

Discussion FORUM

Knowledge for Development— Impact on Donor Programs

Washington-area professionals gathered on June 30th for the eighteenth IRG Discussion Forum: Knowledge for Development—Impact on Donor Programs. The event was a joint venture of IRG and the Washington Chapter of the Society of International Development. Erik Johnson, co-leader of the World Bank's Knowledge Sharing Team; Susan Wallace, chair of USAID's Knowledge for Development Subcommittee; and Stacey Young, who leads USAID's Microenterprise Development Knowledge Management effort, summarized the findings of a recent knowledge-sharing workshop and conference and their practical implications for donor operations. The workshop, held June 23–25, was co-sponsored by the World Bank, UNDP, Bellanet International, and USAID. The World Bank hosted its annual Knowledge Fair and Conference on June 28–29.

Knowledge sharing is increasingly understood to be critical to improving the quality and extending the impact of development initiatives. Donor agencies actively seek ways to manage knowledge as a valuable asset that allows them to improve their strategies, operations, and results. Attendance at the June

2004 knowledge-sharing workshop and conference testified to the development community's interest in the topic and in the approaches to knowledge capture and dissemination being used by the agencies involved.

Knowledge Sharing Benefits All

Building Knowledge Sharing (KS) within an organization requires that all of its members recognize the need for and benefits of sharing knowledge. At USAID, for example, the three “faces” of the agency—public, government, and administrative—benefit from KS in different ways. The public face, which is directly involved in development assistance and disaster relief, sees improved development results through the use of

knowledge gained through its work and contributed by partners and clients. The government face, which defines agency policy and develops country strategies and program plans, is able to improve policy decisions by making the knowledge and experience gained through the agency's development

Efforts to strengthen human capacity and use it to its full potential are becoming more important in light of the fact that more than 70 percent of the present US federal workforce will be eligible to retire in 2010.



The forum began with a brief introduction of the speakers by Betsy Bassan, Vice President for Program Affairs for the Society of International Development, a co-sponsor with IRG of the event.

For More Information...

World Bank

http://www.worldbank.org/oed/knowledge_evaluation/

Bellanet

<http://open.bellanet.org/km/>

Knowledge for Development

<http://knowledge.usaid.gov/>

Development Communities of Practice at USAID

http://knowledge.usaid.gov/documents/cop_pilot.pdf

FRAME

www.framework.org

efforts available to decision makers.

The administrative face, which supports those policies and programs, can maximize productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness on the basis of information provided by other parts of the agency.

Information needed to ensure a development project's success is often found outside the implementing organization.

USAID's Knowledge for Development strategy is to access and leverage knowledge "across the extended enterprise," recognizing that innovative approaches may be found among stakeholders, government leaders, implementing and funding partners, other

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development organizations, think tanks and universities, and the beneficiaries themselves. Finding ways to share that knowledge can be critical to a project's outcome.

Capturing and sharing knowledge is also critical to an organization's

success. In light of the fact that more than 70 percent of the present U.S. federal workforce will be eligible to retire in 2010, utilizing methods to share the knowledge of these workers with younger staff can strengthen human capacity and optimize human resources.

Trust is Critical

Accessing and disseminating knowledge within a particular organization is only part of the challenge; getting information to the wider audience of development

workers is the other side of the coin.

While knowledge-sharing mechanisms offer an impressive variety of new tools and techniques for building capacity, building trust among

users is critical to ensuring that they are also used to their full potential.

Social networks that encourage openness and dialogue—where people can “agree to disagree”—are especially important in building this trust. The communities of practice (CoPs) that result from sharing knowledge about development needs and solutions in a social network are organic entities that require ongoing nurturing, resources, and a delicate balance between structure and freedom to experiment.

Concerted efforts to foster and promote CoPs or “virtual communities” can help improve service delivery dramatically, limit corruption, foster transparency, and

“Virtual communities,” E-development, and Web portals, can help improve service delivery dramatically, limit corruption, foster transparency, and empower people.

empower people. One such CoP, facilitated by Bellanet International, is the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) initiative. KM4Dev brings together 300 practitioners from around the world via a Web site and mailing list, providing news items, documents and reports, and

information from workshops. A USAID CoP, the Global Learning Portal, provides field-tested educational material and shares best practices with teachers around the world in four languages.

The Advantage of “Just Doing It”

Organizations are finding that it is more important just to start sharing problems, new ideas, and lessons learned rather than spend too much time on detailed KS strategies and work plans. Because organizations, like people, learn from their mistakes, it is more expedient and effective—and increasingly becoming more acceptable—to have an ongoing dialogue as opposed to producing a polished final report that may not get useful information into the right hands. Development agencies are beginning to realize that the learning process is an important and useful product in itself.

Microenterprise and microfinance development agencies seem to have adopted KS more readily than agencies involved in other types of development. This is because they deal directly with people in a field where very specific knowledge is needed for decision making, e.g., Is this struggling entrepreneur a good credit risk or not? This emphasis on immediate, practical considerations may hold an important lesson for everyone interested in knowledge management—the importance of focusing on problems that matter

and issues of immediate concern to their clients.

The ongoing challenge is to ensure that the fruits of KS are adopted, adapted, and applied widely. To do this, knowledge managers will need to continue their efforts to help developing nations build sustainable institutional capacity so

they can acquire and use the knowledge that is so rapidly becoming available to them.

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From left to right: Susan Wallace, chair of USAID’s Knowledge for Development Subcommittee; Stacey Young, who leads USAID’s Microenterprise Development Knowledge Management; and Erik Johnson, co-leader of the World Bank’s Knowledge Sharing Team.

About the Presenters

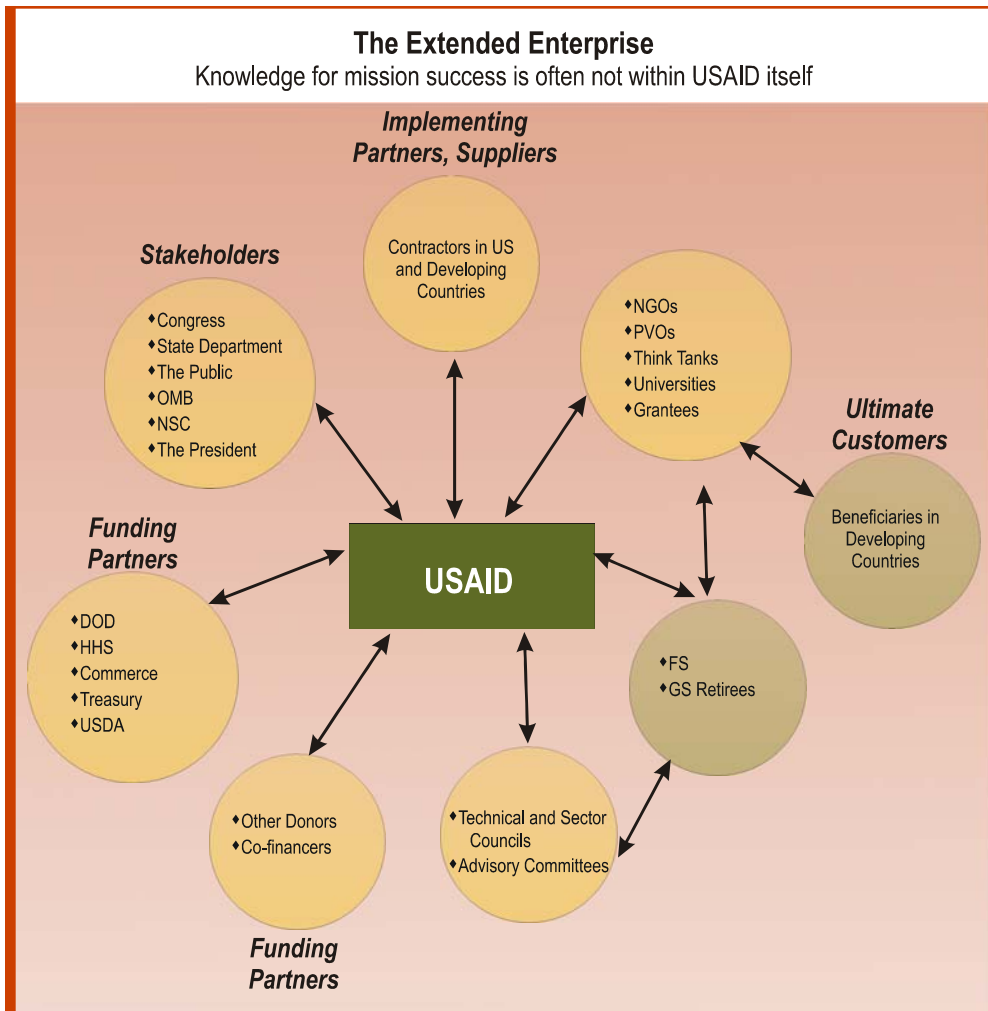
In his role as co-leader of the World Bank’s Knowledge Sharing Team, Erik Johnson is in charge of strategic issues, coordination, awareness building, capacity building. He also provides advice to Bank staff, clients, and partners on KS tools, approaches, and strategies. As a member of the Knowledge Secretariat, Mr. Johnson supports the work of the Vice-President’s Knowledge Steering Committee and the Knowledge Focal Points.

Prior to joining USAID, Susan Wallace, chair of USAID’s Knowledge for Development (KfD) Subcommittee, served as a career US Army officer. When she joined USAID after her retirement from the military, she immediately recognized that the Agency’s knowledge management goals closely resembled those of the Army’s KM program. Ms. Wallace has been posted in Germany, South Korea, Japan, and Belgium, where she worked with NATO Headquarters International Military Staff.

Stacey Young leads the Knowledge Management and Communications component of USAID’s Accelerated Microenterprise Advancement Project, the Microenterprise Results Reporting work, and the Poverty Measurement Tools development effort. Prior to joining USAID, Dr. Young was an independent consultant in Kenya and Uganda. She is the author of *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics, and the Feminist Movement*.

FORUM FEEDBACK

- ◆ Knowledge repositories such as Web sites, Web portals, and electronic discussion forums begin to disseminate and generate knowledge most effectively after people hear about them from others who have used them successfully and profitably. Word of mouth is still powerful.
- ◆ Successful KS is best achieved when sufficient resources are put into the effort and policy changes are instituted to encourage it.



About the IRG Discussion Forum

The IRG Discussion Forum, a monthly event hosted by Henri-Claude Bailly (chairman of IRG's Board of Advisors), addresses issues affecting international development. Each session is informal, with guest speakers and attendees participating in a personal capacity. For comments, questions, or information on the Discussion Forum, contact discussionforum@irgltd.com or call IRG at 202-289-0100.

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