**Working Paper 244**

# Implementing Knowledge Strategies: Lessons from international development agencies

**Ben Ramalingam**

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Overseas Development Institute
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London
SE1 7JD
UK

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**Ben Ramalingam** is a member of the Research and Policy Development (RAPID) Programme at the ODI. He specialises in strategy development, organisational learning and knowledge management, and he is responsible for developing and implementing the ODI strategy for knowledge and learning, as well as advising strategic development within a range of different contexts from humanitarian NGOs to public sector bodies.

He can be contacted at b.ramalingam@odi.org.uk.

# Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| AAR | After Action Review |
| ACP | African, Caribbean and Pacific |
| ALNAP | Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action |
| CEO | Chief Executive Officer |
| CGIAR | Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research |
| CIDA | Canadian International Development Agency |
| CIDSE | Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité / International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity |
| CIO | Chief Information Officer |
| CMS | Content management system |
| CoP | Community of practice |
| DFID | UK Department for International Development |
| EADI | European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes |
| ECDPM | European Centre for Development Policy Management |
| EGDI | Expert Group on Development Issues |
| EKMS | Education Knowledge Management System |
| ESRC | Economic and Social Research Council |
| EU | European Union |
| GDN | Global Development Network |
| GIM | Global Impact Monitoring |
| HAI | Help Age International |
| HR | Human resources |
| ICARDA | International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas |
| ICT | Information and Communication Technology |
| IDS | Institute of Development Studies |
| ILAC | Institutional Learning and Change |
| IM | Information management |
| IT | Information Technology |
| ITDG | Intermediate Technology Development Group |
| IWMI | International Water Management Institute |
| JICA | Japan International Cooperation Agency |
| JKM | JICA Knowledge Management |
| KIT | Het Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen / Royal Tropical Institute |
| KM | Knowledge management |
| KS | Knowledge sharing |
| M&E | Monitoring and evaluation |
| NGO | Non-governmental organisation |
| NHS | National Health Service (UK) |
| OCP | Organisational Change Programme |
| ODI | Overseas Development Institute |
| OED | Operations Evaluation Department of the World Bank |
| OL | Organisational Learning |
| RAPID | Research and Policy in Development Programme |
| SCF | Save the Children Fund |
| SCF-UK | Save the Children UK |
| Sida | Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UN | United Nations |

| | |
|---|---|
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| US | United States |
| VSO | Voluntary Services Overseas |
| WB | World Bank |

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has been working since 1999 to promote development policy-making processes that are evidence-based and focused on the needs of the poor. One of the key dimensions of the RAPID programme at ODI is '*knowledge and learning systems in development agencies*'.

This study synthesises existing research on knowledge and learning in the development sector, and draws out eight key questions for examining related strategies and systems in development agencies. Together, these questions make up a comprehensive Knowledge Strategies Framework, which bears close resemblance to the framework used by the ODI to assess complex processes of change within the development and humanitarian sector. The dimensions of this new Knowledge Strategies Framework are mapped out as *Organisational knowledge*, O*rganisational links*, *Organisational contexts*, and *External factors*.

The study then presents the analysis of data collected on current knowledge and learning practices in 13 selected case study organisations[1]. This data was gathered via desk based reviews, interviews, consultations with agency staff and focus groups. The Knowledge Strategies Framework is used to analyse and synthesise these findings, to formulate the recommendations of the study, and to suggest key next steps.

## Findings and Recommendations

Following analysis of the data with reference to each of the key research questions, a number of recommendations for consideration are made. Overall, it is suggested that each of the dimensions of the Knowledge Strategies Framework is considered in developing, revising and evaluating strategies for knowledge and learning, and further, that the framework may also be of use in systematic comparisons across different settings.

More specifically, the case studies suggest that where *Organisational knowledge* and learning are well defined and understood, the related knowledge and learning activities are more effective, and more likely to have a positive impact. These activities should focus on the effective creation, sharing and storing of the different forms of knowledge. Staff capacities for participating in knowledge and learning activities, and systematic approaches to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of these activities, are of crucial importance.

The dimension of *Organisational links* refers to the connections between knowledge and learning activities and ongoing / existing functions and processes. Internal communities of practice (CoPs) are vital here – specifically, developing relationships and trust to facilitate knowledge sharing. While electronic interactions cannot replace face-to-face in terms of the value generated, they are significantly lower cost at the point of use, and the potential trade-offs must be understood. Overall, there should be concerted and coherent efforts to drive organisational change through widespread learning activities, integration of systems and process changes. The legitimacy of systematic approaches to knowledge and learning appears to be greatly enhanced when such principles are used as a rationale for restructuring, as has been the case in some of the organisations looked at here. However, where knowledge and learning strategies are framed as a support function, as is often the case, their transformative potential may be reduced.

[1] Organisational case studies are presented in the Appendix of the full Working Paper.

Findings in the *Organisational Contexts* dimension refer to understanding and addressing overall institutional strategy, governance, management and financing. All of these crucially impact upon knowledge and learning issues, and those organisations which seem closest to realising their vision for knowledge and learning appear to have addressed these issues in a proactive manner.

*External factors* should be addressed throughout the development of the knowledge strategy. In defining and understanding knowledge and learning, the knowledge audit process should address all knowledge that is used to achieve the overall goals of the organisation. This means the inclusion of knowledge that resides beyond or at the boundaries of given agencies. Specifically, the knowledge of beneficiaries, partner organisations in the South, and partners / donors in the North must be considered. This dimension also highlights the need for activities, processes and systems which facilitate knowledge sharing (KS) and learning across organisational boundaries, both with beneficiaries and other agencies (North and South). A related need is to emphasise the role of knowledge and learning within communications and advocacy strategies.

**Conclusions**

A diverse range of organisational initiatives are looked at here – from heavily resourced multilateral strategies to non-governmental organisations working on 'shoestring' budgets. A common finding across the case studies is that a learning organisation may be something that one always *aspires* to: learning is a continuous process of becoming, rather than attainment. Indeed, this finding is corroborated by evidence from other sectors. Even the most accomplished of initiatives looked at in the present study is marked by a sense of dissatisfaction, due to the drive for continuous improvement that is at the heart of knowledge strategies. Such ambitions are well-placed, and crucial to the vision of the learning organisation. However, there is a clear need to accept the resource constraints that must inevitably be placed on these initiatives, and work towards goals that are, as far as possible, specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound and appropriate to a given organisation.

The findings of the paper highlight that there is ongoing work of importance and value in this area, but that the major challenges of knowledge and learning in the development sector still need to be addressed. Three provisos are made – first, that many of the initiatives are at a relatively early stage; second, that the knowledge and learning agenda is just one among many voices pressing for change and adaptation within development agencies; and third, that their transformative potential may need to be placed in a more realistic manner. The evidence from the case studies suggests that efforts are more likely to be successful where the dimensions of the Knowledge Strategies Framework are addressed in a coherent and integrated manner.

The study also poses a number of questions to help shape future investigations that may be carried out to improve knowledge and learning in development organisations. These questions include:

- What are the knowledge and learning needs, capacities and challenges of beneficiary groups in the South? How does work in areas such as participation support this? How can issues of culture, national identity and religion be addressed?
- What possible mechanisms are there for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of knowledge and learning strategies? How can these be made more systematic and evidence-based?
- In what ways do Information Technology (IT) systems support or inhibit the knowledge and learning agenda? How is this impacted upon by the various forms of 'digital divides' that exist across different actors in the development sector?
- How does knowledge and learning take place within specific development actors – e.g. multilaterals, Southern government agencies, partner agencies, research institutes, etc?
- What mechanisms exist for inter-organisational KS and learning, and how can knowledge strategies of specific agencies support these?

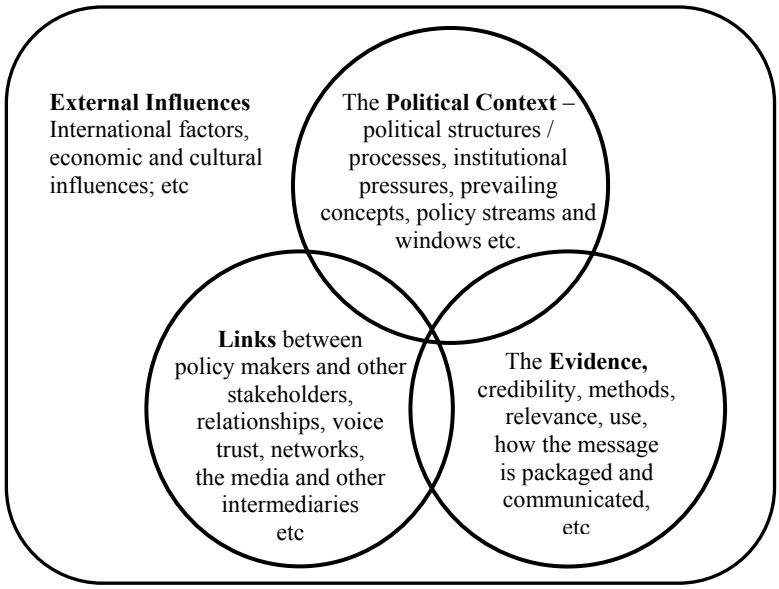
# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Since 1999, the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has been working to promote development policy-making processes that are evidence-based and pro-poor. In particular, the programme addresses the issue of bridging research and policy, and how policy processes are shaped by the use of evidence.

A key tool for the programme is the RAPID Framework (Figure 1) which is used to analyse and compare processes of change in a holistic manner (as developed in Crewe and Young, 2002).

**Figure 1: The RAPID Framework**




The RAPID programme focuses on four outcomes:

1. Improved knowledge about research-policy linkages among development practitioners, policy-makers and researchers;
2. Improved knowledge management and learning systems in Southern and Northern development agencies;
3. Helping Southern and Northern researchers, practitioners and advocates to communicate research findings and influence policy more effectively;
4. Improving awareness of the importance of research and how to access it among policy-makers and practitioners, especially in the United Kingdom (UK).

This working paper fits into the second focus area: *knowledge management and learning systems in development agencies*. These systems are taking on increasing strategic and tactical importance in achieving organisational goals, and have an important bearing on the linkages between research, policy and practice. There is a clear need to recognise and assess the impact of these organisational knowledge and learning initiatives. The RAPID team has already made inroads into this area. Our 2003 literature review on knowledge and learning, a key starting point for the current work, identified ten key gaps in the literature on knowledge and learning in development agencies (Hovland, 2003a). We have also undertaken a literature review on communications for poverty

reduction (Hovland, 2003b), worked on the application of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in sustainable livelihoods approaches (Chapman and Slaymaker, 2002), and written a series of as-of-yet unpublished papers that provide the theoretical underpinnings to the 2004 ODI knowledge and learning strategy (ODI, 2003; ODI, 2004a; ODI, 2004b). There is also more relevant work in the pipeline, in particular a Working Paper on networks (Perkin and Court, forthcoming 2005).

As well as the RAPID Programme, the ODI also houses the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP), an international, interagency forum that has been working for several years to improve knowledge, learning, accountability and quality across the humanitarian sector. Understanding of improved information flows and shared learning has been integral to the ALNAP annual assessments of humanitarian action, and this work, notably the 2002 Annual Review (ALNAP, 2002) has invaluably informed the current study. There is also other ODI thinking which has relevance for this study. In particular, *Development as Process* (Mosse, Farrington and Rew, 1998) looks at the importance of politics and relationships in project-related information flows and the need to include intangible impacts in monitoring and evaluation (M&E) assessments. In addition, a study of process monitoring (Baumann, 1999) reviews the importance of the intrinsically linked nature of knowledge and power and the implications of this for KS. More recently, there has been a study on global knowledge networks (Stone and Maxwell, 2005) which provided useful insights and approaches on the role of knowledge and ideas in development.

## 1.2 Rationale

The initial purpose of the present study was to build understanding of knowledge and learning work as undertaken in a range of different contexts in the development sector. Specific objectives were to undertake research into organisational initiatives to build knowledge and learning capacities, and to understand the ways in which these goals have been achieved, with what implications. This study therefore stands as a practical counterpoint to the earlier RAPID literature review on knowledge and learning (Hovland, 2003a), and may be seen as a response to the points raised at that time.

## 1.3 Method

The study has drawn upon a series of interviews and consultations (face-to-face and by telephone and email) conducted with representatives of development agency staff from 13 development agencies (listed in the Appendix), the majority between May and August 2004. Several of these interviews were based on initial outputs which were produced by the participants, where they worked together of their own accord to develop a group-based response to a preset list of questions. In a number of other instances, the case was produced based on available desk research and then submitted to the study organisation for consultation, review and comments. Across all the cases, qualitative data from informants complemented, or was complemented by, with the findings of desk-based research, and further by readings of policy documents provided by the study organisations.

All the case studies, provided in the Appendix to this report, have been constructed using the same technique and format. The format is based on the questions used in the semi-structured interviews that were undertaken, with some re-ordering for the purpose of logical flow. Starting with a snapshot of how knowledge and learning fits into broad organisational strategies, there is a brief overview of the rationale for knowledge and learning work. Following this, there is a section which maps out the knowledge and learning activities undertaken, as well as the systems put in place to support these activities. The final section comprises informant reflections on these activities,

covering what works well, barriers and constraints, and broader statements on the potential value and future of knowledge and learning work.

## 1.4 Outline

- *Section 2: Knowledge and Learning: From Policy to Practice* provides the background and context of knowledge and learning in organisations operating in the new global economy. This section provides a framework for categorising knowledge and learning activities, and attempts to provide insights into the macro-level trends that led to the growth of this work as a strategic tool within organisations. The areas covered in brief in this section are themselves the subject of extensive research, and therefore at the risk of simplification, this section raises only the key points of relevance. The section then moves on an analysis of the uptake of knowledge and learning in development organisations, based on existing comparative studies of such work. The aim of this framework section is to provide an understanding of the complex issues faced by knowledge and learning work in development organisations. These issues are used to provide a structure and for the next section of the paper, as well as to point to an emerging analytical framework.
- *Section 3: Findings from Organisational Profiles* presents a synthesis of the findings from the research undertaken in the organisations covered. Structured with reference to the key issues emerging from the framework section, this synthesis will show how the core dimensions identified in the literature are represented, articulated and resolved (or not) in a variety of real-life situations.
- *Section 4: Conclusions and Recommendations* will bring together these sections of the paper in an attempt to provide a critical overview of the effectiveness of knowledge and learning initiatives. It is hoped that the analytical progression from the available research and literature through organisational policies onto actual practices will help shed light on knowledge and learning work within development organisations, and also to show how and in what ways such work has proved useful within the study organisations. The Recommendations will be structured to enable their consideration in systematic approaches to developing, improving and evaluating knowledge strategies.
- *Appendix* contains profiles of the knowledge and learning work undertaken in the organisations covered in the study. These were developed using the findings which informed the main body of the working paper, and through consultation with participating organisations. These case studies comprise descriptions of the knowledge and learning strategies *at the time of research*. This last point is emphasised because of the rapid pace of change in this area of institutional development. Lists of activities, as at time of writing, are also provided for those study organisations that disclosed this information. The case studies were made available to participants and representatives of each organisation participating in the study for approval, with many useful comments and perspectives forthcoming, thus further deepening understanding and analysis.

# 2 Knowledge and Learning: From Policy to Practice

## 2.1 A conceptual model of knowledge strategies[2]

For the purposes of this study, knowledge and learning activities are viewed as those activities that form the processes by which individuals, teams, organisations and groups of organisations become skilled at creating, sharing, storing and using knowledge in order to achieve positive change and realise their goals. More specifically:

- *The creation of knowledge* comprises activities associated with the entry of new knowledge into the organisational system. It includes all the transformations suggested by the 'data to information to knowledge to wisdom' frameworks, models of knowledge creation derived from the Knowledge Management (KM) literature (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) , as well as research work, participatory work, workshops, and so on.
- *Sharing knowledge* relates to the flow of knowledge from one party to another. This includes the diverse tools used for translation, conversion, filtering and two-way communication.
- *Storing knowledge* relates to the preservation of knowledge, allowing it to remain within the organisational system, and to those activities that help to maintain the viability of this system. These include intranets, search engines, content management systems (CMSs), electronic publishing systems, workflow systems, groupware, help desk applications, as well as more fundamental systems such as personal and group filing, project archiving, and so on.
- Finally, the *use of knowledge* relates to its application in organisational policy and practice. This involves taking and shaping decisions, making informed actions and modifying behaviours in order to achieve goals. In the case of all organisations, certain decisions, actions and behaviours have become embedded in the form of processes, procedures, rules, instructions and standards. It is perhaps one of the few truisms in this area that all such elements of organisational life were, at some point, specialist tacit knowledge or know-how, which was then converted to explicit forms in order to enable application by non-specialists. Also included in this category is the development of such tools as task performance measurement and coordination patterns, interaction guidelines and process specifications (ODI, 2003; ODI, 2004a; ODI, 2004b; US Knowledge Forum, 1999).

Various tools may be used to facilitate these knowledge activities, ranging from Information management (IM) systems through structured learning activities, to comprehensive M&E processes. To identify the most appropriate tools to use in a given situation or context, it can be useful to distinguish between three different types of knowledge:

- *Tacit knowledge* is unconscious and intuitive; it allows experts to make decisions without referring to rules or principles (e.g. knowing how to perform medical operations, knowing how to network at a conference);
- *Explicit knowledge* is clearly articulated and accessible to anyone who reads, hears or looks at it (e.g. a training guide on using a software package or the conclusions of a policy briefing paper);
- *Implicit knowledge* helps individuals know what is socially and culturally appropriate in a given circumstance; it is knowledge of shared beliefs, values and expectations (e.g. knowing that it is inappropriate to undermine colleagues in public, understanding management attitudes within a given organisation) (ODI, 2003; ODI, 2004a; ODI, 2004b).

[2] This section is draws heavily from a unpublished ODI paper (ODI, 2004a)

The different types of activities and the different forms of knowledge can be brought together in a simple, easy to understand format as shown in Figure 2 (ODI, 2004b, adapted from Nutley et al, 2003). Knowledge-based or learning-based strategies can then be defined as *the strategic application of knowledge and learning based processes and tools in order to meet organisational goals*. But these strategies are more than a framework relating to how organisations undertake such activities. Knowledge and learning also embodies a value system – an orientation of undertaking work that carries a democratic principle that all humans should be valued on their own terms, as should the knowledge they carry, and that all should be given the opportunity to realise their potential as an individual and as a member of a team or organisation (KIT website, 2004).

**Figure 2: Knowledge and Learning Tools (adapted from Nutley et al, 2003)**

| | | Knowledge | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | **Tacit** | **Explicit** | **Implicit** |
| **Purpose** | **Create** | **Research<br>Workshops<br>Challenge sessions** | **Business intelligence e.g. funding analysis** | **Statistical modelling<br>Reasoning tools** |
| | **Store** | **Capacity assessments<br>Exit IVs<br>Handovers** | **Shared Drives<br>Info Centre<br>Taxonomies<br>Databases** | **Space Mgmt<br>Workflow<br>M&E<br>Process Map** |
| | **Share** | **Mentoring<br>Coaching<br>Communities<br>Training** | **Intranet<br>Internet<br>Email<br>Publications<br>CD ROMs** | **AARs<br>Retrospects<br>Evaluations** |

The framework in Figure 2 is worth explaining briefly. The horizontal axis refers to the types of knowledge described earlier. The vertical axis refers to the knowledge process being considered. Reading across the framework enables identification of appropriate tools in a given context. This framework brings together diverse tools, from IM to learning. While this suggests a holistic and integrated approach to knowledge and learning, there is evidence of a tension between knowledge and learning at a practical level. For example, 'knowledge management' as a phrase can be taken to imply a set of pre-existing objective truths being dealt with through efficient managerial and administrative techniques. By contrast, 'Organisational Learning' (OL) is often taken to mean self-assessment and critical analysis (ODI, 2003). Closer examination, however, suggests that this dichotomy is a false one. For example, where learning already occurs on a small scale, the call is for more systematisation and improved process management, and where knowledge is already dealt with via systems and rigorous processes, there is a need for more flexible learning-based evaluation and assessment.[3]

Given knowledge and learning is a strategic initiative, it is also worth looking considering where organisations are in terms of progress towards their vision. Research on knowledge and learning in suggests that most organisations can be placed at distinct phases in the implementation of their KM / OL vision. These iterative phases are described in Box 1.

Institutional transformation to deal with the bewildering array of new opportunities and challenges encapsulated by knowledge and learning is now a norm of working life. The newly identified phenomenon of 'initiative overload' may attest to this (Abrahamson, 2003). Much of this transformative effort appears to be based on the application of value-based management principles to the idea of knowledge and learning (Por, 2000).

[3] Despite this intertwining, where the study organisations view the two strands as distinct, the study will highlight this.

**Box 1: Phases in Implementing Knowledge and Learning – A suggested 'knowledge roadmap'**

- *Phase 1: Pre-design phase*, comprising experimental pilot efforts, often ad-hoc in approach;
- *Phase 2: Strategic development phase*, in which the specific organisational approach to KM is developed in a structured fashion, and priorities are established;
- *Phase 3: Implementation phase*, when a variety of KM initiatives are rolled out in line with the strategic vision;
- *Phase 4: Alignment phase*, when refinements and adjustments to initiatives are made in accordance with the overall strategic vision.

(ODI, 2003; ODI, 2004a; ODI, 2004b)

Corporate knowledge strategies therefore have clear and consistent goals of maximising competitive advantage and cost efficiency, thereby improving profitability (Prusak and Davenport, 2000). This suggests that different types of organisations, operating in different environments with different goals, may have quiet different approaches to knowledge and learning activities. Specifically, what of those organisations that face 'perhaps the most complex and ill-defined questions confronting humankind' (Ellerman, in Roper and Pettit (eds), 2002: 289), namely development aid agencies? Before moving on to look at the literature on this subject, it is worth summarising in brief where the recent focus on knowledge and learning has in fact come from.

## 2.2 Knowledge economies – a primer

The rapid growth in the application of knowledge and learning strategies and activities as an explicit set of organisational practices has been driven by a number of macro-level changes – shifts that can be broadly summed up as growth of the 'knowledge economy'. A European Union (EU)-funded report (European KM Forum, 2002) has summarised the most significant drivers of this growth as follows:

- Digitisation: changes driven by the growth of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs);
- Knowledge intensity: the rising importance of knowledge for economic activity and for the workforce, resulting in 'knowledge workers' taking on greater prominence within organisations;
- Connectivity: the increased importance of networks and network relationships for production and policy processes;
- Globalisation: with the stepping up of technology, there has been a concurrent expansion of the concept of a global system, driven by global capital flows, global supply chains for resources and labour, and, in particular, global markets for information;
- Dematerialisation: an increasing move towards services as well as products, and a growing awareness of the consequences of material consumption;
- Ideas-driven growth: increasing importance on ideas and innovation for progress and development;
- Social fabric: there is a need for increased socialisation within and across organisations, as a means of capturing attention in the complexity of a highly networked information-heavy world.

The changes above have resulted in knowledge and learning taking on a central role within effective managerial approaches to planning, organising, structuring and undertaking activities within organisations (ODI, 2004). Knowledge is at the heart of the modern vision of economies, organisations and workers. Knowledge strategies have been developed for entire nations –

for instance, the 2001 New Zealand Talent Initiative Strategy, which places the effective retention and management of knowledge workers as central to the overall competitiveness and well-being of the nation (L.E.K. Consulting, 2001). That the approach is becoming conventional wisdom within the modern policy environment is exemplified in the following statement by the UK Prime Minister, typical of many such statements made by senior politicians in recent years:

> '...I consider the question of how we harness technological change, alongside the related question of science, to be a fundamental economic and social challenge of our future. The fundamental challenge is to create a knowledge-driven economy that serves our long term goals of first-class public services and economic prosperity for all...' (Tony Blair, in speech, 2002)

It is not merely developed countries that have taken on the knowledge paradigm The United Nations (UN) Millennium Declaration describes at length the transformation of all its Member States from energy-based economies with traditional factors of production to information-based economies with knowledge assets and intellectual capital. Furthermore, this shift was seen as a strong underlying rationale for development cooperation to encompass social, cultural and human development as well as the more traditional focus on economic growth (Malhotra, 2003). How then, have development agencies adopted the principles of knowledge and learning?

## 2.3 Knowledge for development: background

Despite the growth of the knowledge economy as described above, the awareness of the central role of knowledge in economic and social development is far from new. The initiation of the age of development itself has been linked by many thinkers (Sachs, 1989; Rist, 1997; King and McGrath, 2004, among many others) to Point Four in the inaugural speech of United States President Truman in 1948. Because of its clear focus on the transfer and utilisation of knowledge, the text of the speech is worth reproducing here:

> '...Fourth, we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and the skill to relieve the suffering of these people... The United States is pre-eminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques. The material resources which we can afford to use for the assistance of other peoples are limited. *But our imponderable resources in technical knowledge are constantly growing and are inexhaustible. I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life...'* (Truman, in speech, 1949, emphasis added)

But this transfer was also increasingly recognised as being far from simple a process. As it was put in an American Economic Review lecture in 1966:

> 'The recognition that development is essentially a knowledge process has been slowly penetrating the minds of economists, but [they] are still too much obsessed by mechanical models…to the neglect of the study of the learning process which is the real key to development.' (Boulding, 1966)

Such 'mechanical models' of knowledge have informed much of development theory, in the form of modernisation theory and its variants, and development practice, through for example, technical assistance. However, knowledge and learning was brought high on the development aid agenda in 1996, in the inaugural speech of the incoming President of the World Bank. Before 175

international Finance Ministers, James Wolfensohn – a former investment banker – made the following announcement:

> 'The Bank Group's relationships with governments and institutions all over the world and our unique reservoir of development experience across sectors and countries position us to play a leading role in a new knowledge partnership... To capture this potential we need to invest in the necessary systems that will enhance our ability to gather development information and experience and share it with our clients. We need to become, in effect, the "Knowledge Bank".' (Wolfensohn, 1996)

There is some evidence to suggest that the motivation for this strategic shift was not simply the stated vision of improving effectiveness (King and McGrath, 2004). At the time, the Bank was facing increasing criticism for its practices, and the knowledge programme was a key response to this.[4] It is worth noting that the development-specific rationale for the shift was to come later, in the 1998 World Development Report, *Knowledge for Development*, which stated that:

> 'For countries in the vanguard of the world economy, the balance between knowledge and resources has shifted so far towards the former that knowledge has become the most important factor determining the standard of living – more than land, than tools, than labor.' (World Bank, 1998)

Since the publication of *Knowledge for Development* there has been a rapidly increasing emphasis on the knowledge and learning, leading to a renewed attention on both development processes and development organisations as essentially 'knowledge-based'. This has led to the widespread adoption of knowledge-based strategies amongst the plethora of agencies within the development sector, including donor agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), research institutes, and institutes based in the South (King and McGrath, 2002). There is now an increasing appreciation, in development organisations of all sizes, of the value of knowledge and learning practices in terms of enabling timely access to institutional knowledge (Creech and Willard, 2001).

The trend through which the knowledge and learning approach has seen its apotheosis in development agencies has been variously termed 'knowledge for development', 'knowledge-based aid', 'KS' or 'OL'. The specific practices advocated cover all of those outlined in the conceptual model articulated in section 2.1 focusing on better knowledge and learning within given organisations. The movement also includes, however, a set of practices geared around the notion of sharing knowledge with Southern counterparts and the poor, and a further set which addresses knowledge economies in the South and attempts to overcome issues of the 'digital divide' (World Bank, 1998).

In each of these sets of activities, then, the movement appears to have either resonated with, commandeered, re-written, underwritten, and in some cases, improved the older and more established practices within development aid (King and McGrath, 2004; Roper and Pettit, 2002). These practices include, but are not restricted to: participatory development, capacity building, M&E, and change management. Interestingly, the knowledge management agenda, even in its most corporate forms, has been described as pre-empted in the work of development practitioners such as Paolo Friere and Robert (Roper and Pettit, 2002). Given, however, the corporate sector drive for profits and competitive advantage (the recent move to include social responsibility notwithstanding), the 'knowledge for development' faces a distinct, perhaps more complex, set of challenges.

[4] Nor was the Bank the only organisation to be facing such issues – see, for example, *Elusive Development* (Wolfe, 1996) for a study of the issues facing the UN body at the turn of the Millennium.

## 2.4 Knowledge for development: key comparative texts

To date, several studies have attempted to look at how the knowledge approach has come to grips with the complexity of development cooperation. These studies are characterised by their holistic approach, and their attempt to draw conclusions from a range of different organisations. These studies are worth looking at here, starting with the RAPID literature review mentioned previously (Hovland, 2003a).

Hovland (2003a) characterises aspects of knowledge and learning as they have been applied in four types of organisations.

- First, NGOs are seen as linking knowledge and learning to M&E work, and focusing strongly on internal knowledge issues, often at the expense of enhancing Southern knowledge. There is also a widespread tension as regards learning between the head-office and field levels.
- Second, bilateral and multilateral donors are viewed as using knowledge programmes to improve internal networks of communications and co-ordination, with the level of ambition of the programmes varying widely.
- Third, institutes in the South are considered in terms of the complex principles that shape organisations: there is a need for greater understanding of how leadership, co-operation, information sharing and monitoring may vary across cultures, and of the impact these elements have on knowledge and learning practices. Technological linkages across and within organisations are also a key issue, in terms of infrastructure, capacities and robustness.
- Finally, research institutes and think-tanks are seen as having the potential to input into all levels of the policy process. They may strengthen research capacity by using a variety of knowledge tools, such as learning centres. And they may enable greater engagement with policy-makers in a co-ordinated and deliberate manner via, for example, targeted dissemination, workshops and policy briefings.

In summary, Hovland identifies a list of research gaps in the literature (see Box 2). These gaps relate to further research that is required to make explicit how knowledge and learning may help achieve key goals of development work (Hovland, 2003a). As such, these points may be seen as implicitly highlighting the complexity of development goals in comparison to those in the corporate sector.

**Box 2: Key 'What Can?' questions for knowledge and learning in development**

**What can knowledge and learning work be applied to?**

1. Connect different types of institutional knowledge within the same organisation?
2. Connect institutional knowledge and policy-making processes?
3. Improve Southern and Northern development organisations' impact on policy?
4. Connect development policy with implementation of programmes and projects?
5. Increase the ability of institutions to translate policy into institutional practice?
6. Increase the ability of institutions to take practice into account in their policy models?
7. Connect Southern institutions with Northern institutions/processes?
8. Contribute to increased Southern engagement in international development debates?
9. Increase the responsiveness of institutional processes to the situation of 'beneficiaries'?
10. Connect the voice of the poor with the institutional knowledge of development / civil society organisations?

*Source*: Adapted from Hovland (2003a)

### *King and McGrath, 2004*

A case study-based investigation assesses knowledge-based aid[5] as it is practiced by four major donor agencies: UK Department for International Development (DFID), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and the World Bank. It sees knowledge-based aid as being part of a broad set of policies which unfortunately emphasise efficiency and effectiveness of agencies too strongly. The internal focus of the approach may hinder the knowledge vision from being realised in a widespread or systematic manner. Furthermore, when knowledge work is externally focused, it is too often driven by principles of one-way transfer of knowledge, rather than a mutual learning approach based on the autonomy of recipients (King and McGrath, 2004).

### *ALNAP, 2002*

This conclusion is supported by the 2002 ALNAP Annual Review, which looks at knowledge and learning practices within the humanitarian sector. The paper identifies a range of strengths and weaknesses, most of which were related to issues of structure and funding. Attention is also given to the emotional difficulties of confronting the need to learn, especially difficult in humanitarian aid, where accepting responsibility for a mistake also means taking responsibility for failing to save human lives. Short term funding (leading to high staff turnover), low overheads and competitive behaviour between agencies were seen as barriers to learning across the sector as a whole. Comparisons to other sectors were largely unfavourable, with the military, the UK National Health Service (NHS), and the UK construction industry all showing better performance in the area of learning. The review concludes with a set of suggested action points for change at the organisational and sectoral level. Given the recent critiques faced by humanitarian agencies of their operations and decision-making processes, the ALNAP recommendations have a clear focus on the internal efficiencies of the organisations involved, and they are written in the broader context of heightening accountability (ALNAP, 2002).

### *Cummings, 2003*

The relationships underlying KS are analysed more closely in a literature review backing up the 2003 Operations Evaluation Department for the World Bank (OED) Evaluation of the knowledge programme at the World Bank. Five key elements are identified as impacting the World Bank's ability to share knowledge, namely: the relationship between the source and the recipient; the form and location of the knowledge; the recipient's learning predisposition; the source's knowledge-sharing capability; and the broader environment in which the sharing occurs. Both internal and external KS is seen as needing to account for these elements, and with external sharing in particular, there are multiple factors that can impede, complicate and harm learning (Cummings, 2003).

### *Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Lessons Papers, 2004*

A series of 2004 studies by IDS uses three case studies of specific learning activities within DFID, Sida and Action Aid, and puts forward the idea that OL[6] is crucial for improved performance, and that the ultimate goal of OL in the development context is to re-think basic organisational principles and values of the development project itself (Pasteur, 2004). This proposed expansion of the scope

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[5] Knowledge-based aid covers three strategically coherent strands of work. The first of these focuses on improving agency efficiency and effectiveness through knowledge strategies for 'connection' (CoPs, on-the-job learning, mentoring, job rotations, etc) and 'collection' (shared drives, intranets, databases, etc). The second strand aims for better sharing of knowledge with the South through partnerships, research collaborations, networks, training, mentoring and shared information systems. The third aims to build knowledge capacities in the South through investment in education, technical co-operation and capacity development, indigenous knowledge programs, ICT infrastructure and promotion of the knowledge economy.

[6] Learning is framed here as distinct from knowledge management, but it is worth noting that the two literatures are increasingly intertwined, and indeed, the conclusions reached by Pasteur et al resonate with those found in many KM studies (for example, Prusak and Davenport, 2000) ; viz.: that learning / knowledge work requires rethinking of processes, methods, attitudes, relationships, personal behaviours and institutional norms, and as such is about more than information flows – it is also about reflection, analysis and behaviour change.

of knowledge and learning work may be seen as adding to the complexity faced by knowledge and learning approaches in development. To state the position simply, knowledge and learning work is seen as key to addressing issues of aid efficiency and effectiveness as well as aid justification and re-alignment. This approach, which calls for an integration of tactical and strategic reforms of international development system, may be seen as pointing out yet another level of complexity: that of demonstrating increased effectiveness in the short term while re-defining the development paradigm in the long term.

The two final studies take a broadly similar approach to the subject matter. Both focus on OL, and are broad collections of articles or case studies regarding the role of learning in development. The detailed cases in both collections are worth exploring in depth – it is the key emerging points that are of particular importance here.

### *Roper and Pettit (eds), 2002*

The first is a Development Practice double issue made up of contributions from scholars and practitioners from a range of institutional backgrounds around the world. Showcasing an impressive array of studies, the analysis is firmly grounded in a practical appreciation of the nature of development and humanitarian work. Five key themes are dealt with across the case studies. First – the broader dynamics of learning as they relate to issues such as power, gender, and culture; second – learning in partnership and collaborations between North and South; third – the multiple levels of learning within an organisation; fourth – learning in humanitarian work; and finally – tools and methods. A key conclusion is that the knowledge initiatives looked at are all at a relatively early stage. More time and further studies are advocated to allow for and assess the kinds of changes promised in the knowledge and learning agenda (Roper and Pettit (eds.), 2002).

### *Carlsson and Wohlgemuth (eds), 1999*

The study, produced by the Sweden Expert Group on Development Issues (EGDI), takes a rare perspective on learning in development that is grounded in the idea of the delivery of aid effectiveness, rather than in the knowledge strategies of particular organisations. Learning is seen as problematic enough in even the most simplified model of aid, where there are only two actors, a donor and a beneficiary. When the realities of multiple actors and interests are brought in, the notion of systematic learning appears almost unfeasibly complicated. These complications have obvious effects on the systematic analysis of the area of learning. The five key issues obstructing system-wide learning (and therefore, its detailed analysis) are as follows: political constraints; the unequal nature of aid relations; problems internal to the organisation of the aid agencies; organisations and capacities on the recipient side; and the sources and quality of knowledge. Different types of learning are identified – learning through communication (which relates to explicit knowledge) or learning by involvement (which relates to tacit knowledge) – both of which are seen to have different cost implications. Ultimately, these costs need to be balanced within any given setting. Despite these deep issues, the overall conclusion is that learning is possible, and often takes place, although not to the extent that is desirable (Carlsson and Wohlgemuth (eds), 1999).

It is also worth mentioning again, in the context of these studies, those areas of aid work that may be seen to have pre-empted, and even shaped the knowledge and learning movement. Some of the ongoing elements of aid work include: participation, sustainable livelihoods, capacity building, technical assistance, organisational development, evaluation, and mutual learning. There are three recent studies worth noting for their explicit attempt to forge links between one or more of these aspects of development work and the knowledge agenda. The first, an ODI study on ICTs for sustainable livelihoods (Chapman and Slaymaker, 2002), deftly shows how the knowledge approach can be incorporated throughout the aid process, from the multilaterals to the community based organisations. The second is a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) study (Fukudo-Parr, Lopez and Malik, 2002) that suggests a new paradigm of capacity development –

a knowledge-based revisiting which proposes the knowledge 'export' process be adapted to allow mutual knowledge construction. Thirdly, there are several studies from the IDS programme for OL, already mentioned above, in which the participatory approach is incorporated into an overall vision for OL (David and Mancini, 2004; Eyben, 2004; Pasteur, 2004; Pasteur and Villiers, 2004).

## 2.5 Summary: key issues

There are clearly many questions that need answering around the use of knowledge and learning in the development sector, and multiple levels and lines of analysis that could be followed. Overall, it is clear that the analysis of knowledge strategies in development organisations needs to be understood in the context of 'knowledge-based aid' – which suggests firstly that development agencies develop knowledge strategies for dealing with IM and OL; secondly that partnership mechanisms are developed for the transfer of knowledge and learning to the South; and thirdly that work is undertaken to build Southern capacity to absorb, apply and provide knowledge. The issues of relevance for this study relate to the first part of this model – knowledge strategies in development agencies. Overall it is clear that the process of developing knowledge-based strategies for development organisations clearly needs more than a 'drag-and-drop' from the methods adopted in the private sector. A DFID-sponsored study on knowledge transfer (DFID, 2000b) highlights the disparity in knowledge strengths and needs of different actors within the sector, from community-based organisations to multilaterals, and highlights the need for effective knowledge brokerage between these diverse actors. This highlights a central issue: unlike in the corporate sector, where knowledge and learning might focus on internal organisational efficiencies and increased *competitiveness*, in the development sector there is more need to look at the role of knowledge practices in the overall context of development, and the role they play in improved *cooperation* and coordination.

To summarise, then, the key issues that emerge from the previous synthesis, and that will be addressed in this paper, are as follows:

1. How is knowledge and learning understood within each organisation? What forms and types of knowledge are accounted for in knowledge and learning strategies? How is knowledge created, shared, stored and used? What means exist for assessing the use or otherwise of knowledge and learning? What impact do these factors have on knowledge and learning strategies?
2. How are knowledge and learning strategies incorporated within the existing structures of the organisation? How does learning work across different levels (e.g. policy-makers vs 'trenchworkers'; individual learning, team-based learning, etc), programme areas (e.g. healthcare vs economic development), and locations (head office vs field level, North vs South)?
3. How do knowledge and learning strategies link to core activities and functions? How is knowledge and learning work aligned and integrated with the existing learning-focused functions (e.g. participation, capacity development) in development organisations?
4. How do knowledge and learning strategies link with existing support functions (e.g. IT, IM, Evaluations, Human Resources (HR))?
5. How do technological and physical architectures and infrastructures support knowledge and learning strategies?
6. What are the issues of governance – leadership, management, financing, process and procedures – that impact upon the effectiveness of knowledge and learning strategies?
7. How does the organisation measure the costs and benefits of learning or of not learning?

How have systems of monitoring and evaluating been used to map these costs?

8. How does the knowledge programme address the external aspects of knowledge and learning strategies (e.g. relationships with Northern and Southern institutes, advocacy work, and relations with beneficiaries)?

These eight issues can be usefully mapped onto the framework used by the RAPID team to analyse and compare processes of change in a holistic manner (see Figure 1, page 1). While the RAPID framework is usually applied to assess the relative contribution of research to policy change, its grounding in diverse fields (from economics through anthropology and management theory to epidemiology) strengthens its potential application in a wide range of situations and contexts (Crewe and Young, 2002). This application is further strengthened by the findings of the UK Economic Social Research Council (ESRC) Evidence Network, which suggests that evidence-based policy making is in fact a form of knowledge management (Nutley, Davies and Walter, 2003). Although not used in the research process, a version of the RAPID model proved particularly appropriate for use in the current study, in synthesising the findings and structuring the emerging recommendations.

Since knowledge and learning strategies focus on both change and the use of knowledge, a version of this framework should prove ideal for use in assessing knowledge and learning strategies. In the context of organisational knowledge strategies, then, the model would bring together the eight key issues as referred to earlier.

**Box 3: An Emerging Framework for looking at knowledge and learning, from organisational policy to organisational practice**

- *Organisational knowledge*: How is knowledge and learning understood and applied within each organisation?
- *Organisational links*: How does knowledge and learning link to structures, functions, core activities and supporting activities a given organisation?
- *Organisational context*: How do issues of institutional governance, politics and economics support or hinder the knowledge strategy?
- *External factors*: How does knowledge and learning work across the boundaries of the organisation, notably with beneficiaries, partners (Southern and Northern), donors and fieldworkers?

As with the RAPID framework from which it is derived, these dimensions should be seen as overlapping. Further, the extent to which the approaches and attitudes towards the dimensions operate in tandem within a given knowledge and learning initiative might highlight the conditions for the implementation of knowledge and learning strategies, as well as the likelihood of success of such strategies. The findings of the study will therefore be a useful way to test, probe and assess, this framework. This framework will be used to structure the *Findings from Organisational Profiles* section of this paper, and will be revisited in the *Conclusions and Recommendations* section.

# 3 Findings from Organisational Profiles

The 13 organisations covered in this review include one multilateral, four bilateral donors, six international NGOs, and two research-based organisations (see the Appendix for a list of the organisations and brief profiles of their knowledge and learning work). The organisations are all headquartered in developed countries, and the majority have multiple offices in countries in the South. All the organisations looked at include knowledge and learning in some way as part of their key mission statement and objectives. It is central to core activities for some organisations, but is secondary for others. Resources allocated to knowledge and learning work range from millions of dollars annually, to approximately half a full time employee dedicated to knowledge and learning work (as in one of the NGOs). Given the range and selection of organisations, these are hoped to be an illustrative sample of knowledge and learning strategies, rather than an exhaustive one.

The set of eight key questions listed in the previous section provide a useful framework for the investigation into knowledge and learning in the organisations. Each of these issues is therefore addressed in turn.

## 3.1 Issue One: how is knowledge and learning understood and applied?

**Box 4: Definition and understanding of knowledge and learning work**

In sum:

- There is a tendency to recognise internal, 'value-generating', forms of knowledge (i.e. the expertise that enables organisations to achieve their goals).
- Most, if not all, organisations see knowledge as an asset, and learning as a practice that contributes to the use and expansion of this asset.
- The widespread and tangible outputs of knowledge and learning work tend, thus far, to be based on improved information systems, rather than improved processes or changed behaviours.
- Organisations which focus the larger part of their knowledge and learning efforts on the human dimensions were in the clear minority.
- The organisational changes called for in knowledge and learning strategies have not in general been facilitated with a systematic, evidence-based approach. Instead, knowledge and learning is dealt with as a menu or toolbox – one which is available for application by staff, but which is more supply-led than demand-driven.
- Although all the organisations place great value in informal sharing and learning activities, these were not generally seen to be within the remit of the organisation's knowledge strategies.

Amongst the organisations reviewed, there was a tendency to recognise 'value-generating' types of knowledge (i.e. the expertise that enables organisations to achieve its goals). This was seen as the focus of knowledge and learning work. However, few of the organisations appear to have developed a clear and systematic taxonomy of the different forms and types of knowledge – or, at least, they have not clearly communicated such taxonomy to the organisation-at-large, still less have such taxonomies been used to re-organise and simplify information repositories. The clear exception is those organisations where the approach has been implemented at the start of the rollout of the repository in question.

All organisations defined knowledge and learning within the context of their broader policies relating to information, knowledge and learning. These policies have two key elements in common.

- First, most if not all organisations see knowledge as an *asset*, and learning as a *practice*. The use or application of this asset and practice may be maximised through managerial practices. In addition to this, some policies and informants mentioned the process of *creation* of knowledge (usually by reference to the 'ideal' hierarchy of data, information, knowledge and wisdom).
- Secondly, there is an overall tendency to point to information systems as the 'end product' rather than specific processes for knowledge and learning. This tendency prevails despite the strongly held view that information is only a part of the overall knowledge and learning picture.

At the time of writing, three of the organisations studied focus the *larger part* of their efforts on the human dimensions of knowledge and learning. In two of these organisations, there was a hint that this strong focus on human dimensions may be at the detriment of systems-based approaches. However, this latter point may be changing with time. Other organisations have emphasised explicit KS based on technologies. The technologies are complemented by other, less widespread, learning-focused initiatives. In the one of the two research-based organisations looked at, there is a clear systems focus to knowledge and learning, a focus which is central to its role as an information broker. The other saw knowledge and learning as a fundamental strategic orientation, and a way of doing work.

Organisational and cultural issues were seen to be at the heart of the initiatives across the organisation, determining its success or failure. However, in practice, knowledge and learning is dealt with as a menu or toolbox – one which is available for application, but is generally perceived as supply-led rather than demand-driven. Notably, all the organisations saw value in informal sharing, specifically in the small acts of sharing that happen informally and randomly on a daily basis. While generally held to be the heart of organisational KS, there was no clear sense that such activities were actively promoted by, or within the remit of, organisational knowledge strategies.

Most of the organisations state that they are using knowledge and learning strategies in order to make their work more efficient and effective. It is not clear how such efficiency-based approaches are coherent with goals of KS and learning, especially when it comes to tacit forms of learning and the need to build in redundancy – time which is written-off – to maximise such learning.

## 3.2 Issue Two: how does knowledge interface with the existing structure of the organisations?

**Box 5: The interface between knowledge and organisational structure**

In sum:

- Many of the organisations have undergone recent re-organisations. This has frequently been done by super-imposing a set of overall goals across the different forms of internal expertise.
- Cross-matrix sharing is sometimes seen to be the focus of senior management meetings, held once or twice a year. How this 'trickles down' into closer operational sharing between units was generally varied.
- Continual demands for information from 'the field' by head office create a tension that makes learning difficult in many of the organisations concerned.
- In the organisations that identify some increase in the use of trip reports, Communities of Practice (CoPs), and internal staff exchange programmes, there is a clear sense that the learning environment is improving.

It is important to note that a wide range of organisations are addressed in this study, covering many different structural forms. Despite this variety, however, it is not clear that any of the organisations have developed a structure which effectively promotes knowledge and learning, with this shortfall being more pronounced in the larger organisations. This may directly related to issues of scale, giving rise to the specific question of the effectiveness of learning in large multilaterals and donor agencies. Only one multilateral was looked at in this study, and comparative studies are minimal.

It is also worth noting that many of the organisations reviewed have undergone recent re-structuring processes.[7] The rationale behind this included the removal of silos, improving the operational and functional focus, and emphasising core competencies. Frequently, the re-organisation consisted of super-imposing an overall set of *goals* across the different forms of internal *expertise*, leading to a variety of matrix structures. This kind of structural re-engineering demonstrates the knowledge and learning agenda as it plays out at the highest level of organisations. Restructuring efforts are generally not perceived to be participatory or inclusive manner – perhaps not surprising given their impacts on headcount. In common with restructuring efforts in other environments, the results do not always pan out as intended. In several of the organisations reviewed, cross-matrix KS was presented as the explicit focus of global or regional senior management meetings, generally held once or twice a year. Via such platforms, those in charge of thematic or geographic areas meet to discuss key common issues and share experiences. However, the 'trickle down' into closer sharing between operational units was varied. The mechanisms for knowledge and learning in these new 'matrix' organisational frameworks were not always seen to be clearly defined and promoted, nor was there felt to be sufficient clarity on how the new structures might provide alternatives to replace forms of knowledge exchange which predated the reorganisations. Where these challenges of KS had been resolved, it was generally through an allocation of resources to support the operational demands of the new knowledge vision – for example, through dedicated knowledge networks or staff exchange programmes. No matter how these issues had been resolved, however, participants generally felt that the full benefits of the matrix restructuring would not be seen in the short term.

Despite these changes in symbolic structures, all of the organisations retain the very real and tangible issues of a decentralised, globally distributed structure. For many of the organisations, the connections between the field and head office level presented a major and enduring challenge. Despite sustained efforts to establish and maintain common processes and reporting systems to ensure continuing information flows, these were generally not seen to be aligned with the complex needs of evolving organisations. Frequent bureaucratic demands are placed on field-offices, often driven by financial reporting requirements from head office. Internal tensions can be compounded by the fact that even these resource-heavy reporting efforts might not be sufficient to meet the diverse needs of head offices. Continual demands for information can create a tension and distrust that makes learning difficult in many of the organisations concerned. Learning was also seen as problematic because of the difficulty associated with fostering a critical self-analytical approach. Admitting mistakes may threaten job security and conflict with both strongly held value systems low levels of internal transparency. Only one organisation has dealt with this directly, with the use of a frequently reiterated motto, focused on pushing such fears and concern out of the work environment. Evidence from across the case organisations suggests that while this is not unique to Southern contexts, there is certainly a possibility that barriers to learning may be exacerbated in more resource-pressured contexts.

Few of the organisations appear to have directly addressed these issues with *widespread and systematic application* of explicit or tacit KS tools. A common electronic infrastructure was seen as key, but for many organisations, the associated cost implications made this unlikely in the short term. However, even where such infrastructure was in place, cultural barriers and time differences

[7] For instance, five of the seven NGOs looked at have recently undergone business reviews.

have meant the KS vision is only partially realised. Few if any of the organisations appear to have developed mechanisms to overcome this last crucial aspect of KS.

The next aspect of organisational structure relates to the different levels at which learning takes place. Specifically, learning is variously located at the levels of the individual, groups and the overall organisation. However, the links between these levels of learning are not clearly understood. For example, certain activities, such as electronic discussions do on occasion lead to organisation-wide dialogue and debate, but there is little sense of how this helps shape overall organisational policies or practices. Additionally, how the learning of individuals (through training, or on the job learning) is aggregated up at the level of groups and the overall organisation is not systematically understood in any of the study agencies.

One of the case study organisations has incorporated participatory learning at the strategic level through 'away days', where staff members collectively develop their organisational vision and look at the means of implementation. Apart from this, the involvement of different types of staff members in strategic planning processes has been uncertain, a point which relates to the earlier lack of transparency and participation in reorganisations.

In day-to-day work, learning across the different levels of the organisation was linked to monitoring, evaluation and reporting functions. For example, in one organisation, a new impact assessment initiative uses evaluations to bring together different groups and teams within the organisation in a global CoP that works towards continuous improvements in working practices. Incorporating learning into reporting requirements is certainly one way of linking together diverse organisational elements, and aggregating these experiences. However, there is little evidence yet of cases where learning in such contexts can transcend the bureaucratically-driven communication processes that are common to M&E frameworks. Much OL appears in practice to be based on such bureaucratic principles and driven by one-way communications approaches, rather than on the facilitation of improved personal interactions based on mutual learning. However, there was a clear sense that the learning environment was improving in those organisations that have seen an increase in the use of tools such as trip reports, CoPs, internal staff exchange programmes and after action reviews (AARs). Overall, the difficulty of uniting diverse parts of an organisation's structure is a key issue faced within all of the knowledge strategies looked at here, and this doesn't look likely to change in the near future.

These issues play out continuously in CoPs – internal knowledge networks that are increasingly being applied to forge learning and knowledge connections across the organisation. The lessons learned from the rollout of CoPs appear to be that relationships should generally pre-empt the network to lead to effective learning and KS. While face-to-face contact is the ideal way to create such a relationship, the success of thematic and action-oriented networks suggests that disciplinary or operational common ground may also facilitate connections between people. Generally, such communities were more prevalent in the bilateral and multilateral organisation, although they are increasingly recognised as important within NGOs. This was perhaps because of the resource implications to make such CoPs effective – which include dedicated support staff, helpdesks and so on. How these CoPs relate to and learn from informal networks, especially those that span institutional boundaries, was not well understood, and is in need of more detailed investigation.

## 3.3 Issue Three: how do knowledge activities link to existing core functions of the organisation?

**Box 6: Interface between knowledge activities and core activities**

In sum:

- In general, there is a sense that knowledge and learning work are useful when and where they have been applied. However, there is an equally strong sense in all of the study organisations that such efforts are made on an ad hoc and opportunistic basis, rather than in a systematic and widespread way.
- It is particularly hard to assess whether knowledge and learning strategies, in and of themselves, lead to successful projects. It seems likely that effective knowledge and learning work be separated from effective management and leadership.
- The take-up of KM and learning tools may have as much to do with the personal relationships between knowledge/learning staff and other staff, than the rationale of the tools themselves. A few interviewees referred to the personality differences between knowledge and learning staff members, who veer towards theorist/reflector mode, and core staff, who tend to be more activist/pragmatist.
- In a number of the study organisations the knowledge and learning approach is seen as being in conflict with ongoing core processes and organisational cultures. Paradoxically, however, objective evaluation studies carried out on one of the most advanced strategies in the sector recommend that knowledge and learning work needs to be tied more closely to the organisation's core operations.
- On the whole, there may be a sense among non-KM staff members across the organisations that KM is a 'solution looking for a problem'.

Data from the study organisations show that knowledge and learning approaches have been applied in a number of practical ways, and have proved useful where they were applied. However, such positive results were generally due to ad hoc and opportunistic efforts. Most examples were based on a single notable case – say, of a particular approach being usefully applied – for example, an effective large scale AAR, or one particularly effective KS network. There were also examples given of particular teams or groups that appeared to have taken up the approach in a systematic manner – although detailed information about such groups was generally not available. Here a paradox is apparent. Generally, those groups that had adopted such practices were perceived to be successful in their particular area of action. However, the reasons for not applying the approach across the board often included statements about the unequal distribution of resource advantages, summarised by comments such as 'they say they just can't afford to do it'. Conversely, the successful groups may hold exactly the opposite view: they cannot afford *not* to do it. This begs the further question of whether or not knowledge and learning was a direct *cause* of success, and whether it can, of itself, be regarded as a source of wide ranging benefits. It is likely that good knowledge and learning work cannot be separated from good management and leadership, and is a necessary, but not sufficient element in effective projects.

As already mentioned, knowledge activities were ubiquitously seen as a support service. Unlike other such services, however, their application appears to be shaped as much by supply-push as by demand-pull. Overall, there is a difficulty in clearly understanding knowledge and learning needs of staff members, given the complexity and constantly evolving nature of these needs. This may be seen to lead to a disparity – between formal knowledge strategies on the one hand, and informal KS practices that appear go on regardless. Where the formal tools have been applied, their take-up may have as much to do with personal relationships between learning staff and other staff, as with the

rationale of the tool itself. Indeed, the need for effective relationships and closer links with core staff was a key area touched upon by most participants. Two interviewees specifically mentioned the personality differences between knowledge and learning staff, who are perceived to veer towards theoretical-reflective modes of learning, and core staff, who are perceived to be more activist-pragmatic in their approach. There was also a concern raised that because knowledge and learning staff had to wear multiple hats, they tended to be jack-of-all-trades and masters of none.

Both the idea of knowledge and learning as a support service, and the notion of diverging personality types are grounded in a wider issue that shapes the links between knowledge and learning and core activities: that of legitimacy. As the participants put it, with almost unfailing bluntness and honesty, knowledge and learning work on the whole lacks widespread acceptance and validity in the face of contrasting organisational cultures and processes. The intractable nature of these issues is highlighted by the fact that even in those organisations where knowledge is central to the overall mission, systematic knowledge-based approaches are not widely accepted and applied. Moreover, in several organisations, the knowledge and learning agenda is in direct contrast to core processes. For example, across the donors examined, disbursement processes are seen as hard to 're-engineer' towards learning and knowledge goals, even in those agencies that may be seen as relatively open and democratic in their attitudes. At best, knowledge work has helped streamline and simplify the often complicated processes for disbursement, but there is little evidence of fundamental re-organisation based on knowledge and learning principles. This highlights the distinction between knowledge for tactical purposes (how can we do things right?) and knowledge for strategic purposes (what are the right things for us to do?).[8] A tentative conclusion may be that – in the organisations reviewed at least – knowledge and learning work is used more for tactical rather than for strategic purposes.

What of those organisations where knowledge and learning is seen as a core competency – viz.: research institutes and think-tanks? How is the vision of knowledge and learning articulated at the operational level? In one organisation looked at here, knowledge activities have the clear remit of reducing timeframes and fostering external relations, in order to move towards a programme-based approach built around shared challenges. Knowledge and learning principles have been used in order to re-think management processes of planning and evaluation. Meanwhile, in another organisation, the major challenge has been to get research staff to address common learning issues and to drop the 'go it alone' mentality. Despite the difficulties faced in both organisations, it is clear that there are elements of operational and research work in such organisations that may be usefully aligned with the knowledge-based approach.

The most common reason given by core staff members for not applying knowledge and learning tools is a lack of time to do so. However, this is seen to be something of a red herring in a number of organisations. It is not the lack of time, but rather, the underlying principles by which time is prioritised. It is worth noting that these principles are not always shaped by internal organisational dynamics; they may also be dictated by external pressures and demands. This difficulty is heightened by a cynicism amongst core staff members across almost all the organisations that knowledge and learning is tantamount to a 'solution looking for a problem'. A major challenge appears to be to convince the relevant parties that knowledge and learning practices are not a solution to anything specific per se, but a means and a process for improving what is already being done.

[8] This idea of strategic versus tactical knowledge provides an interesting context to the views that emerge from an evaluation of one of the covered initiatives. This evaluation recommends that knowledge and learning work needs to be tied more closely to the core operations. If this is implemented, it may rule out some aspects of strategically focused knowledge and learning work at the organisation in question.

In the organisation where the principles of connecting knowledge and learning practices to core operational work appear to be most clearly set out, this was less about systematic attempts to establish these linkages and points of synergy, and more attributable to organisational policy statements that were yet to find their way into changed practices.

## 3.4 Issue Four: how does knowledge and learning link with the existing support functions of the organisations?

**Box 7: Interface of knowledge and learning with organisations' support functions**

In sum:

- In development agencies, knowledge and learning strategies are normally located alongside IT, IM, HR, and evaluations. Some interviewees noted that this might diffuse rather than strengthen the knowledge and learning agenda.
- There was a frequently expressed link between knowledge, learning and monitoring and evaluation, which makes the clear lack of systematic M&E of the knowledge and learning practices themselves appear particularly stark. A frequent problem appears to be the difficulty faced in applying rigorous measures in evaluating the success or failure of KM programmes.
- While the donor organisations assessed here have tended to have significant resources at hand for individual learning, there seems to have been less attention for group or organisation-wide learning. By contrast, NGOs have far fewer resources for individual learning, Moreover, when these resources were available, their use was not always consistent, nor based on clear and transparent principles.
- Cross group learning was an obvious gap for most organisations, and how learning moves up from the individual to the group to the overall organisation is not systematically understood.
- The application of knowledge and learning principles as part of staff competency assessments were widely seen as key to foster cultural change – especially when the learning competencies of the most senior staff are included in such assessments.
- In general, systems cannot create relationships within organisations where some form of relationship does not already exist. Face to face contact is the ideal way to create such relationships.
- It was hard to escape the sense that, once the rhetoric is stripped away, knowledge and learning is yet another voice clamouring for change in the 'thought-world' of the organisations covered, with, as yet, insufficient linkages forged with the core operations.

Knowledge work was frequently described as a support function, and as such, it sits alongside and draws from the other business support functions that are found in development organisations (and indeed, any organisation). These functions included IT, IM, HR, evaluations and communications, among others. The knowledge agenda is shaped by all of these, and several participants noted that this may serve to diffuse rather than strengthen the knowledge and learning agenda. At the time of writing, and in most of the organisations covered, the whole of knowledge and learning appears to be somewhat less than the sum of all these parts. Largely, this is because it would prove impossible for dedicated knowledge staff to be experts in all these different areas simultaneously. A danger, however, is that where one particular support function (say, IT) dominates the others within an organisation, this may be overly emphasised in the implementation of knowledge strategies. Certainly, this was the case in one donor organisation, where knowledge activities were grounded in the broader contexts of e-government policies, and have therefore taken on a heavy information bias. At the same time, in another of the donor agencies, the total lack of such broader support appears to have created issues for the legitimacy of knowledge and learning.

Many of the organisations link learning with M&E, either in principle and statements, but also through the co-location of such functions within the organisational system. For example, in one organisation, learning is a key part of the global impact monitoring system; in another, KM is being relocated to be part of the performance and measurement division. It may therefore be particularly surprising that there is a distinct lack of systematic M&E *for* the knowledge and learning practices. Looking at the role of formal evaluations provides a good benchmark for the potential for knowledge and learning activities. One participant suggested that there were three main factors that impacted on the success or failure of an evaluation: the team involved in the evaluation, the source of the evaluation effort, and the timing. This rule of thumb may apply to much knowledge and learning work. The difficulty in applying rigorous measures of evaluating the success or otherwise of KM programmes is to be a repeated problem.

Continuing with human capacities for knowledge and learning, while the donor organisations assessed here have tended to have resources at hand for individual learning, there has been less systematic application of resources for the wider aspects of learning, such as group or OL. Meanwhile, NGOs have fewer resources for individual learning, and where these resources are available, their application is not consistent – staff training sometimes appears to be dependent on individual managerial attitudes and personal perspectives on budgets and their allocation. In general, it seems that newer generations of managers are more pro-active in addressing staff training needs. Interestingly, one of the smallest UK NGOs is the only one to have achieved the UK Investors in People accreditation.[9] When moving from the individual to the group level, a number of simple mechanisms were identified for group-wide learning, including regular meetings, team appraisals, and regular AARs. The application of these tools tended to be within particular groups or departments, and at best uneven across the rest of the organisation. Linked to this, cross group learning was an obvious gap. Where this does happen, it was more likely to be driven by a serious problem – for example, an AAR in one donor agency involving more than 50 people – or a major event – for example, an international learning event focusing on learning from humanitarian operations which led by one of the study NGOs. On a day-to-day level, interviewees mentioned the need to find out more about thematic aspects of their work. None of the interviewees saw put great emphasis on the need to share more at the operational 'everyday' level, partly due to the information overload that this would create.

The re-shaping of staff competency frameworks and appraisal systems to include knowledge and learning aspects has proved useful in initiating cultural change. Of importance here is how these elements are prioritised with respect to other elements. The importance of subjecting the most senior staff to the new knowledge-based competencies assessments has been a crucial aspect of this work, and was emphasised in two organisations.

Interestingly, in many of the study organisations, knowledge and learning was seen to be a core competency. Apart from the research institutes and a particular NGO, where to a large degree knowledge and learning *is* a core competency, this notion is somewhat at odds with the position of knowledge work as a support function. It is unlikely that many of the organisations covered here would place IT, evaluations, or any elements of their overall cost base, at the heart of their work. This presents one of the many paradoxes with which knowledge and learning initiatives must grapple daily.

An integrated strategy bringing the different support functions together is now a holy grail – with two organisations making efforts in this area. In part, this may be an attempt to strengthen the vision that knowledge should inform day-to-day work. However, effort must be made to ensure that the

[9] Investors in People is a national UK quality standard that sets a level of good practice for improving an organisation's performance through its people (from Investors in People website: http://www.iipuk.co.uk/).

knowledge and learning imperative is not subsumed in this process, and that such initiatives might lead to little more than more high level vision statements.

Overall, it was hard to escape the sense that, when the rhetoric is stripped away, knowledge and learning is simply another clamouring voice in the 'thought-world' of the organisations covered, with insufficient linkages to their core operations.

## 3.5 Issue Five: how do connective physical and electronic infrastructures support knowledge and learning strategies?

**Box 8: Supporting physical and electronic infrastructures**

In sum:

- Electronic infrastructure is important but an emphasis on information can often blur the knowledge and learning initiative, especially when it comes to tacit knowledge exchange that is at heart of knowledge and learning principles.
- The lack of common infrastructure is seen a key problem, but apart form a few notable instances, resources are not available to facilitate this.
- Generally, the development of supporting infrastructure, both physical and electronic, has been taken further in the donor organisations than in the NGOs. However, where this is apparent, the changes are not wholly attributable to the knowledge strategies.

Supporting systems have varying roles within the knowledge and learning strategies assessed in this study. Because of the non-technical background of the majority of informants, these insights necessarily concern high-level strategies and perspectives, which is in keeping with the overall focus of this study on the management of organisational change processes. This point notwithstanding, infrastructure was a key enabler for knowledge and learning and is frequently mistaken for it. Significant challenges are faced in retaining such learning aspects in the face of more visible systems-based approaches. It is worth noting though, that those study organisations which promote a learning and interaction approach had *not*, in the main and as at time of writing, invested a large amount of resources into systems development. Where a systems-based approach is taken as a pillar of knowledge and learning work, the lack of common infrastructure is seen as a key issue, but there is little evidence of systematic movement towards this vision. On the systems side, one organisation proved to be unique in that it was trialling new systems in Southern offices prior to rolling them out in the head office in the North. Interestingly, this organisation also has a strong learning slant to its work.

A key issue is how to facilitate the digitalisation of physical information systems – i.e. how to make information available electronically. Naturally, this has been achieved through multiple tools and platforms. One of the most common systems appears to be variants on database driven intranets, with the popular Lotus Notes application often working in tandem. Other common systems are shared network drives, extranets, collaboration tools including videoconferencing and other facilities. Again, the donors have done most work here. One organisation in particular is noteworthy for having achieved the goal of common infrastructure and electronic knowledge system – it is worth noting that the development of supporting infrastructure, both physical and electronic, has been taken further in the donor organisations than others.

Even where common systems have been established, much more work is still needed on making them more internationally accessible and resolving the critical issues of access, language and user-driven resources.

The bridge between IT and knowledge and learning was mentioned in all instances, and nowhere is it entirely unproblematic. In a resource-constrained environment, there is some suggestion of internal competition to lay claim to organisational changes, as this may secure the future of teams and functions – and this tension may prove critical for effective change management. More detailed investigations are needed in this area.

Space has also been an increasingly important aspect of workplace management, and in some of the organisations covered (notably the donors and multilateral), the re-organisation of office space has played an indirect part in the management of learning and knowledge work. The influence of space as a facilitating factor is undeniable – but is in general hard to measure in a systematic fashion.

## 3.6 Issue Six: vision, leadership and management

**Box 9: Vision, leadership and management**

In sum:

- The role of leaders and senior staff in fostering an open learning environment cannot be overemphasised. However, consistent learning leaders are perceived to be rare among the study organisation.
- The systematic improvement of managerial strategies may itself be a knowledge and learning process. While several participants alluded to this, it does not appear to be recognised at the organisational level.
- Too often, knowledge and learning activities sit on top of existing managerial problems instead of resolving them.

The participants emphasised that leaders and senior staff play a very important role in helping to create and foster an organisational culture of learning. Individual members of staff will usually interpret given data differently, depending on their roles and responsibilities. This variability may be affected by the attitudes of the management teams – for example, attitudes towards staff development, towards evaluations, and so on. Crucially, the attitudes of senior staff were cited as a potential cause of de-motivation, tension and even political infractions among staff. In such situations, the role of senior staff or leaders in helping to clarify meaning in a coherent and collective fashion may need improvement. Even though senior staff may not be actively involved in learning processes, they nevertheless – directly or indirectly – communicate 'what is expected' of staff members. For example, leaders or senior staff can try to address issues that cause insecurity among staff when it comes to sharing information and admitting mistakes, such as with the mantra of 'driving fear out of the workplace' adopted in one of the study organisations.

There was also a sense that knowledge and learning was threatened by the old order – 'the way we do things around here' – and vice versa. This leads to a continual and widespread issue of contradictions between official managerial statements and managerial practices. Across the study organisations, it seems as though there are three types of learning leaders, each rarer than the one before: there are leaders who don't demonstrate learning behaviours and don't ask for it; those that don't demonstrate but do ask for it; and those that do demonstrate and do ask for it, but both in limited contexts only. Those that *consistently* demonstrate and ask for learning are seen to be not merely rare, but virtually nonexistent in many organisations. The goal of becoming a knowledge and learning organisation was articulated by several staff as a continual journey, because it is highly dependent on individuals within organisations continually changing their attitudes and behaviours. The failure of individuals to exhibit such behaviour is perhaps simply more visible amongst the senior cadre of organisations. Overall, the systematic improvement of managerial shortcomings may itself be a set of knowledge and learning issues which could se more attention within these

initiatives. While several participants alluded to this, it does not appear to be recognised and dealt with at the organisational level. Too often, the case seems to be that knowledge and learning activities are superimposed onto existing managerial problems, instead of being used to resolve them. The development and promotion of simple, people-centred processes to support learning activities does not appear to be high on the managerial agenda. In many cases, this is attributable to the need to keep looking for funding, which makes reflection difficult if not impossible. Furthermore, there appears to be a general failure among management to link learning activities to mission critical activities, and to be actively involved in such activities themselves. More often that not, this was seen as an issue of not truly understanding the learning process, what it means, and how it should be taken forward – an issue which a number of informants suggested could be overcome with a more 'selling and networking' driven approach to knowledge and learning.

## 3.7 Issue Seven: measuring the costs and benefits of learning and not learning

**Box 10: Measuring the costs and benefits of learning**

In sum:

- All of the organisations face difficulties in assessing their knowledge and learning strategies.
- Narratives are a frequently used technique, but have a tendency of putting an overly positive gloss on results without identifying key areas for improvement.
- At present there appears to be more emphasis in all study organisations on the potential of knowledge and learning, rather than on the tangible benefits it has already achieved.
- The point-of-use cost of engaging in knowledge/learning strategies is rarely assessed. For example, the cost-per-use ratio of an AAR, seen in the short term, may be significantly higher than that of, say, an intranet. However, this does not appear to have been explored by any of the organisations in the study.

Throughout the review, a major difficulty was getting a clear feel firstly for exactly how much knowledge and learning work the organisations undertake, and secondly how effective this work has been. This may be attributed to the assessment difficulties that the organisations themselves face. The underlying problem may be that knowledge cannot be measured easily in these environments. Even the most large-scale knowledge strategy reviewed was seen to lack a mechanism to check and monitor progress, although efforts are underway to address this. The organisations address this problem in different ways. Some organisations see output-based indicators as useful (e.g. attendance at KS events) while others prefer to use staff surveys.

Narratives have been widely adopted as a technique for knowledge transfer, and indeed they were used frequently by participants in the interviews. However, they do have the inevitable consequence of putting an overly positive gloss on results without identifying key areas for improvement. In view of this problem, regular and confidential staff attitudinal testing is perhaps a more systematic – though currently under-used – method that could be usefully applied in wider contexts.

It is clear that the cost and revenue base of the organisation (the understanding of which is often at the heart of strategic initiatives in the private sector) has a clear impact on promoting and motivating learning. While this was often implicitly at the heart of the perspectives on learning provided by the participants, it is difficult to see how such an analysis has helped shape the knowledge and learning agenda. Similarly, the costs of not learning were only expressed in general terms – including a continued sense of inefficiency, a sense of creative dissatisfaction, or wasted time – adding to the frustrations of an already pressured environment.

Implicitly and explicitly, the case studies raise questions about the measurable benefits of the application of KM practices – questions, furthermore, that are not resolved within this current study. At present, organisations reviewed appear to place a greater emphasis on the *potential* of KM rather than on the tangible benefits it has already achieved. This may be driven by necessity – a result of the specific stage of the knowledge programmes in question, or it may be due to a lack of M&E. At the risk of being abstract, it may also be true that knowledge and learning is most clearly observable when it is not happening.

There is clearly potential to explore the point-of-use cost of engaging in knowledge work, whether it is electronically or face-to-face. The cost-per-use ratio of an AAR, seen in the short term, may be significantly higher than that of, say, an intranet. However, this has not been explored by any of the organisations in the study – partly due to an overall weakness in evidence-based monitoring and evaluating, which applies to many activities undertaken by development organisations. This may also be due to low levels of cost-benefit consciousness in day-to-day work – which may or may not be appropriate within the environments looked at here. This point is grounded in a wider debate around whether an organisation working towards social change could, or indeed should, be measured through tangible, efficiency based metrics. This debate notwithstanding, rational and evidence-based approaches to M&E of knowledge and learning do not appear to have seen much headway. As at time of research, such initiatives were juts starting to emerge in two of the study organisations.

It should be pointed out that knowledge and learning activities do not only ‘take time’ in the immediate sense of requiring more staff time, but also in the sense of requiring a lot of time to bring about organisational change, especially given the bureaucratic inertia that plagues many of the organisations looked at here. This is a particular challenge when considering the funding cycles into which most organisations have to squeeze their ongoing activities.

## 3.8 Issue Eight: how does the knowledge programme address the external aspects of knowledge and learning work?

**Box 11: How the knowledge programme addresses external aspects of knowledge and learning work**

In sum:

- Where external knowledge and learning-based interactions were mentioned, partnerships and learning were the key elements, especially with organisations based in the South, and the ultimate beneficiaries of programs and projects.
- The majority of participants identified the need to address internal issues first, before looking at external issues. A counter argument was that much knowledge that is 'value generating' in terms of the goals of development organisations, should be based on some degree of sharing with, and learning from those in the South. This last point does not hold for knowledge used in certain aspects of work – such as administrative work, operational management, fundraising, and so on.
- Knowledge and learning was largely seen as assisting the wider dissemination of internal knowledge – i.e. facilitating the movement of information and know-how moving from the inside of the organisation to the outside, for improved advocacy and direct action. However, the idea that KM can also act as a filter and amplifier of external knowledge (i.e. information moving from the outside to the inside) was only mentioned explicitly in two cases. Communications strategies were generally dealt with by other parts of the organisation, and there were numerous comments on the segregation of knowledge and communications teams, which may be part of the reason for this gap in practice.
- The role of knowledge and learning in collaboration with other Northern organisations was seldom mentioned in the context of knowledge strategies. The only formal tools that were mentioned in connection to this were web-based information gateways, and on occasion, inter-organisational CoPs, although the value-added impact of these tools on operational work was uncertain. It was clear that much external sharing and learning happens through the informal networks of organisations staff members, and that knowledge and learning strategies generally did not address these issues.

In those interviews where external aspects of knowledge and learning were mentioned, partnerships and learning were the key elements, especially when it came to interactions with Southern institutes. Here, capacity building is a key form of knowledge and learning activity. Two of the bilaterals emphasise capacity building through skill sharing and mutual learning; one of the NGOs focused on training activities for Southern partners, while yet another has a 'knowledge market' approach where they aim to be the leading player of knowledge in their sector. Such approaches are, at the surface level, as diverse as the organisations themselves. However, a large number of participants identified the need for knowledge strategies to address internal issues before addressing these broader issues – as is seen in comments such as: 'If we can't share with the guy in the office next door, how can we do so with the South?' Interestingly, the focus on internal knowledge work belies the fact that all the study organisations relied on activities in the South as a key source of their most valued knowledge, and that eventually, all knowledge that is 'value generating' must by necessity be tied back to a level of KS with those in the South. With the accompanying notion of a trickle-down to eventual beneficiaries, it would be easy to condemn the internal focus for putting the cart before the horse (i.e. putting internal sharing before external sharing) – and this critique could be heightened given the weakness in impact and evaluation of knowledge work. However, in some organisations, ranging from bilaterals to NGOs, there are attempts to make links between participatory field level learning and the knowledge and learning agenda – and indeed, some of the

rationale for the latter has been drawn from the former – with an emphasis on sharing powerful narratives to promote the idea of South-to-North learning.

In practice, it appears that the incorporation of Southern knowledge occurs at the tactical, rather than strategic, level – and then only in an ad hoc manner. Rightly or wrongly, reacting to strategic issues within Northern development organisations currently requires the application of forms of knowledge which are largely internal to these organisations. As an example, consider the tacit know how of staff in operational and management teams, which enables responses to funding opportunities. While the *content* of such proposals should be driven by knowledge of and from the South, the delivery and effectiveness of the proposal currently does not currently require a strong link to Southern knowledge bases. A shift in this balance towards true Southern ownership of development solutions is likely to happen only in the long term – and it is unclear the extent to which the work of knowledge and learning initiatives and staff members could or should be seen as addressing this long term, systemic issue. Further, incorporating, and learning from, Southern knowledge bases may not be entirely unproblematic. Development organisations can only exert a degree of legitimate influence over the knowledge and learning capacities of their own staff members, and as has been shown throughout this study, even this legitimacy and influence is not simple or easy to achieve.

These points notwithstanding, many organisations see the external aspects of knowledge and learning as being eventually addressed – the key word being eventually. Some did see the knowledge generated in external work as being the most valuable form of knowledge, leading on to the idea that knowledge and learning should, as a starter:

- incorporate local perspectives in planning projects;
- take lessons from programmes and incorporate them into advocacy work;
- use evaluations (or, less often, pre-project assessments) to incorporate the perspectives of indigenous beneficiaries of programmes;
- get a better shared understanding of impact.

Unfortunately, the bureaucratic structures within which these ambitions are fostered appear to do much to stifle them. Several participants talked about a process-oriented, ‘end-game’ view of learning, where knowledge and learning activities were bolted onto the end of other ongoing work.

There does appear to be some role for KM in improving external relations, collaboration and co-operation, although this was not always clearly defined within the knowledge initiatives. KS initiatives between donor agencies were more common than between other types of agencies, with an emphasis on information systems – for example, the AIDA database which catalogue of information on development activities found on the web sites or internal information systems of major bilateral donors, multilateral development banks and UN agencies. While certainly impressive, the effectiveness and impact of such efforts was uncertain. Humanitarian agencies were also found to be increasingly using large scale AAR mechanisms to foster cross-OL after major responses. On the whole, however, the organisations lean towards the view that KM is there to assist the wider dissemination of *internal* explicit knowledge. Specifically, advocacy strategies were seen as benefiting from effective knowledge and learning. The idea that KM might also serve as a filter and amplifier of *external* knowledge was only mentioned explicitly in two cases. In terms of learning about knowledge and learning itself, networks such as KM4Dev and the UK’s BOND were seen as useful platforms for sharing experiences and engaging with other practitioners.

Of note were the inter-organisational platforms used for KS, specifically relating to electronic information platforms. The internet aside, these were not on the whole the result of the organisation-specific knowledge strategies, but rather donor-driven initiatives, with varying degrees

of editorial control impacting upon the nature of KS that these platforms enable. By their very nature, these platforms emphasise the sharing of information rather than know-how. Here, the external networks of staff members, both professional and personal are seen to be major sources of knowledge and learning – however, these networks are seldom conscious CoPs, but have rather evolved separately from explicit strategies. This may be seen as the external equivalent of internal informal sharing of knowledge.

The external dissemination of information products is key for the research institutes looked at here. More generally, however, dissemination seemed to be driven more by communications-as-broadcast rather than communications-for-learning. The increased focus on communications across the agencies and the separation of this function from knowledge and learning is evident in a number of the case study organisations. Such a segregated approach may in fact inhibit the effective application of knowledge and learning principles to external sharing. The creation of barriers between related fields was seen as potentially creating unnecessary tensions between different aspects of a very similar organisational imperative – framed by numerous informants as different facets of the same organisational imperative.

# 4 Synthesis and Recommendations

Following on from the earlier literature review and the subsequent analysis, it should prove useful to synthesise the findings and structure the recommendations of this by reference to the framework in suggested in Section 2. To recap:

- *Organisational knowledge*: How is knowledge and learning understood and applied within each organisation?
- *Organisational links*: How does knowledge and learning link to structures, functions, core activities and supporting activities a given organisation?
- *Organisational context*: How do issues of institutional governance, politics and economics support or hinder the knowledge and learning strategy?
- *External issues:* How does the knowledge and learning strategy address issues emerging from external relationships and factors?

It must be noted that the following recommendations have been drawn from the breadth of knowledge and learning initiatives identified across the organisations covered in the study. Naturally, as each organisation is unique, particular knowledge and learning priorities may only be understood by reference to specific constraints and opportunities faced by a given organisation. It is therefore useful to see these recommendations as a set of good practice pointers which can be applied in the development and assessment of knowledge and learning strategies, but additional work must be undertaken to establish specific needs and priorities.

## 4.1 Organisational knowledge

This dimension of the framework covers the definition of knowledge and learning work, and the kinds of knowledge and learning processes activities in a given organisation. Accepted wisdom from the case studies suggests that where these elements are well defined, clear and comprehensive, knowledge and learning activities are more effective, and more likely to have a positive impact.

At the same time, however, there is little hard evidence from the case study organisations of a comprehensive organisation-wide answer to what knowledge is in fact available how it can be accessed and shared, and in what forms it resides. Frequently, an ‘off-the-peg’ tacit-explicit distinction is used, with the occasional classification of knowledge as relating to particular themes or operational activities. Owing to the complexity of the work undertaken, the latter is seldom systematic or wide-ranging. In terms of knowledge processes, the tangible value and underlying principles of knowledge *sharing* were not particularly well defined. However, perhaps because of the bibliometric basis of such work, the *storing* of knowledge fared rather better. A number of organisations used rules for structuring how information was preserved within electronic and physical systems. The *creation* and *use* of knowledge, however, does not appear to have had any systematic, focused attention. This may be because the potential relevance of knowledge – to individuals, groups, organisationally, and inter-organisationally – is unknown, making clarification not just hard, but undesirable. On the other hand, there is a clear awareness of where and how knowledge is created and used (e.g. on external trips, on donor visits, in meetings and conferences, in workshops, and so on), and yet there is a lack of focus of knowledge and learning work around these areas, leading to the widely bemoaned knowledge leakage and repetition of mistakes. The problem is linked to capacities for learning, and to the fact that KS as a practice may not be legitimate in the eyes of those doing the most valuable learning. Related to this last point, incentives are crucially lacking.

There is an urgent need to clarify the explicit and implicit cost-benefits of staff engaging in knowledge and learning activities. Evidence-based answers to these questions appear to be essential to the development and refinement of knowledge strategies, but there is slow movement towards these goals within the organisations looked at in this study. Further, it appears as though the principles underlying different approaches may change before M&E can be considered. The lack of such rationale, combined with a lack of incentives for knowledge and learning work, may explain the limited uptake of the more time-intensive knowledge and learning tools. It may prove useful, then, to start initiatives off with this analysis, and then work backwards to see what tools can provide the necessary improvements.

**Box 12: Recommendations for organisational knowledge**

1. As far as possible, define the different forms of knowledge within the organisation, and work to map these in terms of location, owners, and relevance to the organisational mission.
2. Work to identify existing knowledge processes in the context of the operational realities of the organisation: specifically, how does the organisation, internal groups and individuals create, share and store knowledge in day-to-day working life, and how is such knowledge used?
3. Develop and promote effective formal and informal knowledge and learning tools for improved creation, sharing and storing of knowledge.
4. Build organisation-wide staff capacity and confidence in the use and application of these tools, and create time and space for ongoing reflection and adaptation of these tools.
5. Work towards a rational, evidence-based model for evaluating the cost-benefit of these tools, in terms of effectiveness, impact and resources used. More radically, consider starting initiatives with the goal of developing such a model and develop the strategic approach 'backwards'.

## 4.2 Organisational links

This dimension covers issues three, four and five from the findings – specifically, knowledge and learning in relation to existing core business activities, support functions, and organisational infrastructure. To put it more prosaically, links are about existing relationships, processes and systems, and the role of knowledge and learning within these. It was apparent from the reflections of participants and from the desk-based cases that the existing structure and functions of the organisation have a critical impact on the success and uptake of knowledge and learning. Specifically, and unfortunately ubiquitously, it is hard to add in knowledge and learning at the end of existing processes, especially if there are no incentives for this additional work. This 'add-on' air of knowledge and learning activities, and the somewhat jargon-laden vocabulary does not appear to help build legitimacy, or assist prioritisation of knowledge and learning with core activities. This may in fact be the fundamental difficulty faced across all the organisations covered: the knowledge and learning function may be seen as competing internally with other approaches whose functions are geared towards different priorities. The slow penetration of knowledge and learning activities into different organisations may explain the relative homogeneity of knowledge and learning work across the organisations covered, which seems to prevail despite the oft-stated need for context-specific approaches to knowledge and learning. It may therefore be the case that knowledge and learning staff themselves need greater exposure to and understanding of the core aspects of the work before they can gain legitimacy in the eyes of those core staff they seek to influence. A more common route is to provide mechanisms for core staff to link up together in organisation-wide CoPs that are focused on key thematic areas. In both of these areas, costs may prove prohibitive.

The typical response to the difficulty of re-organising core processes along knowledge and learning lines has led to the widespread conceptualisation of knowledge and learning initiatives, which supposedly drive organisational change, as a support function. Here, too, difficulties are faced as the influence of the strongest support function often shapes the knowledge agenda. The fluid and

diffuse nature of knowledge and learning work means that more visible disciplines can often overshadow it. Across many of the study organisations, this has led to an information-biased view of knowledge and learning.

The *Organisational Links* dimension is fundamentally dependent on various organisational processes and systems. Processes may be short term and day-to-day (for example, the office post distribution system) or alternatively long term over a number of years (for example, the strategic planning cycle). In the majority of cases, such processes were found to be overly complex and bureaucratic, and seldom incorporated processes for learning and reflection in day-to-day working. Systems – most especially electronic systems – are in practice the simplest and least painful mechanism to *implement* in the face of complex knowledge and learning needs. Effective take-up is another matter – even those organisations with an explicit information bias suggest that systems should be seen as a necessary but insufficient part of the knowledge and learning agenda. Systems tend to be widely cited as the tangible outcomes of knowledge and learning strategies. This heightened attention may be in part because of the need to justify high front-end investments. The experience of the organisations reviewed suggests that this trend, if continued, could contribute to the increasing prevalence of 'information graveyards'. In the final analysis, IT systems cannot be relied upon to create relationships that are at the heart of effective KS.

The theoretical support for the *Organisational Links* dimension should be drawn from the successful completion of a knowledge audit as described previously in the *Knowledge* dimension. It is important to be aware that this dimension is based on the elevation of the knowledge and learning agenda to an overall rationale for driving organisational change, and as a practical basis for process and systems development. The legitimacy of knowledge and learning would appear to be greatly enhanced if it is used as a rationale for organisation-wide reorganisations, as has been the case in some of the organisations looked at here. However, if these re-organisations are driven by the need to consolidate costs, they may run counter to the knowledge agenda – as lessons from the corporate sector have repeatedly shown.

**Box 13: Recommendations for organisational linkages**

1. Work to ensure that knowledge and learning approaches are used to review ongoing organisational processes, from the day-to-day to the strategic. Create clear and simple mechanisms for sharing good practices in these processes, and set up a series of knowledge and learning pilots across groups, departments and offices.
2. Adapt and, where necessary, re-engineer current procedures and processes to allow space for better reflection and learning in core activities, using, for example, narratives, AARs and retrospect methodologies.
3. Facilitate and foster the development of CoPs and form working groups that cut across internal hierarchies to support peer-to-peer and cross-functional learning, making use of both face to face encounters as well as electronic systems such as video-conferencing.
4. Ensure that systems and technologies are developed in line with clear user-defined demands, and are built to meet evolving business needs. Ensure ongoing developments incorporate these principles.
5. Define knowledge and learning clearly with reference to the other support functions within the organisation (HR, IM, etc), create explicit linkages where necessary, and work to ensure harmonisation of approaches and goals.
6. Provide clear incentives for staff to engage in knowledge and learning processes, based on the optimum combination of recognition and reward, and ensure that these are coherent with broader incentive structures.
7. Create a communications plan for the knowledge and learning work, and make knowledge and learning mesh with the existing language of the agency rather than loading the initiative with jargon.

## 4.3 Organisational contexts

It is apparent that the issues that hold back knowledge and learning initiatives in many of the organisations are the very issues that they are supposed to resolve – for example, problems related to decentralisation, staff turnover and cultural inertia. This brings up the question of whether knowledge and learning principles can in fact, in their own right, resolve these issues. If not, what are the other issues that must be considered in overcoming these problems? Or can these problems simply not be overcome? There is a clear sense that learning and knowledge can only ever be as systematic and productive as the organisation itself. In other words, the overarching organisational contexts are also important. More specifically, the organisations reviewed face the increasing need to address overall goals, issues of funding, and leadership and management through knowledge and learning initiatives. Clearly, this is not an easy or simple task, particularly if the role of knowledge and learning is defined in terms of a support function.

Against this considerable obstacle, there does appear to be slowly increasing support for knowledge and learning work at the level of programmes and projects and within evaluations. While funding issues and impacts on external relations are often cited as reasons for not engaging fully with knowledge and learning work, and acknowledging mistakes, there is nevertheless an increasing sense that such activities could, eventually, be value-generating. This perspective may also serve to bring knowledge and learning further into the realm of accountability and evaluations.

Learning leadership and management are key to the success of any initiative: knowledge management cannot exist in an environment where management itself is weak. It is clearly important to have a collective vision for knowledge and learning – one that fits with the strategic direction of the organisation, and one that is understood and accepted by staff. However, interviewees pointed out that leaders do not always appear to understand the knowledge and learning function, nor do they always ensure that the knowledge agenda is supported by their own activities. Against this somewhat damning critique, it is important to note that not every member of staff is a 'sharer' or a 'learner', and not even the best manager in the world can make this the case. However, the key to successful knowledge and learning initiatives is fostering continual creative adaptation, and this is not something that occurs without management support, and clear signals from and to all levels of the organisation.

Many of the NGOs studied have evolved to be adaptable and flexible in their ongoing processes. Insofar as the knowledge learning agenda sees these qualities as prerequisites, the battle may be seen as half won. However, the remaining issues seem to around developing more systematic approaches to the creation, sharing, storing and use of knowledge. The challenge is how to build on such organisations' inherent flexibility without inhibiting it. In many of these organisations it was noted that there may never be significant resources earmarked for knowledge and learning work, and the struggle to become a learning organisation may be ongoing. The exact opposite seems true in the donor organisations, which by contrast appear too process-oriented and bureaucratic.

Overall, if a strategic view is to be taken, it must be backed up with a precise understanding of the position of the organisation, and where it intends to get to. The knowledge 'roadmap' articulated in section 2 of this paper may prove useful here.

The *Contexts* dimension is not well addressed across the initiatives in the organisations under study, and is perhaps the most critical of the all dimension of the Knowledge Strategies Framework. Focusing on this area requires an authority amongst knowledge and learning staff, and of self-critical openness amongst senior management that may not, in fact, be present. Nor might these qualities be appropriate within the organisations in question. Ultimately, however, knowledge and learning requires both the courage and the capacity to deal with the implications of being human, and erring.

**Box 14: Recommendations for organisational contexts**

1. Establish the knowledge and learning vision of the organisation, and link this explicitly to where the organisation is in terms of the knowledge and learning 'road-map' (see Box 1 for more details).
2. Ensure that leaders and senior management are on board, briefed and trained in all aspects of knowledge and learning work, especially rationales and the tools available.
3. Involve all levels of the organisation in competency assessments, and ensure senior and middle management are included.
4. Work to create direct resources to finance knowledge and learning work, bearing in mind that successful knowledge and learning-based organisations in the corporate sector spend 10-20% of their budget in this area.
5. Streamline knowledge and learning work with other processes of organisational change by ensuring that knowledge and learning capacities are used to support such processes both analytically and practically.
6. Identify and deal with identified organisational barriers to knowledge and learning in an open, brave and honest fashion, as part of a broader more towards more transparent governance processes.

## 4.4 External factors

It was commonly agreed that knowledge strategies needed to be weighed up in terms of how they contribute to the overall strategic goals of the organisations in question. In the context of the current study this implies that OL needs to have practical relevance to poor people (i.e. it should be both policy relevant and programme relevant) and external organisations, given the cooperative values of development work. However, these notions were seldom at the *heart* of the knowledge and learning vision. Partly this was put down to a question of time – it was suggested that these issues would be faced by knowledge and learning: 'eventually'. Participants often argued for improving internal knowledge work prior to addressing external issues. However, there was no sense of how the tools might need adaptation in the context of Southern realities, and how they might add to or compare with existing approaches such as capacity development or participation. This lack of focus on final outcomes may also highlight the differences between knowledge policies and practices in the organisations concerned. Where organisations is currently more concerned with internal management and tensions, then there appears to be little evidence that knowledge and learning can help fundamentally re-orient this towards a greater focus on improved on development goals.

Learning between agencies, between agencies and Southern partners, and between agencies and beneficiaries, is a clear gap in the knowledge and learning strategies looked at here. Despite such learning frequently being the justification of knowledge and learning programs in development agencies, they seldom appear to be central pillars of organisational knowledge and learning strategies. Where this was the case, the activities tended to focus on knowledge transfer to, rather than learning from external partners.

There is a clear need to look at the role of communications initiatives, both internal and external, both direct and indirect, from the perspective of knowledge and learning. Interestingly, these two areas were seldom closely linked in practice, despite the widespread sentiment that successful communications strategies should be based on a two-way learning process. More effort is needed to forge links between knowledge and communications initiatives. This is particularly important where knowledge and learning is linked (directly or indirectly) to the effectiveness of advocacy work, as was the case in several of the NGO organisations studied.

**Box 15: Recommendations for external factors**

1. Ensure that key external forms of knowledge are addressed explicitly in the knowledge and learning strategies, especially rationales for incorporation of these knowledge bases into organisational activities and the tools available for this purpose.
2. Work to build organisation-wide understanding of relationships with key external stakeholders, and identify clear knowledge and learning principles and guidelines governing external interactions and partnerships.
3. Create a knowledge-based view of internal and external communications, with clear frameworks and guidelines for both, and integrate this with any existing communications initiative, ensuring, for example, that advocacy work is evidence-based.

# 5 Conclusions

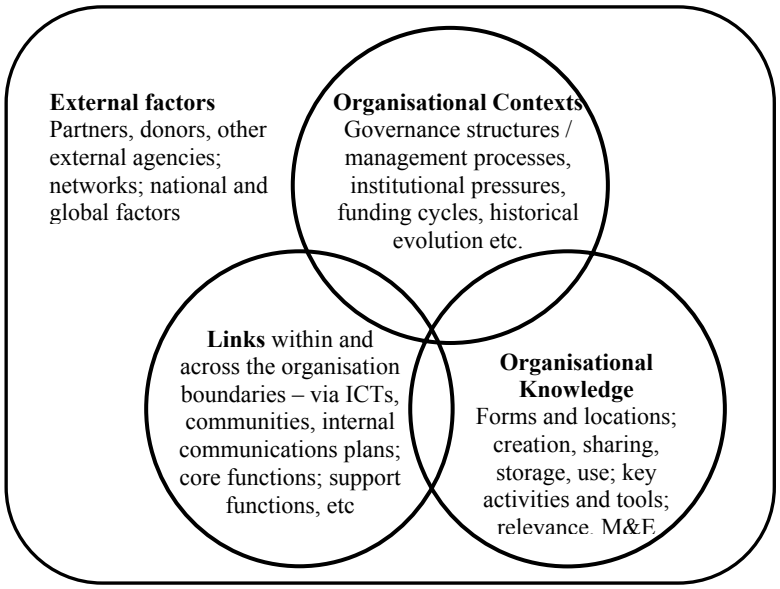
## 5.1 The Knowledge Strategies Framework and possible directions for future research

This study was undertaken in response to a number of needs. First, there is a need for an integrated framework, one that may be applied to ensure that the investigations undertaken to develop knowledge and learning strategies are comprehensive and systematic, but to also allow for cross-organisational comparisons and 'learning about learning'. Second, there was a need for evidence-based 'good practice' considerations, which may be used to identify potential 'entry points' for organisations looking to devise or revise their knowledge and learning strategy. Third, there is the perennial need for research to identify specific areas for further systematic investigations. In the context of the current study, this also means research that could be used in the improvement of practices within and across development organisations. The ways in which this paper has responded to these needs are outlined below.

The first need calls for better management-led 'knowledge audits' that deal with the complexities of knowledge management and OL in an unflinching manner. Such audits should be designed to provide detailed, systematic answers to the question: 'how and under what conditions are knowledge and learning strategies best applied to bring about organisational change?' These audits should be used to both initiate and assess ongoing knowledge strategies.

The Knowledge Strategies framework developed as part of the analysis undertaken in this study may be of use in devising and revising knowledge and learning strategies (Figure 3 below). This model could be used to ensure that knowledge audits are more robust and potentially become better known as *knowledge-based 'due diligence'* – a set of activities which address the complex, intangible assets of development organisations.

**Figure 3: The RAPID Framework for Knowledge Strategies**




The model might also enable detailed comparison across different initiatives in distinct organisations. For example, the current study has synthesised lessons across all of the organisations within each of the dimensions. However, it was also apparent that the different organisations have each addressed these overlapping dimensions in different ways, thus leading to differing configurations of the overall framework. For example, in one of the study organisations, *knowledge*

and *links* are closely aligned through a conception of knowledge that is predominately information and technology based, while the overall organisational contexts are yet to be adapted to this approach. In another, the ICT revolution has been seen as secondary to the approach of learning, but again, the organisational contexts are yet to reflect this approach in a far-reaching and systematic fashion. In one of the largest organisations, there are pockets where these dimensions are dealt with in a proactive fashion, but the rest of the organisation is clearly lagging behind due to a lack of clear understanding or incentives. In the organisation that appears to be closest to realising its vision for knowledge and learning, these dimensions do appear to have been dealt with in an active and systematic manner. Interestingly, this last is also one of the smallest organisations looked at here, which brings up the very real and practical question of the impact of scale on knowledge and learning activities.

It may be tentatively suggested, then, that where the different dimensions of *organisational knowledge*, *organisational links*, *organisational contexts* and *external factors* are dealt with in an integrated and coherent manner, strategies may prove more effective. More research would prove useful in exploring the potential of the model in more depth.

Second, the recommendations of this paper may be usefully considered within a range of organisations as illustrations of good practices for knowledge strategies in development agencies. It must be underlined that the ideal entry points for knowledge and learning are largely organisational specific. With this in mind, the framework outlined above may be used for initiating a process of gap analysis and priority setting[10]. Such a process could be applied at different points in the evolution of knowledge and learning work, and may be useful for helping an organisation move between the phases of the knowledge and learning roadmap suggested earlier in this paper, as follows:

- *Phase 1: Pre-design phase*, comprising experimental pilot efforts, often ad-hoc in approach;
- *Phase 2: Strategic development phase*, in which the specific organisational approach to KM is developed in a structured fashion, and priorities established;
- *Phase 3: Implementation phase*, when a variety of KM initiatives are rolled out in line with the strategic vision;
- *Phase 4: Alignment phase*, when refinements and adjustments to initiatives are made in accordance with the overall strategic vision.

Finally, there are at least five areas worthy of further study which are identified within this study. These are as follows:

1. Given that this study only looks at part of the 'knowledge for development' model, there is a clear need to synthesise existing understanding of the knowledge and learning needs, capacities and challenges of the ultimate beneficiaries of development agencies, as well as those Southern partner agencies working closest with these groups. This may be achieved by developing a broader definition of knowledge and learning work, such that the knowledge of beneficiaries and Southern partners is not systematically excluded, nor its incorporation postponed. A starting point for addressing this knowledge gap may be to undertake a study which focuses on the literature on 'indigenous knowledge' systems, and undertakes research on relevant knowledge and learning practices already utilised by development agencies, such as participation, capacity building, and others. As part of this need, there is a need to better understand how knowledge and learning may practically address and deal with issues of culture, language, religion, national identities, and so on.

[10] To support such a process, a knowledge and learning manual will be made available in a parallel RAPID publication (Ramalingam, forthcoming 2005).

2. There is a clear and obvious need to assess the different forms of knowledge-based M&E, and use these to develop a set of holistic guidelines, enabling objective assessment of knowledge and learning strategies. It may be necessary to draw lessons from a wide range of sectors, as well as to assess a number of tools that are already being used. Such a process could potentially take the KS model emerging in this study as its starting point.
3. Given the non-technical nature of the informants to the current study, and the frequent conflation of IT systems with knowledge and learning, a more in-depth analysis of the role of IT infrastructure and applications within OL initiatives would be particularly useful. Of particular relevance is the role such IT systems play in resolving or exacerbating the digital divides that exist: firstly across different types of development organisations; secondly, within the same development organisation with offices distributed across Northern and Southern countries, and thirdly, between development organisations and other actors based in the South.
4. Building on this, it would be useful to undertake further studies to look at four or five different types of organisations, for example multilaterals, NGOs, research institutes and think-tanks. Across the sector, multiple studies are already underway or nearing completion in this area, and it may be useful to aim for synthesis and aggregation of the lessons learned from these, as well as to initiate further studies. In particular, a number of the United Nations bodies were interested in participating in the current study, but owing to reasons of timing and coordination, were unable to do so. Given the current focus on different aspects of reform within the UN, this may prove a particularly timely and useful study.
5. Finally, given the co-operative ideals of development work, and the wide range of organisations operating within the field, there is a clear need to better understand mechanisms and platforms that exist for inter-organisational KS and learning, and how knowledge strategies may support these interactions and the delivery of the goals of different types of development agencies.

## 5.2 Final points

This study is of knowledge and learning initiatives in a range of development organisations. Many of them are heavily resource-constrained NGOs, and some are government organisations and multilaterals which are far more heavily resourced. Interestingly however, there is a common finding across the case studies: that the learning approach is something an organisation always *aspires* to. Learning, it seems, is a continuous process of becoming, rather than attainment. This finding is corroborated by evidence from many other sectors. Even the most accomplished of initiatives looked at in the present study, then, is marked, internally at least, by a sense of dissatisfaction, due to the drive for continuous improvement that is at the heart of knowledge and learning work. This drive is well-placed, and crucial to the vision of knowledge and learning work. However, there is clearly a need to accept the resource constraints that must inevitably be placed on such work, and work towards goals that are, as far as possible, specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound and appropriate to a given organisation.

It is clear that good work is ongoing within each of the case study organisations, but also that the many of the significant challenges faced by the knowledge and learning initiatives in development agencies are yet to be overcome. Overall, the promise and potential of these initiatives, as with the overall ‘knowledge for development’ movement, is yet to be fully realised. However, this is by no means to detract from the knowledge and learning work looked at here. In particular, three points should be noted. First, all of the initiatives are at relatively early stages. This is especially true in relation to the historical legacy and institutional weight associated with some of the processes at which these transformative efforts are aimed. Second, knowledge and learning is far from being the

only initiative aiming to bring about change in these agencies. For example, a staff member in one agency identified no less than 37 initiatives aimed at changed organisational 'policy and practice'. Third, the transformative potential of these initiatives may need to be framed in a more realistic manner, and not unduly inflated. One participant likened the process of driving organisational change with driving an oil tanker – much steering is required without seeing a change in direction for a long time.

The evidence from the case studies suggests that efforts are more likely to be successful where all the dimensions of the Knowledge Strategies Framework are addressed in a coherent and integrated manner. In particular, knowledge and learning strategies in development organisations need to be clearly and realistically positioned within the broader dynamics of organisational life, as well as in the context of the international development efforts as a whole. Perhaps most challenging, but equally unavoidable, is the need to locate efforts in relation to the specific knowledge and learning needs and capacities of organisations and beneficiaries in the South, such that the idea of knowledge transfer to the South is increasingly replaced with learning with and from the South.

Clearly, the knowledge and learning approach can and does provide useful tools and approaches which, if properly, consistently and thoughtfully applied, can help address some of the symptoms of the institutional malaise faced by modern development organisations. Whether the development sector as a whole manages to cure this malaise or merely finds ways to live with it, and what the specific contribution of knowledge and learning initiatives might be to such broader processes of sectoral reform, all remain to be seen.

# Appendix: Organisational Profiles

1. Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
2. Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)
3. Department for International Development (DFID)
4. European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM)
5. Help Age International (HAI)
6. Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG)
7. Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)
8. Save the Children (SCF-UK)
9. Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)
10. Skillshare
11. Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO)
12. World Bank (WB)
13. World Vision

Note: these case studies represent the status of these knowledge initiatives at time of research, and progress may have changed in the intervening time. All case studies were made available to participating organisations for comments and consultation.

## Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)

CIDA's ambitions to become an effective knowledge-based organisation are part of the overall Agency goal of 'Strengthening Aid Effectiveness'. The vision of the knowledge strategy is to ensure that all CIDA staff:

- value learning and KS
- have ready access to technical expertise
- have a sound knowledge of sustainable development and poverty reduction
- continually learn from experience

Further, CIDA knowledge needs to be widely available to partners domestically, internationally, and in client countries.

Knowledge work is facilitated by the members of a dedicated KM Secretariat. As KM work has evolved, the secretariat has moved around the agency numerous times. Subsequently housed in the HR Division, Policy Branch and President's Office, the Secretariat recently became part of the Performance Management Division, highlighting the importance of knowledge-work to the effectiveness of the organisation. The KS program aims to continuously inform and stimulate improvements in Agency programs and policies. This involves three key areas of results and activities, as follows:

1. Demonstration and promotion of KS practices by management and supervisors
2. HR practices that support and reward KM approaches
3. Provision and integration of tools within business processes to improve staff ability to apply KM in work

The breadth of the work suggested in the activity areas above are evidently reflected in practice. In undertaking KM work, the 5-person KM Secretariat assumes three main functions:

1. Promote and develop CIDA KS capability
2. Facilitate and support KS processes
3. Initiate KS projects with various partners

At the operational level, the team works with HR, IM/IT, Evaluation and Audit and Programming Branches. KM has however been consciously maintained as a distinct field because of the danger of being overshadowed by these other, more established, business disciplines. Increasingly, there is an effort to gain a common understanding of KS and OL across these business disciplines.

AARs and Peer Assists are both key tools, and training on these has reached 130 out of 1500 staff. There have been numerous requests to help with the planning and application of these tools across the Agency. Peer Assists are now a compulsory learning step of the project review and approval process in one of the CIDA branches. Other mechanisms include formal KS networks focusing on sectoral, thematic and methodological issues, which run learning events such as presentations, discussion forums, panels and roundtables, and develop common tools and practices.

The human-side of KM receives a good amount of attention. KM competencies are included in the profiles of even the highest cadre within the organisation, and recruitment processes are monitored to ensure KS (KS) competencies are considered. The Continuous Learning Section offers workshops on policies, themes and business processes, as well as a mentoring program. Trip reports and exit interviews are completed, albeit on a voluntary basis. A significant amount of informal KS takes place through opportunistic workshops and seminars, coffee mornings, and so on.

Supporting systems include the CIDA Internet site, which has large numbers of users; and the recently updated Extranet on KS. Email is a widely used tool. The main Collaboration tools are extranets (for partners, field workers, internal KS networks); extranets are web enabled Lotus Notes databases, accessible by all internally and by password externally. The Evaluation division maintains an electronic lessons database from the corporate level evaluations that are undertaken, and the KM Secretariat maintains a stories database. All of these systems are used by CoPs, programs, projects and working groups in support of their KS activities. There is an identified need to co-ordinate these activities through an integrated knowledge and learning strategy, in order to achieve better OL.

The CIDA approach to KS is currently internally focused. CIDA see KM and OL as a means to learn from its experience in order to continuously improve their programmes and policies. There is an implicit assumption here that internal sharing will lead eventually to better external sharing, although the mechanisms and approaches may be quite different. To put it rhetorically, if the organisation cannot share effectively within the same office, how could it be seen to share with partners in the South?

The key barriers to learning are related to the fact that the function and culture of CIDA focus heavily on disbursements, driven by bureaucratic processes which are 'heavy' and leave little time for reflection. As the KS focuses on intangible assets, its impact is hard to measure. There have been linkages between KS and these core processes on a tactical level, for example in supporting the business operations group in standardising and simplifying key business processes, which are extremely diversified. The underlying assumption is that such work will free up some time for acquiring and exchanging both the tacit and explicit knowledge which is key to development work.

**Examples of Current CIDA Activities**

- 11 formal KS networks (CoPs) on sectors, themes and methods
- Peer Assist are compulsory step of project process in one CIDA division (branch)
- 130 CIDA employees out of 1500 trained on knowledge and learning tools
- Learning workshops on policies, themes and business processes
- Mentoring program
- Trip reports
- Voluntary exit interviews
- Electronic evaluations and lessons learned database
- Stories Database
- Shared drives (by group, not across the whole organisation)
- CIDA Internet site and recently revamped intranet
- Email
- Collaboration sites (extranets) used by CoPs, programs, projects, working groups etc
- Opportunistic workshops and seminars, coffee mornings, and other informal activities
- Currently developing a KM Policy and revamping the Learning Policy, with the objective of having an integrated KM and OL Strategy

Despite the high-level support, another barrier was cited as a general lack of awareness on the part of leaders as to the importance of knowledge and learning. This may be in part due to the lack of a central government support – there is no government-wide KS initiative. Certainly some staff members below the level of leaders are seen as applying KS principles in their work, but the benefits are not made clear to all staff. Specifically, leaders need to encourage and reward the behaviours that lead to effective sharing. A key part of this is for leaders to model the behaviours being asked of the rest of the staff. At present, the high level of attendance of the various knowledge events is seen as a good indicator of staff receptiveness and usefulness. There is a clear acknowledgement of the fact that actual learning will always be complex and hard to measure.

*Sources*:
ODI Interview
CIDA KM Secretariat Prepared Response to Key Questions
CIDA Report on Plans and Priorities 2003-04
CIDA Departmental Performance Report 2002-03
Bellanet

## Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)

Agriculture throughout the world is being transformed by globalisation of markets, the spread of new IT, and other social, economic, political and environmental trends. Against this background of rapid change in agriculture and in the needs of partner organisations, the CGIAR requires a strong culture of knowledge management and sharing. This will complement other efforts to improve OL and performance. The importance of information and knowledge strategies is reflected in the creation of a high-level position of Chief Information Officer (CIO) in 2003.

In recent years, three distinct initiatives have aimed to achieve significant improvements in knowledge management and sharing and in the learning orientation of the CGIAR: the Organisational Change Program (OCP), the Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative and the KS Project. With a number of pilot initiatives, the KS project has a budget of just under $400k for the period 2004 to 2005. The KS project employs a 'learning-by-doing' approach that involves 'KS Champions' in CGIAR centres and programs in planning, implementing and reviewing its activities. Activities have included a review of the status of KS and ILAC in the CGIAR, a study of human resource policies in relation to KS and organisational learning, facilitation training and pilot projects in four CGIAR centres and one Challenge Program.

The three-year OCP, funded by the Ford Foundation, identified the need for people-focused approaches, and funded CoPs and extensive knowledge strategies at two centres, International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas (ICARDA), as well as supporting a range of other activities. CoPs were supported to foster discussion of issues and to seek creative solutions, initially to KM issues. A system-wide CoP of IM professionals identified opportunities for achieving significant savings. Application of KM/S also sought to reduce the timeframe of the research cycle and help build external relations.

The ICT-KM Program has worked with other change efforts in the CGIAR to shift the system from a collection of independent centres to a program- and institute-based system built around shared challenges, with expanded teamwork, collaboration, KS and a culture of learning and change. Finally the ILAC initiative seeks to make agricultural research more effective at reducing poverty by fostering learning at the level of individuals, groups, and organizations, and to improve their performance, based on the results of this learning. The strategy has been to raise awareness and to build capacity for learning and change through action research and reviews of innovation processes. The ILAC Initiative also supports the reorientation of management processes, particularly those concerned with planning and evaluation. These activities complement KS activities.

To realise the potential of knowledge-based strategies, there is a need to share experience and tacit knowledge to make more effective use of multidisciplinary research capacities. The overall approach to KM is that it is a menu of approaches and tools for dealing with a rapidly changing world and to achieve objectives.

As knowledge is central to CGIAR work, KM and KS are crucial to the success of the system. Consequently, they merit significant investments of time and resources. Leadership support and changes in management processes and organisational culture are all critical for mainstreaming improvements in knowledge management and sharing, organisational learning and organisational performance. The ICT-KM Program and the ILAC Initiative are fostering changes at various levels within the CGIAR – ranging from the level of individual research scientists and projects all the way up to human resource policies and procedures which cut across all the centres.

*Sources*:
ODI Consultation
CGIAR Documents on CGIAR website

## Department for International Development (DFID)

The aim of DFID KS is to 'maximise... collective knowledge resources to help meet the Millennium Development Goals and [internal] targets'. KS strategies within DFID aim to do this by improving efficiency and effectiveness of working practices. As such, KS addresses internal capacities to deal with new opportunities (such as new and better ICTs), new challenges (such as information overload) and existing issues (such as internal staff capacities to deal with the complexity of development cooperation) (DFID, 2002a).

The knowledge strategy promotes a range of internal KS tools, covering the full spectrum from tacit to explicit tools. One key element has been the development and maintenance of 'how to' notes on key themes and processes. These are targeted at identified areas for improvement of practice or knowledge within the agency. There are around 70 CoPs, many of which are informal with no tangible hub such as an intranet page, although some have allocated staff time for administrative or thematic support. The outputs of these CoPs are largely unfunded and, perhaps as a consequence, are generally unrecognised. Interdisciplinary staff seminars have increased in number, in order to ensure ideas are shared about ongoing work and theoretical underpinnings. Such sharing is supported by discussion groups, virtual team working, and web casts, all of which have been introduced. Training has also been made available on the use of these tools (DFID, 2000a; DFID, 2002a).

While knowledge and information competencies play on the performance management system, there is no evidence yet of systematic application of team-based learning activities such as AARs or peer assists. Rather, OL appears to be achieved through the 'downloading' of experience in the form of information materials. The key focus of this is the intranet, which is the platform for the vast majority of internal KS. Dedicated editorial staff are employed to monitor contributions and to ensure general adherence to quality standards. The use of the intranet varies across groups, with some using it extensively and others hardly at all, but the average is on the plus side, and the intranet is increasingly used as a means of promoting dialogue within the agency about management and direction. The daily newspaper, Spotlight, is a key internal sharing tool, with some healthy jostling evident amongst staff competing for the daily headline positions. The intranet is also used to support some key operational tasks, with the travel portal cited as a key source of efficiency gains. The Connect tool is considered to be a very important element – a yellow pages tool capturing information about staff and their past and current activities.

Other information systems include PRISM, a programme assessment system, and many databases. Principles are in place governing use of email, and a document and record management system is in the process of being installed. The latter will make explicit the division between the intranet (sharing) and the document management system (storing). DFID has made major inroads into developing supporting infrastructure for knowledge and learning work. In addition to dedicated satellite space from which all country offices can benefit, the new headquarters clearly take account of the impact of space on KS (Bellanet Profile, King and McGrath, 2004).

DFID supports numerous external knowledge networks such as GDNet, SciDev, id21, ELDIS and Livelihoods Connect. Id21 is a particularly successful dissemination vehicle which provides a web, email and hard copy research reporting service. Livelihoods Connect is a platform for information pertaining to the sustainable livelihoods approach. While these platforms disseminate DFID material in the sense that DFID is part of the development community, they are not focused on the specific promotion of DFID knowledge to external parties. The provision of editorial freedom to these external knowledge projects is seen as a particular boon, but may also stands at odds with the approach to influence and shape policy debates as espoused in the knowledge strategy (DFID Website; King and McGrath, 2004). There is also a need to integrate better the diverse systems that

exist externally, to ensure that the IM effort is not duplicated. External aspects of KS, specifically as relating to Southern partners, are seen as needing further encouragement. The positioning of DFID HQ as a hub for the country offices should support this.

M&E was represented in two ways – first, the improved dissemination of evaluation findings, and the improved evaluation of knowledge and learning. The latter was seen as best based on internal research focusing on what benefits had been realised, and what further could be done. Internal audits had been applied to the intranet, for example, and in some instances, external consultants are brought in to provide these services. Importantly, such work is carried out at key milestones rather than on a continuous basis.

Key barriers to learning and sharing were cited as cultural and behavioural. Despite the information bias of DFID's knowledge work, technology is not seen to be the key driver of organisational change, which is seen as taking more time and effort than was expected at the outset. The process of managing organisational change was likened to 'steering an oil tanker... you can steer like crazy without seeing any change in direction for a long time...'

*Sources*:
ODI Consultation
DFID Website
DFID documents:
- 'The Knowledge Sharing and Communications Snap-Shot Study', 2002
- 'Doing the Knowledge', 2000
- 'Doing the Knowledge II', 2002

Bellanet Profile
King and McGrath (2004)

# European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM)

Both the 1993 and 1997 Strategic Plans see information and communication as leading to improved internal and external efficiencies, with EU-African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) partners seen as the focus of collaborative information activities.

There are three aspects to ECDPM knowledge-based strategy: acting as an information broker; building partnerships and networking; and programme activities which focus on capacity building, policy dialogue, and information.

Internal activities have included: the use of email; an internal library; staff training on publications work; bibliographic database that eventually became 'webliographic'; database applications; and web authoring tools (developed with OneWorld), and an intranet (Centre Wide Web).

External work has included: newsletters; publications and dissemination; working papers and policy management briefs; negotiating briefs; policy management reports; newsletters; flyers; and infobriefs.

There have been numerous external collaborators on content issues, leading to initiatives such as Euforic, a European gateway to development cooperation information, and el@nd – a collaboration among development libraries in Europe. Work with International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity (CIDSE), European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes (EADI), and Euforic led to a shared contacts database for use internally and externally.

The Euforic project was focused on are sharing knowledge and information, connecting people and ideas, and acting as a platform for joint action between EU member countries and developing countries. Euforic is now the main formal information resource for the Centre, and it has expanded external audiences simultaneously. The goals of internal and external access were seen as complementary, leading to both improved efficiency and improved visibility.

The majority of the internal knowledge work has focused on knowledge storage and portals. Learning from projects and programmes is disseminated via various publications. The collaborative aspects of knowledge strategies have been covered in activities such as e-conferences. Face-to-face meetings are also an important platform for dialogue. The limited internal capacities for information work have been complemented through cooperation and collaboration activities. Joint ventures and partnerships have been critical to external information work. Internal mainstreaming of information has been achieved through the promotion of information in programmatic work.

Key issues are trust and a 'do it yourself' attitude that prevents people from approaching each other. The key pursuit has been joint action, sharing tasks, ownership and responsibility with partners for the benefit of those in the South.

*Sources*:
ODI Consultation
ECDPM Information Policies
ECDPM Website

## Help Age International (HAI)

The HAI Strategic Development Plan 2003-07 states that a key objective for strengthening the organisation relates to 'developing coherent structures and systems to gather information / make links between programmes, policy and advocacy work, improve internal reporting and intranet development.' Within this, the OL initiative aims for improved effectiveness and efficiency, ensuring staff development through training and on-the-job experience, organisational development through strategic alliances, partnerships and policy influence through advocacy and campaigning. Learning therefore is seen to take place at multiple levels within the organisation, and is promoted as such.

There are formal activities for strategic sharing of knowledge, such as project reviews, evaluations and donor reports. In day-to-day work, mechanisms such as monthly reports and inter/intra-team meetings are useful. There is also a lot of informal sharing, through emails, country visit reports, briefing meetings, hallway meetings, social events and so on. While many of these mechanisms are applied in an ad-hoc manner, it is unclear as to how well these informal sharing activities actually contribute to organisation-wide KS when there is no mechanism for this to take place. Of course a lot of sharing is necessarily informal but it is important not to assume that this is occurring effectively when there is no way of tracking it.

The impact of learning outcomes is dependent on a number of factors. For example, with valuations, it depends on the whether the evaluator was internal or external, on the people in the team or programme being evaluated. There is some cross-organisational sharing, which has not been inhibited by departmental silos, at least not in the London office. There are perhaps greater barriers to learning and sharing in and between the Southern offices.

Electronic systems provide crucial support to learning and sharing. The major system is the new shared 'Everyone drive', use of which is governed by explicit rules which form part of the induction of new staff. Currently being rolled out for remote access, it will eventually be a common international platform. Complementing this is the rollout of an indexed keyword system which enables staff to classify all electronic files at point-of-save, enabling easy searching and access by all colleagues. A small paper-based resource centre is used as an archive of information, books and other hard copy material, and is the home of the database of publications, currently being updated. The decision has been made to move to a content managed website, and this may bring about additional resources to develop the intranet.

HAI recognises knowledge and learning as an ongoing process rather than a two or three year project. The approach will only be successful when the principles of knowledge and learning are integrated into the work of all staff members. Barriers do however exist. Partly related to time, this is also an issue of capacity: extra resources are required to identify entry points in a strategic and systematic manner. Without this capacity, knowledge and sharing may remain 'unfocused', with HAI staff left unaware of how or what or with whom to share, and of appropriate approaches and tools to use. Further, as knowledge and learning is not a core function of what HAI do, it is possible that there will never be significant direct resources in this area, and knowledge work will remain opportunistic and ad-hoc in its application.

There are two upsides to this picture, both of which relate to the very nature of NGOs. First, strategic planning can easily fall into the 'devise and revise' cycle, and in line with this, a strategic approach to knowledge may not deliver a tool to guide monitoring and implementation, leading to wasted effort. The very nature of KM and learning may be adverse to 'big' strategies, but at the same time there is a clear need for a proper plan and set of concepts on approaches to KM and learning which acts as a 'common denominator' agreement for all staff and as a basis to seek

resources and so on. Second, knowledge and learning is ad-hoc and opportunistic because development NGO work, by its very nature, is ad-hoc and opportunistic. Crucially, this is not a knowledge and learning issue; rather, it is connected to the perennial problems of funding, and linked to this, staff turnover. So while these broader points create issues for knowledge and learning, the fact is that flexibility and creative mileage are strong points of NGOs, and, paradoxically, both are fundamental to learning and knowledge work. Overall, and despite the initial focus of the work on IM issues, it is critical to move forward with the attitude that knowledge and learning ultimately relies on people.

**Examples of current HAI Activities**

- Monthly meetings
- Project reviews
- Evaluations
- Donor reports
- Trip reports
- Social gatherings
- Inter-team meetings
- Departmental meetings
- Thematic workshops
- Website and Intranet
- Shared Everyone Drive
- Indexing and keywording of all documents
- Knowledge and learning circular

*Sources*:
ODI Interview
HAI Organisational Learning Paper
HAI Knowledge Thesis

## Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG)

ITDG works with poor people to demonstrate practical technological answers to poverty. It defines 'technology' as including physical infrastructure, machinery and equipment, the associated knowledge and skills, and the capacity to organise and use all of these. Given this, it might be expected that KS is reflected strongly in the organisational mission statement, and this is indeed the case, as shown in the following quote:

> 'ITDG aims to eradicate poverty in developing countries by developing and using technology, and by demonstrating results, sharing knowledge and influencing others.'

The 2003-07 Strategy is subtitled 'Knowledge, Impact, Influence' and also clearly demonstrates the centrality of knowledge to organisational goals.

In terms of organisational structure, the new International Programme Teams focus on distinct themes, with cross-cutting organisation-wide aims. This matrix structure allows for clearer definition and classification of ITDG's portfolio of work in functional and strategic dimensions. This also provides a platform for improved creation and sharing of knowledge. The International Programme Team leaders meet annually to discuss and share key lessons. Similarly, the group management team, made up of Country Directors, meet biannually and discuss issues of strategic leadership.

With offices in 7 countries as well as the UK, and little in the way of shared infrastructure, relationships are key to effective KS. Much of the work has been promoted within the framework of Learning Before – Learning During – Learning After. Diverse activities take place within the framework, but their take-up has not generally been systematic. One of the most recent of these activities, at the time of writing, was the new six-stage project cycle which is being rolled out, focusing on information collection and collation to embed learning within the business planning processes.

The Knowledge and Information Services Unit consists of an international technical enquiries service, Hands On (a unit providing support to the multimedia Hands On series), a photo library and internal resource centre. There are also more informal KS mechanisms. A story gathering team interviews all staff after missions and trips and shares the findings, and in specific country offices, there are shared presentations on key narratives regarding relevant topics. Internal discussions and seminars are common, one of the most distinctive of which is the Chief Executive Officer (CEO)-led weekly email discussion which provides short opinion pieces in order to develop internal dialogue.

While CoPs have attracted a lot of attention, the structure of ITDG in combination with technological limitations of Southern offices, means that they have not always delivered on their promise. CoPs have been found to work if there is a relationship already in place, but evidence shows that they cannot be created by technological connections alone. The International Programme Team coordinators are resourced to facilitating information exchange among international teams.

Training is used for individual learning, and staff appraisals are being developed to build knowledge and learning into core staff competencies. However, the perception is that links between HR and knowledge work are not well established. To date, communications has been a separate department from Knowledge and Information Services, which makes for further difficulties in terms of implementing knowledge strategies. This organisational structure is currently under review.

Much of the KS within ITDG is of a codified, explicit nature. The ITDGNet intranet system, shared drives, and numerous databases all fulfil different IM functions, and some systems that should be logically managed together are managed by separate parts of the organisation (for example, the Intranet and the Internet). There is a key need for rules for the use of the shared drive and the intranet. There is also a need for common infrastructure across the country offices to facilitate the global sharing of explicit knowledge. This is being resourced and implemented in partnership with CISCO through a content delivery network project, Project Reach. ITDG is reviewing its enterprise architecture to develop integrated systems to support internal and external KS and has invested in a Knowledge Transfer Partnership with Cranfield University to study how it can make best use of ICTs to share information with external audiences.

Implementation and systematic uptake of knowledge and learning activities are crucially dependent on management capacities and encouragement. Take-up of new initiatives is usually driven by informal networks and a few personalities working in tandem.

The barriers to KM at ITDG are decentralisation, the lack of common infrastructure, internal politics, and the lack of a culture of sharing. There is also an issue of inadequate existing systems for sharing core information. For example, project managers at the country level are required to submit monthly project reports to head-office, but despite this, UK staff still contact these managers frequently for information, leading to complaints.

The time issue is often stated as a barrier by staff (for example, in the internal knowledge audit). However, the fundamental issue is not one of time scarcity, but rather that time is prioritised according to a set of values that do not allow much room for reflection and learning. Another time-related issue results from the long turnaround time of knowledge-based strategies. Findings and results are not always disseminated in a timely fashion. The lack of M&E mechanisms for knowledge activities may compound this issue. While it is true that individuals need to be more supported by the organisation in their work, staff also need to become a little more forward in engaging with each other.

**Examples of current ITDG Activities**

- Matrix restructuring
- Training CD ROMs
- Knowledge-based project cycle
- Performance management system
- Staff appraisals
- Communities of practice
- Story-gathering which interviews all staff after missions and trips
- Weekly shared PPT presentation on key narratives (in one country office)
- CEO-generated weekly discussion pieces (‘Off the Cuff’) which provide short opinion pieces on thematic or technical issues
- Databases
- Website
- ITDGNet (Intranet)
- Shared drives and document repositories
- Bespoke project tracking system

*Sources:*
ODI Interview
ITDG Website
ITDG Documents

## Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)

JICA's knowledge management function has the primary objective of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the agency by ensuring better KS within the organisation. The KM project is intended to give the non-development generalists access to Japanese and global knowledge on development issues through JICA Knowledgesite. KS is very rigorously managed within JICA, as may be seen in its use of CoPs or the management system for feeding back results of evaluation.

Under the framework entitled JICA Knowledge Management (JKM) with the advisory support of Professor Ikujiro Nonaka, a founder of knowledge based management, JICA has a number of CoPs, all of which have a core group and a larger voluntary member group. These networks have been identified and managed into existence rather than allowed to emerge informally, and in charge of producing JICA's thematic guidelines on each sector in which JICA extends cooperation projects.

JICA's external KS includes support to the generation and dissemination of global public goods. JICA has also been a strong supporter of Southern knowledge capacity through cooperation with higher education.

The JICA aid philosophy stresses the passing on of experience, knowledge and attitudes. JICA experts are often reticent towards becoming involved with policy issues, and as such, they are more likely to be found in middle-level practitioner positions, focusing on people-to-people transfer of skills and technology. There is also training provided for overseas citizens and JICA has recently held the Knowledge Creation training seminar under the supervision of Professor Nonaka.

At the same time, JICA has also supported South-South KS collaboration, especially in East and South-East Asia, and more recently in Africa.

*Sources*:
ODI Consultation
JICA Website
JICA Annual Report 2000
King and McGrath (2004)

## Save the Children UK (SCF-UK)

The underlying basis of Save the Children's work in programmes and advocacy is a commitment to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The role of learning, along with impact assessment, is to support the development of rights based frameworks and methodologies for greater accountability and learning, ensuring that Save the Children UK work produces maximum impacts in the lives of children and young people. The newly established Policy and Learning team is leading on issues of child rights programming (including issues of diversity and children's participation), accountability and impact. The Global Impact Monitoring (GIM) Framework allows programmes and policy teams to better understand the impact of their work; the processes that led to this impact; and the changes required to improve this impact. A key part of the role of OL is the implementation of the GIM framework.

An internal CoP, the Effective Programmes initiative, has been initiated with the aims of ensuring that SCF-UK's generic programming approaches (of child rights programming, tackling issues of diversity, children's participation, accountability to children, impact assessment and learning) are integrated and implemented across all programmes. The network is supported by communications systems, and has representatives from policy (including advocacy), funding, and media departments as well as members from the international operations department in Head Office and in the field (there is one senior member of staff per country as well as a representative from each regional office). In addition, members meet annually, and the work of the network is strongly plugged into country planning and review processes with solid back up from senior management. The network builds the capacity of its members to ensure that generic programming approaches are well understood and implemented as well as establishing links and improving communication across departments and with country programme staff to ensure that lessons learned are shared across the organisation.

The driver of this learning initiative has been the fact that the ability to assess SCF-UK's impact at the programme and advocacy levels needs to be improved. In particular, SCF-UK aims to strengthen its ability to use evidence to identify what works and what does not, so that learning from these assessments can translate into meaningful recommendations and hence, improved programming and advocacy.

However, many staff members do not sufficiently value evaluations and impact assessments. A lack of (technical) capacity and necessary resources, combined with some staff members viewing evaluations as purely a donor requirement, can lead to poor quality evaluations. In addition, the activist nature of certain teams (for example, emergencies) makes them harder to tie down for a reflective learning process. Since poor quality evaluations do not teach us much, evaluations can be seen as a burden that do not offer much benefit to programmes who are often over-burdened with competing work demands as it is. Through improving SCF-UK's ability to assess its impact, it hopes to engender a culture where impact assessments are viewed as a fundamental opportunity to learn from successes and mistakes so that it can improve its future work and share learning across the development community.

Across SCF-UK, at present learning does not occur in a systematic way, and whilst it is being increasingly prioritised, there is still some lack of clarity about what learning actually means, who should be doing it and for what purposes. The Effective Programmes initiative goes some way to clarifying the relationships and synergies between policy, programmes, advocacy and learning. In addition, the Learning and Impact Assessment Unit are working closely with those responsible for database management, to ensure that information contained in this database is as useful as possible (for programme, policy and advocacy departments, as well as for other departments) and that it is used effectively throughout the organisation.

While senior staff place learning as a top priority, improving the SCF ability to learn is itself a learning task. There will always be room for improvement, and the need to encourage the realisation that whilst the task of learning is challenging, it brings great rewards, and that the path of learning never ends.

*Sources*:
ODI Interview
SCF Website
SCF Global Impact Assessment Paper

## Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida)

Sida has identified improvements in knowledge as central to the challenge of working as a development cooperation agency. The emphasis is on shared knowledge generation or learning as the key activity. This is seen as fundamental to acquisition and ownership of relevant and useful knowledge, which in turn is a driver of development.

The Unit for OL, which takes responsibility for knowledge and learning, is a division housed within the larger HR Department. A number of informal CoPs exist, and a range of programmes and activities are used to implement the Sida vision of being a learning organisation. These include mapping of competency needs, facilitation training for managers, team-working, mentoring and e-learning. Training modules on development are available for Sida and partner organisation staff, and learning is also a key element of staff appraisal. An annual HR Report communicates information about these diverse learning activities and the changes they have brought about. This is an important M&E mechanism. While there is also work being undertaken on aspects of knowledge management such as electronic documentation, these initiatives are not central to the drive towards learning.

In external activities, Sida stresses the importance of mutual knowledge construction and national ownership of development, which it sees as standing in contrast to the 'best practices' approach put forward by other agencies. This is particularly demonstrated by its mutual learning approach to capacity building, demonstrated in its work on 'twinning' which is based on the principle that Sida merely facilitates the application of knowledge already residing with its partners. While there is an overall acknowledged tension between learning and disbursement of funds, the visionary nature of the Sida ideals, as evidenced in the quote below, should not be discounted:

> '...solutions to complex social and political problems are always 'local'. Solutions can be stimulated by but not solved through transfer of knowledge of analytical frameworks or foreign experts...'

Proviso: The vision for knowledge learning within Sida has undergone changes since the time of research.

*Sources*:
ODI Consultation
Gustafsson, I (2000)
King, K and McGrath, S (2004)
Sida Website
Sida documents:
'Mission Statement', 1995
'Sida Looks Forward', 1997
'Capacity Development as a Strategic Question on Development Cooperation', 2000
'Human Resources Report 2001', 2001

## Skillshare

Learning is at the heart of Skillshare's mission to share and develop skills, facilitating organisational effectiveness and supporting organisational growth in order to achieve partnership-driven sustainable development.

Clear procedures for learning are applied throughout all of the work of the organisation: from pre-placement briefings to exit interviews, the knowledge of workers is actively developed, shared and stored. Staff development is fundamental, and the achievements of the Skillshare are proven by their recent Investors in People accreditation: amongst the UK organisations covered in the study, Skillshare was the only organisation to achieve such accreditation. Staff development is supported at the head office and the country level, and is expanded at country level to include partner capacity building.

Other activities include: informal mentoring; secondments from head office to country level and back; internal and external newsletters; staff away days; and the worldwide Process Improvement initiative. There are also significant social activities which are seen to promote informal KS.

**Examples of current Skillshare Activities**

- Volunteer preparation programme M&E, personal development, impact assessment, awareness-raising
- Quality Improvements in the workplace initiative
- Learning reviews
- Staff development activities including a flexible induction process (with a built-in feedback mechanism)
- Personal development plans based on training needs identified in annual appraisals; Organisation wide training on broad institutional needs (e.g. IT applications)
- Exit interviews for staff in the UK and the country offices
- Staff away days (to discuss key issues such as the corporate strategy)
- Direct training programmes for new managers.
- Training in country offices to build partner capacity including coaching and leadership development
- Process Improvement Courses for all staff
- Reporting mechanism for programme funding
- Coaching secondments to rotate staff across country office
- External newsletters on overall work done by the organisation, and internal newsletters
- Social gatherings, cakes on birthdays
- Trip presentations
- Narratives, quizzes, etc
- Exit interviews
- *Driving fear out of the workplace* initiative
- Investors in People accreditation
- Shared facilities on Lotus Notes, including shared diaries and key documents databases
- Website
- Management information system

Relevant IT systems include an IT-based reporting system used for programme funding, a training skills system, and Lotus Notes. There is a drive to establish common systems across all offices to ensure that there is sufficient ownership by the country offices. Of particular interest is the fact that the new IT system was piloted in the country offices before being rolled out in the UK.

Exchanging knowledge with partners in developing countries is a core aspect of Skillshare's work. Much goes on in the way of partner capacity building in key areas, and in one-off partnerships.

Mechanisms for learning and sharing are regularly reviewed and updated to ensure that stagnation is avoided. All courses and programs also have regular evaluations.

There are issues round balancing learning with confidentiality, especially at the individual level. It must be accepted that not all staff are learners at work – some people will always see it as a means to an end. The monitoring of funding flows often makes heavy information demands, to the detriment of other forms of information exchange. Cultural differences across offices can also act as a barrier to learning.

*Sources*:
ODI Interview
Skillshare Website

## Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO)

The VSO approach to knowledge and learning is both tacit and explicit, and this is supported by the increasing recognition that a more integrated approach is required. The Information Services team has been re-organised and moved to be housed within the International Services division, alongside HR. This has been in recognition of the fact that HR, IT and communications were too separate and a holistic view of these organisational activities was crucial.

Current activities include a recruitment drive to fill key knowledge gaps; intranet development; provision of external courses; sponsorship for courses for staff; learning contracts and training opportunities for all staff. Less formal work includes the application of action learning sets, and a very popular mentoring scheme for staff. There are also lunchtime talks, staff tours, information sharing events such as staff conferences.

Supporting systems include the recently launched online catalogue, which facilitates the international storage of volunteer stories and 'significant change' stories, as well as resources developed by volunteers and other external organisations. All contributions are quality checked and catalogued. Increasingly, these stories are seen to be replacing the formal reporting system. There is also VolZone, which contains 'good practice' message boards to encourage sharing between volunteers working in specialist areas such as NGO capacity building. The VISION intranet is the portal for sharing information within VSO, and it is being continually developed to realise its potential for KS.

**Examples of current VSO Activities**

- Staff development policies and supporting materials
- External courses
- Sponsorship for courses
- Learning contracts
- Action learning sets
- Mentoring scheme
- Lunchtime talks
- Staff tours
- Information sharing events e.g. staff conference
- Online catalogue – international storage of volunteer stories, significant change stories, resources developed by volunteers and external organisations
- VolZone – good practice message boards to encourage sharing between volunteers
- VISION – international intranet for sharing information within VSO
- Website and Databases
- Return volunteer weekends

The key to IM is for all staff to have easy access to VSO's vast range of information assets, and to capture information, for example from returned volunteer weekends. Access is crucial – there is a need to find more efficient ways of storing information. It is important to reduce the time lapse between events and their reporting – many of the issues boil down to issues of time and capacity.

Knowledge and learning work is characterised as very ad hoc. Where guidelines exist, they are not always followed, and where they are followed, inconsistencies are apparent in their application. Managers have the freedom to work in different ways, so a consistent approach is hard to achieve. Therefore, access to organisational resources is dependent on the teams in which one works, and the individual managerial approach.

Information is very slow moving as everyone has heavy workloads and communications is not an issue that is prioritised. There are some impenetrable barriers and blockages, such as the geographic and cultural separation of programme officers and main offices. Information flows within offices also face problems.

Different ways of monitoring and evaluating programmes are being investigated and learning is being captured as part of this process, with a view to producing standard learning processes. These are also required for project work. Some of the previous learning activities such as Learning

Groups, a cross divisional meeting to talk about key issues, have been disbanded following the recent restructuring.

The restructuring was primarily to re-align the organisation to support the work of the new strategic plan and reduce some of the boundaries between departments. The positioning and responsibility of an Information and KM team became a key issue during the restructuring process. Overall, however, it is too soon to tell the impact of the restructuring on learning issues.

Overall, VSO is seen as being highly operationally focused and evolutionary in terms of its approach to change. Generally, staff do recognise the need for knowledge and learning work, but there is pressure in trying to implement relevant strategies. These pressures are based primarily on resources and staff capacities. There are some issues around understanding the value of knowledge and its importance to VSO and this is reflected within organisational priorities.

*Sources*:
ODI Interview
VSO Website
VSO Documents

## World Bank (WB)

The World Bank's knowledge management strategy is part of its re-branding, announced in 1996 at the inaugural speech of James Wolfensohn. Wolfensohn argued that the Bank should complement its position as a financial bank by also being a 'knowledge bank', a clearinghouse for knowledge about development generated by the Bank and all other players in the development sector, since the decades of knowledge of development successes and failures they possess is often more important than loans. As well as being a broker of knowledge, the Bank would provide technical assistance and advice on key development issues. This idea was a central element of the Strategic Compact of the Bank (World Bank, 1997).

The approach of the knowledge bank was to restructure the Bank and its work in the face of external critiques. This restructuring became part of a broader vision for aid work which was promoted in the 1998 World Development Report – Knowledge for Development. These two events, perhaps more than any other, have driven the rapid spread of knowledge-based strategies across the development agency community. It should be borne in mind that these relate to different, but related elements of development work: the Knowledge Bank relates to organisational change with IT improvements thrown in, while Knowledge for Development is about how countries can identify strategies to use their knowledge for economic growth. The Bank strategy is managed by knowledge and learning specialists across the different Regions and Networks with a small central coordination unit housed within the World Bank Institute.

The rationale for the Knowledge Bank was very diverse, covering both internal and external aspects of the Bank's work. In brief summary, the strategic goals include higher levels of knowledge reuse; the reduction or elimination of duplicated work; increased quality and quantity of client services through enhanced access to Bank knowledge; strengthened comparative advantage in providing international best practice; stronger capacity building; providing a prerequisite for physical decentralisation and providing incentives for organisational development. Critical to this has been an appreciation of the need to listen and learn from clients, and to incorporate their views into Bank programs, to produce better results. These activities have been developed into a set of three strategic 'pillars' for the Knowledge Bank, as follows:

- Knowledge to support operations, e.g. thematic groups and advisory services;
- KS to clients and partners e.g. through learning networks;
- Client capacity building, through the work of the World Bank Institute, GDN, Knowledge for Development, and so on.

Specific knowledge activities are incredibly numerous and diverse, but at the forefront of the knowledge bank vision was the creation of the Bank's Networks, which were designed to share global knowledge and practices across the Regions. Another important dimension of the vision is the 80-plus thematic CoPs, integrated with help-desks, which support KS and learning on key issues. The prototype CoP was the Education Knowledge Management System (EKMS) which was typical of the networks that followed. EKMS works to identify best practices, provides training and advisory services, facilitates knowledge synthesis, stimulates discussion, provides information via a dedicated intranet website, and proactively identifies problems and needs for the 300-plus Bank education sector staff worldwide. These CoPs were designed to be formalised versions of the already existing *informal* communities that were the focus for Bank-wide KS.

Strong emphasis is placed on the use of stories rather than charts to explain knowledge management concepts to the organisation; on face to face interaction; and on the roll-out of common tools and technology throughout the organisation to put the wealth of knowledge the bank has acquired

through the decades into the hands of the ‘right people at the right time’. Emphasis is also placed on convening clients and partners to establish constructive dialogue and share lessons of development, and where the WB itself can learn: e Shanghai poverty conference is a good example of this convening role.

There are also a plethora of external projects to provide access and outreach to clients, partners, stakeholders and beneficiaries, through initiatives such as the Development Gateway, a web portal website on development issues, and the Global Development Network (GDN). GDN works to enhance the quality and availability of policy-oriented research and to strengthen the institutions which undertake this work – and knowledge management is a core aspect of this work. Learning needs are addressed through the Global Development Learning Network, an attempt to collect local knowledge of practices that impact on development, and to apply this knowledge in the planning and implementation of development policies and programmes. Also of interest here is the Indigenous knowledge programme, which focuses on better use of local knowledge in the Africa region.

Information-focused ventures have included: the building of the Peoples Pages (an extensive task at an organisation as large as the bank), with work now underway to build a portal-based directory of expertise; making key statistics available online; and provision of access to transaction information. The overall support for knowledge work has a number of elements including databases for codified knowledge (e.g. terms of reference, consultants directory, who knows what, lessons learned, articles, books and reports); Knowledge Bases via websites or Lotus Notes (containing best practices, sector strategies, tool kits, model outputs, analytical tools, sources of subject-driven information and think pieces) and Help Desks (low-tech but manned by experts for answering complex queries and customising interventions according to specialised needs).

Ongoing M&E has taken place on the basis of narratives. These may be seen as problematic as they tend to share the successes but not the fracture points in the knowledge strategy. However, the 2003 OED evaluation, covered later in this case study, has provided an invaluable assessment of the knowledge initiative. The specific response to the study that will be built by the knowledge team in the Bank is worth further attention.

There are still barriers remaining to knowledge and learning principles being more widespread. Issues include shifting the culture towards sharing, which is the biggest obstacle; setting and implementing quality standards; maintaining the system to avoid knowledge ‘junkyards’; ensuring that the system stays demand-driven; balancing the need for new information versus better access to current information and resolving external issues, such as confidentiality. Resolving these issues will be essential to achieving an integrated approach across the organisation.

The November 2003 OED evaluation of the Knowledge Bank approach provided an objective critique of the knowledge and learning strategies. The viewpoint was expressed that while the Bank has done much to develop the architecture for supporting knowledge strategies, work processes and governance arrangements are trailing behind. This must be balanced with the fact that the implementation of knowledge and learning at the Bank has always been decentralised. The business objectives were seen as only partially realised, due to a need for closer integration with core operational activities of the Bank. Further, the knowledge approach has been one of aggregation and sharing, leaving the adaptation and application of knowledge to end users. With the lack of integration with core activities, the perception of knowledge work in some quarters is that it is not mission critical. Knowledge management is still not seen in context of Bank operations, specifically the lending side.

The external programmes such as GDN and the Development Gateway also face challenges. These include ensuring continuing value in the rapidly changing environment, financial sustainability of programs and partners, governance and management arrangements and a clearer definition of the Bank's evolving role. There have been some external criticisms made of the knowledge initiative from outside the Bank, covering a wide range of issues such as insufficient independence of governance, insufficient consultation and communication, and the potential competition posed to other such initiatives.

Overall, the lack of incentives for sharing, and strong knowledge leadership that has not been followed by clear governance and management structures are seen as the major barriers to realising the vision of the Knowledge Bank. There is therefore a clear need for defined responsibilities and accountabilities, for tighter linking to core lending and non–lending processes, and for the development of robust, outcome-oriented M&E systems. While the Knowledge Bank has been successful in some key areas, notably in the provision of support to the vision with improved systems and architectures, there is still a need to address the key issues of organisational culture and the role of knowledge and learning in core operations to realise the original vision.

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## World Vision

The World Vision strategy for knowledge and learning combines both knowledge collection and people connection approaches to ensure that the organisation can learn effectively from its work both in the field and at office level. Top level commitment to this strategy is demonstrated by the creation of the position of Director of KM, who is to take responsibility for learning across the 100 international offices. This commitment has been diffused throughout the organisation through a number of mechanisms: key amongst these has been the process of redefining all job descriptions to take account of knowledge and learning competencies. Perceptions of these competencies vary widely, from individual to individual, and across departments. Some teams, such as disaster recovery, emergencies or marketing, are recognised as internal leaders in this area. This status is dependent on how effectively and systematically they apply mechanisms for knowledge and learning in their work.

The key mechanisms used by World Vision are learning reviews, team appraisals and exit interviews. Learning reviews vary in scale; some are massive undertakings which attempt to synthesise lessons learned after major emergency actions. Others relate to day-to-day work, and such smaller-scale sessions are increasingly being used across the organisation. Another widespread tool is team appraisals, which was described as one of the most useful learning mechanisms. This involves a team getting together to look at how it has performed over the last few months, to review how good lessons had been captured, problems overcome, and changes in the internal and external environment dealt with.

Learning also happens on an informal basis, through a wide range of activities which include coffee mornings, guest speaker sessions and brown bag lunches. A key element of informal sharing is a dedicated canteen, which is a crucial element of the working environment. The learning that flows from such informal activities was seen as possibly longer term as regards its scope for change.

There is a proactive individual training programme which targets thematic knowledge gaps amongst the staff members (e.g. what is development? How do we mainstream HIV-AIDS into responses?) as well as addressing specific needs identified in personal development plans and objective reviews (communications skills, writing, etc).

World Vision uses a number of systems that support internal OL. In the UK office, the intranet is used as the hub for information about operational work. Numerous other systems are also employed, including shared drives, Lotus Notes, a lessons learned system, and many different databases. The latter included the PARIS system which captures data for programmes, or systems used by particular business functions, such as the marketing database. The internet is used for external sharing of information about operational work, with project reports available for download. There is a monthly newsletter which also shares ongoing items of interest. At the strategic level external sharing was less apparent.

Future activities will take place under the umbrella of learning better across the 100 or so offices worldwide. A key element will be making systems of monitoring and evaluating more accurate – at present assessments of impacts are carried out on an annual basis. The key barrier to learning is seen as time. The 2004 restructuring was seen as slowing the shift towards learning in the short term, although the opinion was that it would have a positive impact overall.

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