowledge about “how” to succeed in any particular setting is very different from the knowledge about “what” the success looks like. The “how” is about the soft skills necessary to deal with the unusual and highly contextual set of circumstances for every situation, which is especially true for development knowledge. Development is essentially about change, and change does not follow a textbook.
- *Knowledge is measured in person-years.* Someone in a profession for 40 years has acquired 40 years of knowledge about it. And so a 5,000-strong community of professionals with an average of 20 years of work experience will have 100,000 years of knowledge.

With such a large pool of individual knowledge, every UN development organization striving for relevance and impact should be tapping into and applying what their staff members and professional partners know.

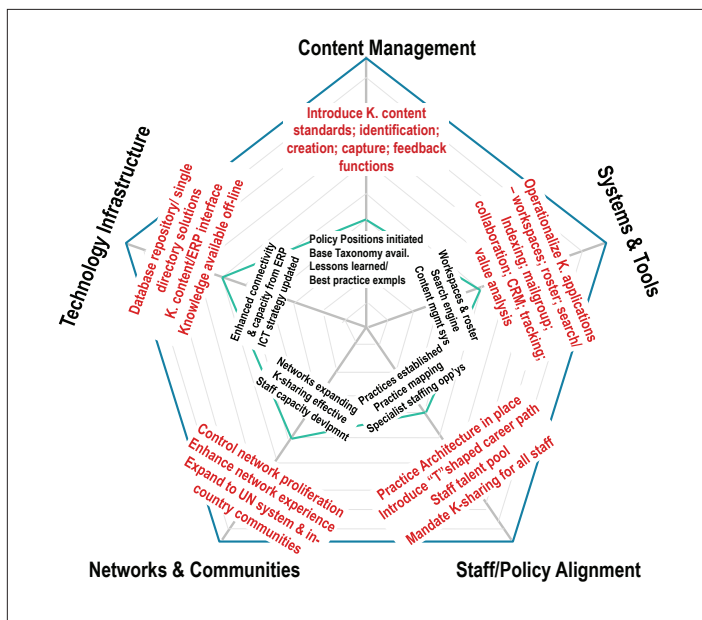
THREE EXAMPLES OF UN KM INITIATIVES

The following illustrations show how three UN development entities planned to manage knowledge and improve effectiveness and impact: the UN Development Programme (UNDP) to strengthen professional competence; the UN Country Team in India to connect to the country’s professional communities; and UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) to become a premier think tank on the continent.

UNDP was probably the first UN organization to “discover” KM when, in late 1999 (as the technology for creating e-mail lists was just beginning), it formed mail groups of its country-office professionals working on poverty, governance, environment, and other UNDP thematic priorities—its “practices”—to share their knowledge and experience. The experiment quickly demonstrated the value of knowledge-sharing. UNDP had been vaunting its network of 136 country offices; in reality however, they worked independently of one other. Once connected, the program officers found that they had a lot to share.

The dramatic success of these knowledge-sharing networks created an awareness that knowledge as a “commodity” could be managed for improving organizational effectiveness. So in 2004 UNDP prepared its first KM strategy, the “Roadmap,” illustrated in the “spider diagram,” Figure 1.

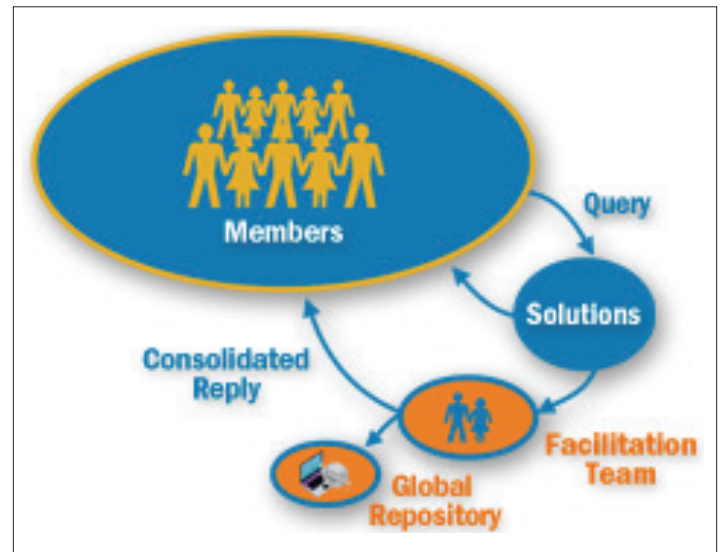
Figure 1: UNDP’s 2004 KM Roadmap Architecture



The development of the roadmap involved three months of extensive in-house consultations, reviews against comparators such as McKinsey and World Bank, and conclusions from two design/validation workshops. It was a \$6 million, 18-month effort, with annual cost implications of \$10 million, for “transforming UNDP into a professional, knowledge-based service organization.” Specifically, the KM Roadmap would “equip staff members with an arsenal of reusable knowledge, lessons learned and tested methods that they could apply when serving clients, to create a competitive advantage in the development marketplace.”² The effort called for 33 initiatives to build out the spider diagram across the five dimensions in Figure 1: content management (e.g., “knowledge-enabled business processes”); networks and communities (the knowledge networks); systems and tools (the abovementioned “arsenal”); the underlying staff policy alignment (the practice architecture); and technology infrastructure (repositories and communications). The roadmap was launched in April 2004, but it came to a dead end by the following December, with virtually nothing delivered.

The second illustration dates from 2005, when the UN country team in India decided to introduce a variation of UNDP’s successful knowledge networks. Whereas the UNDP communities comprised professionals with similar job descriptions, the Indian initiative was a broad-gauged, UN knowledge-sharing facilitation service for professionals with similar job objectives (i.e., across disciplines), which sought to link people working in government, the private sector, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), donors, and researchers. Branded “Solution Exchange” and drawing on UNDP’s experience, members joined e-mail networks moderated by full-time facilitators and research associates. A member would post a query seeking relevant knowledge and experience; the community would respond with experiences or reference resources; and the facilitation team would synthesize the results in a “Consolidated Reply” (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: UN Country Team India, Solution Exchange



From a KM perspective, Solution Exchange was a clear demonstration of “expeditiously getting what you know to the person who needs to know it.” The UN role as convener provided the impartiality that enabled practitioners across the spectrum to participate. Through this service, policy-makers heard from field workers about the implications of their policies, projects, and programs. NGOs got ideas for community initiatives. Researchers identified knowledge gaps. UN and other donors got feedback on project design and implementation. And the private sector identified business opportunities.

Over the three years of operation, seven UN organizations created twelve professional communities with between 2,000 and 4,000 members in their specialized areas—for instance, ILO for work and employment, UNAIDS for HIV, UNESCO for education, UN Women and UNICEF for gender in development, and so on. Solution Exchange’s success exceeded expectations. After three years, over 15,000 professionals had subscribed and 8,000 members had shared knowledge in response to 536 queries. A 2010 evaluation by the Overseas Development Institute concluded that Solution Exchange “had occupied a unique niche in India’s development scene, paving the way for new collaborative ventures, creating space for discussions that have fed into policy formulation, and impacting the policy process in several important development sectors.”³ However, the

evaluation also identified the need for further funding, which was not forthcoming. By 2016, three of the original twelve communities remained active, with only one sustaining a level of activity comparable to the 2005-2007 period. Outside India, one community created for Pacific climate change practitioners by UNDP's Pacific Centre has been operating for six years, and a variation exists in Russia; Solution Exchange services created for development professionals in Bhutan, Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Bangladesh functioned for a time before closing down.

The third illustration comes from the UN Economic Commission for Africa, when in 2012 the newly appointed ECA executive secretary, Carlos Lopes, announced his intention to “make ECA the premier think tank on Africa’s transformation.”⁴ The role of think tanks is to provide policymakers with the deep analyses that their staff do not have the time for, so that they can make better informed policy decisions. The idea that a UN economic commission could be a think tank was not new. The Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA and later ECLAC when the “Caribbean” was added) has been an effective source of development ideas since the time of Raúl Prebisch in the 1950s and early 1960s. However, the intellectual contribution of UN organizations still largely revolves around the publication of reports drafted by in-house specialists and consultants.⁵ While published reports remain useful, to stand out in a world of proliferating opinions and media channels, today’s aspiring think tanks need to work differently. These days, the way to reach decision makers and influential advocates is by producing solid and compelling research from the widest perspectives of viewpoints, experiences and documented evidence, and then presenting it through a multifaceted communications campaign.

ECA’s updated think-tank business model would be created through four corporate strategies: communications, knowledge management, publications and information technology. The KM strategy would address how “the knowledge of ECA’s staff, consultants and networked stakeholders, as well as the knowledge residing in its documentation and libraries is captured, stored, accessed and applied in the organization’s business processes and made available to stakeholders, to maximize organizational learning and impact.”⁶

Importantly, ECA is not just a thinker, but a doer. One part of the house generates policy ideas—on macroeconomic management, social development, regional integration and trade, technology and innovation, sustainable resource management, and statistics. Another part of the house—a deep bench of regional advisors, sub-regional offices, a regional training institute (IDEP) and support to the African Union Commission—delivers policy ideas to policy-makers. As a set-up, it was easy to see how knowledge could flow from the policy-idea generators through the policy idea deliverers to the clients, and then back again so that the generators could address the field realities, and ECA could achieve “premier” think tank status.

The KM strategy extended these flows to include knowledge from professionals across Africa working on the same issues—India’s Solution Exchange service adapted to Africa. Each of Africa’s fifty-four countries can be seen as a center of innovation, and all the practitioners are working on something that other practitioners would probably like to hear about. Africa’s planners, statisticians, gender specialists, trade specialists, and the list goes on are connected on e-mail networks, with ECA’s own professionals listening and posting whenever they have questions.

The strategy also covered documented “expert” knowledge—but not only the books and papers in the ECA library and digital repository. Using common search metadata, it introduced a “federated search engine” to connect the repository to digital resources from libraries across Africa and worldwide. The expanded search facility would be used by a team of research assistants to build bibliographies for the research work being carried out by the knowledge generators, enabling the ECA think tank to draw on the latest and best material.

To ensure that these knowledge flows were incorporated into the business of the organization, three business processes were identified that would benefit from knowledge. The first was product development, ensuring that whatever is produced by ECA reflects the latest global knowledge on a particular policy idea. The second consisted of organizational learning, factoring knowledge into the business processes so that, for example, project development included a step for “due diligence” to account for network consultations, past experiences, and evaluations. The third was capacity development, making continual improvements in strengthening staff skills and competencies based on insights from experience.

Finally, to get the wheels turning, a principle was established: how well ECA policy staff shared and applied knowledge would benefit their careers. The best knowledge-sharers and users would be recognized as outstanding representatives of ECA’s new profile.

ECA’s Senior Management Team approved the strategy, with little discussion, in April 2014. It was to be implemented through a project containing nineteen interventions involving changes to business systems and staffing. However, once the project was approved most of the interventions were dropped. Instead, the funds were reallocated to a large contract to refurbish the ground floor of ECA’s library, constructing a new functional layout suited to interaction and reflection.

LESSONS LEARNED

The three cases were serious attempts to introduce KM, but all encountered problems either starting up or being sustained. It is instructive that comparable efforts have been successful in other organizations and, according to the JIU study, within the UN itself. In fact the knowledge networks in UNDP succeeded in transforming how UNDP shares knowledge, and the effort has been replicated in other UN offices and organizations. But it was introduced under the radar, uninhibited by corporate intentions. While this “stealth approach” can work, it is not a very appropriate corporate strategy.

What can be learned from these three efforts? What are the common threads that held them back?

Essentially, knowledge is the lifeblood of a knowledge organization. To succeed, knowledge management must be fully integrated into how each organization operates. Introducing KM as a core business process requires transformational change, which is complex and difficult. No matter how sound, valuable, and relevant the idea, it will fail unless two conditions are met: that it is directed by a dedicated and persistent transformational leader; and that it has buy-in and commitment from the full management team.

The three examples demonstrate what happens when these conditions are missing. In the UNDP case, leadership from the Executive Office was

absent from the outset. The initiative was championed by only one bureau, the Bureau for Development Policy, and was never fully accepted by the others in spite of the existence of an organization-wide steering committee. When the host bureau proposed moving the Roadmap's management to the Executive Office, the offer was rebuffed.

India's Solution Exchange initially became successful due to the dedication and leadership of the UN resident coordinator and her country team. But in the UN system, when a leader moves on, her vision often goes with her. And here, this resident coordinator was replaced by a less inspirational one. Several UN convening agencies also suffered a similar fate. The country team initiative, and many of the twelve individual communities, were eventually de-funded.

For organizations to succeed with transformational change, an important job for the transformational leader is to win over the management by persuading them that such dramatic change is essential for their organization to adapt to a new environment. Many UN managers, perceiving that their organization is in no danger of being declared irrelevant, will not see why the leader has to shake things up. In addition, in the UN it is exceedingly difficult to remove or even to redeploy anyone.

The result is that for many of the key managers, the motivation for change may not be particularly pressing or persuasive. In ECA's case, the executive secretary and a few inspired professionals, supported by some dedicated staff, succeeded in repositioning the organization; and it is perceived as being in the ranks of top African think tanks.⁷ But the effort generated 35 staff grievances and a \$760,000 library refurbishment project; and it failed to manage ECA's knowledge.

In different circumstances, UNDP could perhaps have become a leader on development thinking; the UNDS in India could have continued to empower the country's professional communities as collective policy influencers; and ECA could have provided Africa's policymakers with the best, most informed advice that global knowledge can provide. The three cases show that bringing knowledge management into the UN system is not about the introduction of systems and processes but something more profound: transformation. And to succeed, such change in the UN requires inspired leadership, motivated managers, and fundamental alterations in organizational culture.

The world badly needs the UN development system to be the best that it can be. Transforming it through KM could make that happen.

Steve Glovinsky retired from UNDP in 2010, having worked since 1975 mainly on project and program design and organizational effectiveness—administrative decentralization; institutional capacity-building; planning; and structural reform. Most recently he was a special adviser to the executive secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa.

NOTES

1. United Nations Joint Inspection Unit, "Knowledge Management in the United Nations System Organizations, forthcoming publication prepared by Petru Dumitriu, JIU inspector.
2. UNDP, "Knowledge Management Roadmap – A Strategy for Deploying Knowledge Management within UNDP," April 2004.
3. Priya Deshingkar, Simon Hearn, Laxman Rao and Pramod Sharma, *Formative Evaluation of Solution Exchange* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2010).

4. UNECA, "ECA Business Plan 2013-2015," undated, 3.
5. See Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and Thomas G. Weiss, *UN Ideas that Changed the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
6. UNECA, "The ECA Knowledge Management Strategy – Managing the Knowledge of a Knowledge Organization," March 2014.
7. James G. McGann, *2015 Global Go To Think Tank Index Report*, The Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program, University of Pennsylvania, http://repository.upenn.edu/think_tanks/10/. The index, issued annually, ranks all "top" think tanks and placed ECA 114th of top think tanks worldwide (non-US), and 67th in Africa.

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