



The future of knowledge management in large development programmes and organisations: lessons from a large-scale institutional experiment

J. Hagmann and H. Gillman

Correct citation:

J. Hagmann and H. Gillman (2017) *“The future of knowledge management in large development programmes and organisations: lessons from a large-scale institutional experiment”* in Knowledge Management for Development Journal, 13 (1): 4-24, <http://journal.km4dev.org>

The future of knowledge management in large development programmes and organisations: lessons from a large-scale institutional experiment

Jürgen Hagmann and Helen Gillman

This paper draws lessons on the future of knowledge management (KM) from the experiences of a process aimed at integrating KM and learning into projects in East and Southern Africa, supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD). KM in IFAD has mainly been aimed at enhancing knowledge sharing at headquarters, and in projects through regional networks. The challenge in the initiative in Eastern and Southern Africa was to make KM and learning practical enough and fully connected with innovation, leading to continuous improvement of project performance, so that project staff would embrace it, rather than seeing it as just another imposed idea. The action learning experiment over four years was successful with impact in many levels, and enabled in-depth learning about how to improve large development projects and programmes through a systemic learning approach. However, unless KM has a clear purpose and is fully integrated into business processes aimed at performance improvement, and its effectiveness can be measured, it will sooner or later fall prey to budgets cuts and other priorities. Unless results are evident, KM might end up like so many other interesting concepts in development organisations. Organisational development and KM need to become one continuous process. All of this throws into question the future of KM in large development organisations unless a very strong leadership and motivation to improve effectiveness throughout the hierarchy persists over a long term.

Keywords: knowledge management, institutionalisation of KM, learning, performance improvement, organisational development, development effectiveness, East Africa, Southern Africa

The context and its challenges

The broader environment in which development organizations are operating has changed substantially in the past decade. The aid effectiveness agenda, focusing on country ownership, harmonization and development impact, has translated into greater accountability for results. In turn, this has led to the requirement for concrete impact, measurable through hard data, and for better delivery processes. All of this means that knowledge, innovation and competence

are increasingly recognized as being fundamental for effective development. In turn, given the stronger focus on knowledge, and the recognition that no single actor can solve the complex problems of development alone, partnerships and networks have become more important. It is accepted – at least in the rhetoric – that learning approaches are part of the solution. It is therefore surprising that managing knowledge for learning and continuous improvement and greater impact is generally still underdeveloped in the practice of many large development organizations and programmes.

In many development organisations, knowledge management (KM) is still largely equated with information management and technology. While KM has become mainstream in many organisations – at least, on paper and in strategies of ‘knowledge’ or ‘learning’ organisations – critical voices continue to challenge its utility versus the cost. A number of development organizations, such as the Inter-American Development Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme and World Health Organization, are developing or improving KM performance measurement systems that are, to varying degrees, aligned with or embedded in corporate results measurement. Understanding of suitable KM indicators has evolved, but it continues to be largely the case that the impact of KM (if it is measured) is vague, often invisible, and in any case difficult to attribute. For example, a 2014 synthesis of 14 KM evaluation studies in six international financial institutions (African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, International Fund for Agricultural Development, International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank) concluded that KM impacts were hard to establish (Independent Evaluation Department Asian Development Bank, 2014).

Given the increasing competition for shrinking development aid resources, logic should dictate that development organizations and programmes would focus their efforts on learning and improving performance. But, in reality, when budgets are tight, KM will often be one of the first domains to be cut because it appears to be a luxury add-on. The complexity and systemic nature of KM require behaviour change among individuals, and broader changes in organizational strategies and processes, making it too complicated for many, and downright threatening for others. KM cannot be separated from organizational change and development, and the ‘trick’ is to get the mandate to make the changes necessary to be a learning organization. Without that mandate, there will always be pushback, and KM will always be subject to changing priorities, changing leadership, and budget crunches. This is the ‘systemic dilemma’ of development agencies versus the private sector, where, as Ramalingam noted (Capacity.org, 2008) ‘the purpose of organizational learning is clear - to build profitability and competitive advantage in the global marketplace’. Public sector organizations frequently lack clear-cut indicators that can inform the learning process, and it is not always clear what ‘good performance’ would even look like (Capacity.org, 2008)

In our experience, not a great deal has changed since these observations were made in 2008. There is still a limit to what we can do in our public sector organizations. All of this throws into question the future of knowledge management for development. Knowledge management in the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) has a long history. The importance of knowledge for the organization came to prominence as early as 1995, when an external assessment recommended that IFAD become a knowledge institution about rural poverty. But it wasn't until 2008 that the organization developed a formal KM strategy (IFAD, 2007), as part of a major organizational reform process that resulted from a 2005 independent external evaluation. The KM strategy was firmly linked to the development effectiveness agenda, and grew out of IFAD's recognition that it needed to improve its learning from development practice - from its own projects and the practice of others - in order to deliver better results and impact. It was acknowledged that changing realities on the ground meant that IFAD would need to become more agile, devise appropriate innovations, and improve its systems and its institutional readiness for more continuous learning and sharing.

The strategy was operationalized through various forums and teams at the corporate level, including a community of practice of KM practitioners, as well as KM officers focused on support to IFAD's field operations. The KM strategy yielded many successes, not least broad experience across the organisation in use of KM approaches and tools. References to KM and learning emerged in IFAD's business processes, including in performance management, project design, quality enhancement and assurance processes, supervision and so on. However, a 2012 review conducted in preparation for an updated corporate KM results framework, showed that successes were often driven by committed individuals, and tended to be dispersed and not linked into an overall, coherent institutional approach – making them fragile in the face of changing circumstances and shifting priorities. Some of the main constraints cited by staff included: lack of management buy-in; heavy workloads with no time for reflection; and lack of incentives to prioritize KM. The conclusion was that KM had not been fully integrated into IFAD's way of working; in effect an overall culture of learning and sharing had not been instilled in the organization. IFAD's business processes and systems still needed to be 'KM-enabled'. IFAD-funded projects were often referred to as 'vehicles for learning' during this period, in line with the KM strategy's focus on enabling IFAD to learn from development practice. Although all projects were required to include KM components or activities, they were not designed or implemented with learning as a core consideration and with the capacity to do so. In 2009, prompted by the need to improve IFAD's capacity to learn from project implementation, an extensive, field-level KM and learning initiative emerged in IFAD's East and Southern Africa Division (ESA). The lessons from this initiative are described and discussed in the next section. In 2012, the organization embarked on a process to update its KM Strategy, which resulted in a new KM Framework that built significantly on the ESA experience.

The response: focus on KM and learning in projects

In 2009, a KM and learning initiative emerged in IFAD's work in Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA). Implemented through the regional network, IFADAfrica, which had been established the previous year, the learning initiative had a broad and ambitious agenda: to improve project management processes and results by fully integrating KM into all aspects of project management, including monitoring and evaluation (M&E), financial management, supervision and reporting. At the time, KM was being widely promoted by IFAD in the projects it funded. Regional networks like IFADAfrica, funded from IFAD grant resources, were being used to build capacity in KM approaches and tools, and to encourage networking, learning and sharing across projects, countries and regions. Project staff had indicated early on in IFADAfrica implementation that they required capacity building and support for using KM approaches, and tools for documentation and learning. They expressed a strong interest in applying these in their daily work. However, it quickly became clear that to enable this to happen, they needed to go through a process of deeper analysis and learning in order to better understand how to integrate KM into project management.

In reality, projects were not necessarily being designed as 'vehicles for learning'. While project documents usually described KM components or activities, attention was rarely given to what needed to be in place in order for project staff to implement KM - for example, capacities and resources. Thus, while project staff were in principle interested in KM, it was usually seen as an add-on to the existing demands and processes of project management, and so could easily become a burden for project managers and officers. From the outset, the ESA initiative linked KM and learning and organizational development. It started with the hypothesis that large development projects could only be successful 'vehicles for learning' when they fully embraced an adaptive management approach, founded on continuous learning and improvement. KM and learning were seen as the essential ingredients needed to improve project processes and systems in an integrated way, in support of adaptive management. Therefore, the challenge was to build them into project management and implementation so that that they became the way of working¹, and helped project and programme managers address critical issues during implementation.

Designing and implementing the learning process

IFAD worked with the Institute for People, Innovation and Change in Organisations (PICOTEAM) to design the process for the KM and learning initiative. PICOTEAM is a

¹ We were guided by an adaptation of the KM self-assessment method developed by Chris Collison and Geoff Parcell, authors of *Learning to Fly*, 2004.

network of organizations in Africa, Latin America and Europe that supports people and organizations in their efforts to bring about change and innovations for sustainable development. Their work focus is grounded in joint experiential concept development and practice. PICO utilized several of its own key concepts, approaches and methodologies in the process. Underpinning the work was the concept of systemic competence development, whereby participants are engaged in learning processes about how to perform their jobs better. Through a process of learning and coaching, people acquire the understanding, skills, and attitudes required to constantly improve their performance. The whole process was facilitated by PICO experts using their facilitation for change approach, which aims to trigger change by bringing out the potential for transformation in groups and individuals.

As lessons emerged during the process and participants identified key success factors, the facilitators employed the LearningWheel (Hagmann, 2005), a methodology developed by PICO for creating experience-based frameworks for joint learning, action and knowledge management. The purpose of the KM and learning initiative was to ensure that those involved in project management and supervision understood how to integrate continuous learning and improvement into organizational systems. It was designed as a dynamic and adaptive process of action research on the operational systems of projects and programmes, combining face-to-face interaction with concrete action in daily practice. Solutions were to be developed with the participants. It comprised three interactive workshops over a period of about two years, during which participants identified and analysed bottlenecks and challenges, and learned from others' experiences. The workshops were followed up by direct coaching support in countries, on demand. The focus was on helping participants to develop solutions to their KM challenges, but we also took a systemic approach to bringing up other critical issues that needed to be addressed to enhance coherence and simplicity of project management processes.

Over a period of two and a half years from 2009 to 2012, we worked with more than 125 project staff (divided into three groups) from 32 IFAD-supported projects in 12 countries in East and Southern Africa, as well as a more limited number of staff from government departments and partner organizations. Participants defined KM based on their own evolving understanding of what it meant in their context: 'Knowledge management is about managing knowledge effectively to improve how we do business, and reach our results and impact'. At the same time, IFAD was investing grant funds in other networks and initiatives in the region. Notable among these was a grant to the Eastern Africa Farmers Federation (EAFF) to support integration of KM and learning systems into their way of working (see section 3).

Concepts and products developed during the process

Three main products resulted from the KM and learning initiative in East and Southern Africa: a model for an integrated KM system; a conceptual framework and guidelines for how

to operationalize KM in large development projects; a performance framework for KM and learning; and a concept for project start-up. These are described below.

Model for an integrated KM system

The integrated KM and learning system is an example of practice-based theory. It evolved from the concrete experiences and understanding of KM of staff from more than 30 development projects of the relevance of KM to their day-to-day work. Five inter-connected functions form the foundations of the system: information management, monitoring and evaluation, communication and innovation, which together support rapid learning and adaptation (see Figure 1). The system's driver is motivation to change and improve. It recognizes that knowledge management is more than managing information through data banks and document repositories. It is a continuous improvement process involving all members of project teams, who learn, try out new ways of doing things, reflect, share their wisdom, and then change and adapt their projects to become more effective and successful.

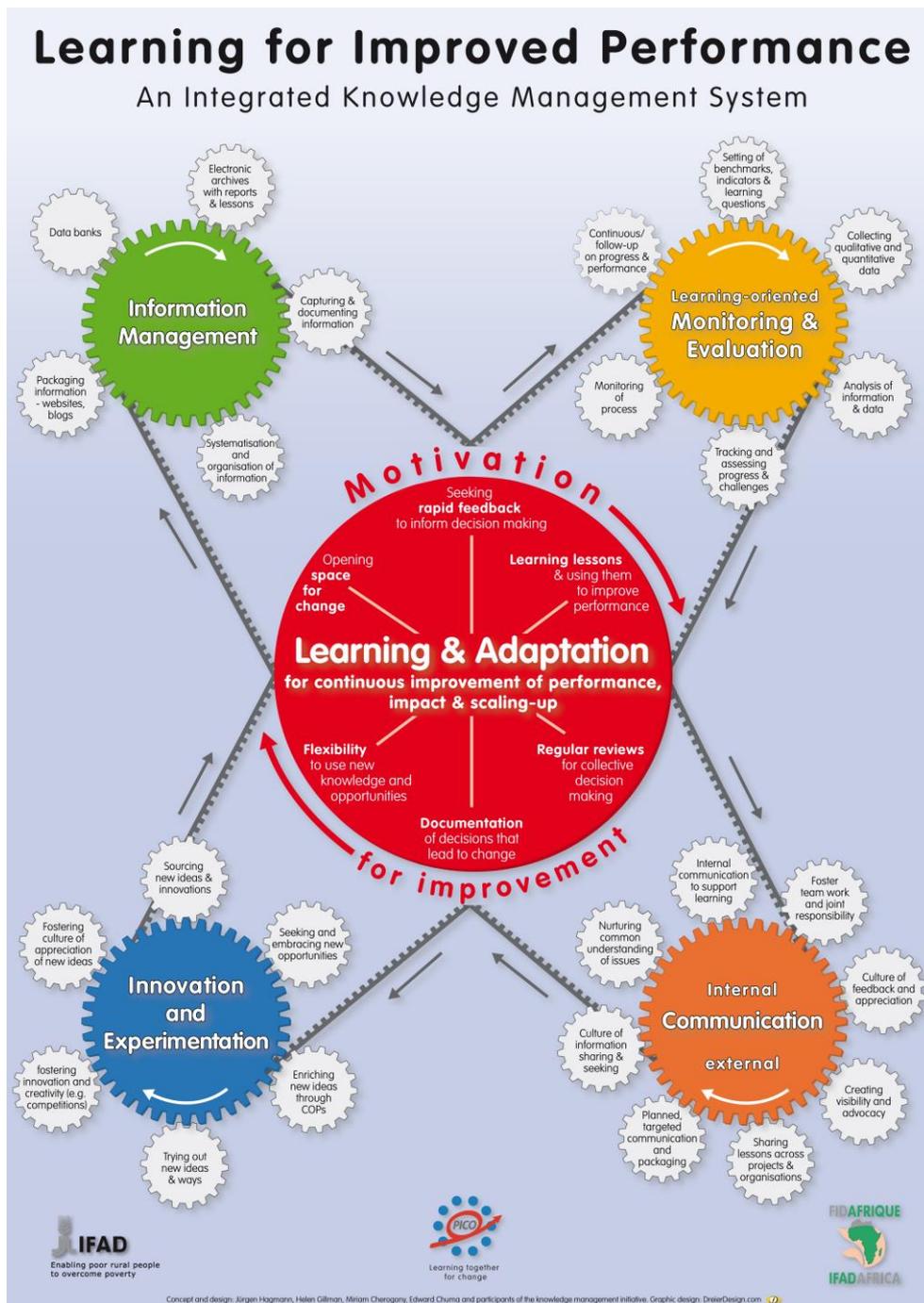


Figure 1: Learning for improve performance

This practice-based concept was utilised to explain the integrated nature of KM and learning, and to analyse the situation in the different initiatives and organisations. It helped people to see what they were doing already and where they needed to engage more to make KM&L a system that works towards improving performance. The model serves as an analytical framework and also as a monitoring framework.

Conceptual framework for operationalizing KM in large development projects

This framework was developed on the basis of the practical constraints, experiences and lessons derived from more than 30 IFAD-supported projects in East and Southern Africa. It is a practical and non-prescriptive guide to support projects and programmers in putting KM and learning into practice. It is geared primarily to the needs of project managers and teams and their counterparts in development organizations and government bodies. It comprises a series of ‘cornerstones’ that form a checklist of the critical success factors for KM interventions, and which were identified by project staff through an analysis of their own project contexts, using PICO’s Learning Wheel methodology. The 11 cornerstones are grouped into three categories: commitment and capacity to drive KM and learning; cultures, systems and structures for supporting knowledge sharing and learning; and continuous improvement processes at all levels (see Figure2).

This concept emerged from people’s practice and reality. It helped to provide a frame to the challenges of integrating KM&L in their projects and organisations as a whole. It was used both as an analytical framework to define priority actions for integrating KM&L, and as a monitoring framework. The accompanying guide to integrating KM&L brought together the existing knowledge and practice, and guided projects on how to address critical challenges.

Performance framework for KM and learning

The KM performance framework was developed based on the perspectives of project staff who participated in the regional KM and learning process. It is a flexible mechanism for assessing KM outcomes - specifically behaviour changes at different impact levels. It is important to note that the performance framework is based on vision, not on targets. Projects can use the framework as a self-assessment tool to understand how far they are from their vision, where they are in terms of intermediate results, what activities are being carried out to achieve the vision, what are the required inputs for the activities? The framework has three elements: impact level, impact area, performance criteria, and methods and tools.

There are seven **impact levels** where behaviour change is expected: local level clients; local organizations of clients; service providers to local actors; project coordination units; country-level; regional-level; global/headquarters level. The **impact areas** were formulated around the question ‘If KM and learning were really successful, with great impact, what would the different actors do, or do differently?’ There is a set of **performance criteria** to be used in assessing behaviour changes, and proposed methods and tools for use in assessment. The performance framework served as a resource to design monitoring systems for KM&L.

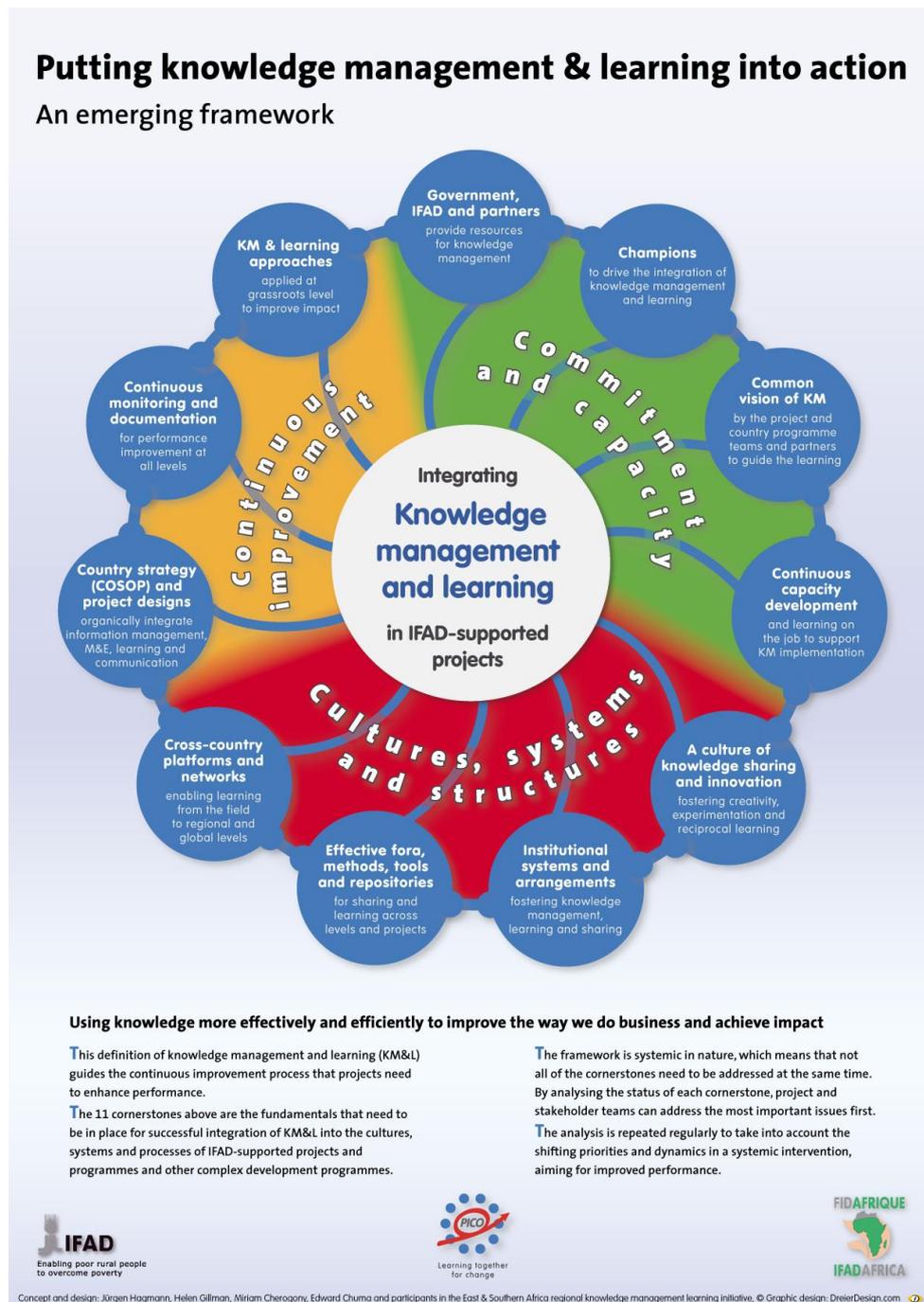


Figure 2: Putting knowledge management and learning into action

Concept and guides for project start-up, supervision/coaching, project closure

The action learning with the projects brought out numerous lessons which we systematised and included in the procedures for project implementation. In terms of the project start-up process, we learned that there was poor understanding of project documents by whole project teams, including field-level implementers. This is a major factors contributing to poor

performance of projects. In response, the ESA KM team experimented with an alternative start-up process that unpacked the project and made it understandable for the whole implementation team in terms of strategy and processes to be applied. The aim was to have a synchronised team (including partners), driving in the same direction, with clear roles and responsibilities, low hierarchy and effective communication between levels. A series of workshops spaced a couple of months apart showed a huge potential to improve performance from the outset, and make learning a mode of operating.

In terms of supervision/coaching of projects, we developed a model for a learning-oriented, supportive approach, rather than a review-based, accountability approach. We learned how much potential the provision of rigorous coaching support to projects has to improve performance. Integration of reflection and learning by project teams into their daily work, leads to rapid improvement. In terms of project closure, from a KM point of view, we experimented with ways of documenting lessons and capturing as much tacit knowledge as possible before closure.

Changes in projects and programmes in five countries and at corporate level

Changes in projects and programmes: the EAFF

The Eastern Africa Farmers' Federation (EAFF) provides an excellent example of how KM can support institutional development. As part of the regional KM and learning initiative, IFAD gave a USD 1.5 million grant to EAFF for a three-year programme to strengthen the capacities of the EAFF secretariat and its constituent national farmer organizations by developing and integrating KM and learning systems in their way of operating. For EAFF, KM was not an add-on or even something separate from its other activities. From the outset, the organization saw KM as a means to achieve key strategic goals - improved service delivery, and reduction of donor dependence. EAFF was already engaged in a process of institutional transformation, and through the grant programme, KM became an integral part of the process - both as a driver and a support.

Early on, technical staff and heads of national farmer organizations were introduced to the model for an integrated KM system. Using the model as an entry point, they analysed their current situations and realized that KM could add value to their strategic plans. This was the foundation of an important breakthrough for EAFF - an understanding that KM and learning and their own organizational development processes were inextricably linked. What then emerged was a conceptual framework for successful farmer organizations, 'Making farmers key actors in value chains.' It comprised four pillars of organizational development in farmers' organizations: leadership and good governance; membership satisfaction and commitment; viable and quality services to members; and sustainable funding and

professional management. They then developed a learning system to support achievement of their goals in the four areas. The purpose was to improve performance by bridging disconnects in information flows between farmer organization leaders and members, and integrating learning and adaptation as a management approach at all levels. The learning system was in turn supported by KM approaches and tools, in particular documentation of lessons.

Fundamentally, the project enabled EAFF to build the capacities of its membership at all levels. It prompted farmer organizations to try out new things, to learn and change direction. An evaluation commissioned by EAFF at the close of the three-year project found that clearly the basis had been established for major change. It stated that, despite the difficulties in measuring the contribution of KM to EAFF's institutional development, the results were clearly there in terms of new skills, new communication mechanisms and new ways of planning. The evaluation noted that in spite of the difficulties, KM had been adopted as an approach 'or as a vehicle for farmer organizations to become well-performing entities'. EAFF had managed to link KM with its market-oriented business model and the evaluator strongly recommended that the organization document the results achieved.

Changes at the country level: Uganda, Rwanda, Madagascar and Swaziland

An interesting example emerged from an agricultural infrastructure improvement project dedicated to building roads and agro-processing facilities. Project staff had participated in the KM and learning process, and were aware of the 'theory' behind an integrated approach to KM in project management and implementation. But, it was only when they applied what they had learned during an exercise to analyse and document lessons learned that they understood concretely what it meant. For example, it had not previously occurred to project staff that they had lessons, ideas, insights and experiences worth capitalising. Therefore, they had not considered using their M&E system to identify these lessons and experiences during project implementation. They learned that it was important to know what to do with the lessons once identified – how to analyse, package and share them, and with whom.

In our experience, it cannot be assumed that these lessons will be obvious. It takes several steps to understand the connections and interplay between the different elements of the integrated KM system, and to see its relevance in practice. The capitalization exercise also had direct development impact: in the next phase of the project, social aspects were taken into closer consideration – community mobilisation and sensitisation, and especially, participatory planning and decision making in terms of location and management of agro-processing facilities. Infrastructure committees were trained and empowered to monitor the quality of roadworks.

Rwanda, the coordinator of the Government's single project implementation unit (SPIU) for all IFAD-supported projects mainstreamed learning and adaptation into his management

approach. For example, it became standard practice to discuss and analyse experiences, reports and data at all levels of implementation, and then determine what needed to be changed in implementation. Feedback was provided as a matter of course. Lessons learned were captured, validated and documented regularly. Among the good practice features of the approach were the following. Project staff from field level to the coordination unit were given clear KM-related responsibilities. The KM function was embedded in the management information system (MIS) unit, under the umbrella of M&E (not necessarily the best solution - but since learning & adaptation underpinned the project management approach overall, KM as such was not marginalized as a result). KM activities were included in annual workplans and budgets. Reflection on and analysis of progress, lessons learned, success stories, challenges were standard practice at every level - and were linked to decision making. Decisions leading to change, as well as lessons from implementation were documented and were shared. Primarily, the SPIU team made considerable progress towards building a learning culture in the IFAD-supported projects.

The Rwanda experience affirms the importance of leadership/championship for KM to be useful and successful. The coordinator of Rwanda's portfolio of IFAD projects realized the potential advantages of an integrated KM approach and knew it would be a long process of learning-by-doing before project staff and partners would understand how to fully build KM into their way of working. As such, he provided the necessary support, space, resources and leadership. His championship was pivotal. However, in 2015 the Coordinator was moved to another role. It remains to be seen if his good work will be maintained. Project staff attribute numerous achievements to the integrated approach to learning, sharing, and improvement/adaptation. For example, at day-to-day level, regular meetings to review and reflect at all levels of implementation shortened the distance between the field and country-level coordination, resulting in faster decision-making and development of more timely and relevant solutions. Lessons and good practice in areas such as procurement and financial management - not normally a focus of KM initiatives - were shared across the portfolio. Staff attribute to this more efficient project implementation and a reduction in queries from government departments, including the auditor-general's office. Performance contracts and guarantees formed the basis of a monitoring to ensure a higher quality of service delivery by implementing partners. Ultimately, the efforts of project staff influenced the Ministry of Agriculture to develop a KM strategy for Rwanda's agriculture sector.

Development projects should be able to use their M&E systems to provide evidence in support of efforts to scale up successes or influence policy. However, this is often far from the case. In 2007, just as KM was gaining a higher profile in IFAD, the Madagascar country programme team launched a results-based management system that linked the indicators for individual projects to those in the country strategy logical framework. The system has evolved into a platform that is able to generate outcome-level data as evidence of change due to

development interventions. The country team uses the platform as a planning and management tool that spotlights which activities work, which do not work, and where to focus efforts in the future. The system allows for implementation issues to be flagged immediately and is a repository of potential solutions derived from practical experiences and joint-thinking exercises conducted among projects within the Madagascar country programme. It represents a harmonized approach to KM, whereby project level KM is linked to and supports the country strategy. The Madagascar country programme was rated highly satisfactory with regard to KM in a 2013 country programme evaluation, conducted by IFAD's independent evaluation office. It was the only country at the time to have achieved such a high rating.

Changes at corporate level: IFAD

In recent years, IFAD has made considerable progress towards a more integrated corporate approach to what can broadly be described as KM. The new Strategic Framework 2016-25 identifies knowledge building, dissemination and policy engagement as one of the four pillars of IFAD's results delivery, and states that a core purpose of KM is to 'identify, develop and promote successful and innovative approaches and interventions that have demonstrated potential to be scaled up'. In 2012/13, IFAD developed a KM Framework that updated its 2008 KM Strategy, and reflected lessons learned during the strategy's implementation. The new Framework built on the lessons and experience of the ESA KM and learning initiative, in particular it reflects an understanding of KM and learning as systemic. It also embraced the understanding that the fundamental purpose of KM was to support learning that would lead to improved performance and results, and scaling up of successes for greater impact.

At the same time, learning is increasingly being prioritized in key business processes, including project design and quality assurance, country strategy development, project supervision, project completion, and reviews of portfolio performance. Learning loops are being established between business processes. Several mutually reinforcing initiatives are underway that will contribute to achieving the objectives in the corporate KM Framework. These include the introduction of a development effectiveness framework that will strengthen IFAD's ability to measure and learn from results and impact. IFAD is also building its capacity in the areas of policy engagement, south-south and triangular cooperation, and research. Further, a methodology is being developed to monitor and assess KM performance. The aim is to build on existing mechanisms to the extent possible, and complement the development effectiveness framework.

Lessons and insights for the future of KM

The need for a clear purpose of KM

In our experience in IFAD and other organisations working on KM, in many cases KM is still equated with ‘information management’, or it focuses on knowledge sharing activities among staff and with outsiders, such as documenting lessons for visibility and positioning.

Knowledge sharing is seen as useful and valuable, but it can be difficult to see the connection with organisational goals. KM often becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end, which has left it open to questions about impact, and made it dispensable in times of scarce funds. In future, the question: ‘KM for WHAT’ will become more central. KM needs a clear purpose aligned to the organisational strategy and goals. The primary purpose can be twofold: a) KM as part and parcel of a continuous process to improve organisational and programme/project performance, delivery and impact; and b) KM as a means to improve visibility and the positioning of the organisation.

The speed of change affecting our organisations, the consequent need for rapid adaptation to new situations and contexts, and the ever-increasing need to demonstrate results and impact mean that learning and continuous improvement gaining increasing importance. It is clear that the successful organisations will be those that learn and adapt fast. Isolated knowledge sharing activities or grand information systems are not useful unless they are being applied in a fast learning and improvement process that can show tangible results.

For years, many organisations have aspired to be learning organisations, but in reality rather little learning is taking place. Very few organisations have processes in place that support systemic learning and improvement. If KM is to play a central role in future, its systemic nature has to be recognised, and it needs to be fully integrated into organisational development, improvement and change processes - instead of being treated as a set of separate activities. However, there are major hurdles to overcome. Elevating KM to the systemic organisational level requires many changes to be made - and organisations generally tend to prefer quick fixes, rather than systemic solutions through complex interventions. In our experience, it is hard to obtain the mandate and commitment from the different levels to make the changes needed to build a true learning organisation (see Senge, 2006). In our work with the EAFF, the purpose of KM was to support organisational transformation. KM was very focused and the activities could be shaped around that purpose. It was part of the organisational change management. The integration of KM with organisational goals triggered the development of a framework to guide EAFF and its members as they developed into learning organisations, embracing transformation.

The need for a compelling motivation and incentives to practice KM and learning

During the conceptualisation of the KM&L framework with project staff in East and Southern Africa (see section 2.2.2), it came out strongly that there was very little motivation for individuals and their organisations to change. At the same time, all practitioners emphasised that without strong motivation to improve performance at both individual and organisational levels, the likelihood of KM activities having any impact was very low. The question is - what drives the motivation? In private sector organisations it is clear that fast learning, innovation and continuous improvement are indispensable in order to generate profit and stay in business, and success is easy to monitor. In development organisations and programmes, however, the indicators for success are still mostly hazy and no matter how much we talk about results, the stronger focus is on correct spending, procedures and compliance. The link between improvement in the way of doing business and impact is often complex and not obvious through simple indicators. As a consequence, performance incentives for staff are in reality based more on compliance than on performance, creativity and innovation. The challenge of the source of motivation to practice KM and improve performance remains. In our experience in the projects in East and Southern Africa, the strongest driver was motivation of individuals who saw an opportunity to improve their practice and ultimately their own careers. Processing their own challenges and finding solutions through sharing and sense making in their own teams, and addressing the real issues rather than just implementing activities was very motivating in a domain where people were seriously interested in making a difference.

The team approach was another motivating factor, where peer-to-peer motivation, encouragement and joint thinking and problem solving generated positive and creative energy for improving performance through KM. The personal motivation to do a better job and have more impact thus became the major driver for integrating KM into the daily work. Lastly, the change in communication culture in project teams helped to motivate individuals. Simple changes like more open communication, rotating chairpersons in meetings, recognition of individual contributions, and fostering joint responsibility in teams, became important sources of energy, and made a huge difference to the motivation for performance improvement in project teams.

Leadership for KM&L

KM requires committed leadership, in the IFAD context primarily at project and country level. Our experience has shown that if the country programme managers and the project coordinators are convinced that KM and performance improvement are essential for managing impact, the project teams start to figure out how to integrate KM&L into their daily work, and are motivated to learn - as the Rwanda example illustrates. This requires intensive engagement to build buy-in and understanding by managers of how KM could be an

instrument for improving performance. On the contrary, leadership changes at project and country programme manager level had a very disruptive influence on successful ongoing KM&L processes during our work in ESA. Countries that were the most advanced became the problematic ones within less than a year after supportive leadership was exchanged for sceptics and managers with more linear thinking.

Management support at the level of IFAD headquarters meant we had the space and resources to experiment, to try out new ideas and to move forward with an open learning agenda. We were fortunate during the first three years to have a highly supportive director, who understood that a systemic approach to KM and learning in project implementation could lead to better results and impact.

Capacity to implement KM&L

The major capacity challenge was not about how to use KM tools, but about the capacity to understand and integrate learning and continuous improvement into daily work. Development practitioners have been groomed and conditioned in a world of logical frameworks. To go beyond that, and freely analyse and think through what makes sense, what works, what needs to be done differently and then do it, requires that people allow themselves the space to create and innovate.

That space and capacity have proven to be best developed in teams through a systemic competence development process consisting of learning workshops, peer learning and coaching. This process was successful in developing iteratively the capacity, the attitudes and the space to change and improve performance. The learning process also enabled the participants in the ESA initiatives to conceptualise KM&L and to integrate it into project management. The frameworks described in section 2 were developed during these learning processes, building on the practical implementation of KM&L in projects.

In our experience, capacity development for KM&L in a project context requires several critical components to be in place:

1. The understanding of KM&L, the process and the tools.
2. An intensive start-up process to make all the implementers (to the field level) fully understand the project in depth.
3. The integration with other dimensions in the project: M&E, communication, project management
4. Development of leaders and champions for KM&L. The pool of leaders and champions needs to be continuously nurtured and new members integrated in the group in order to sustain the capacity. Capacity development of that nature requires an integrated competency development approach rather than a modular training approach. It is a 'learning by doing' process whereby teams gain the capacity to deal with their real

challenges, think together and support each other, supported by external facilitators, coaches and resource persons.

There are a range of different functions and core business processes that need to be adapted to systemically anchor KM and learning in the organization. In an organization like IFAD, this means: a) integration into the entire project cycle, from design and quality assurance, through supervision, reviews, evaluations and completion (Table 1); and b) integration into the corporate organisational processes and systems.

Table 1: Integrating KM&L in the project /programme cycle

| Stage in project/ programme cycle | What it means to integrate KM&L - some aspects- |
|--|---|
| Design | Identify and build on the lessons of previous efforts and initiatives Identify knowledge demands, knowledge flows and loops, and incentives to enable them Focus on designing a fast learning process to improve project performance, rather than on KM tools and methods Identify key learning questions and innovation areas for the project to succeed Quality assurance processes: check connection between KM activities and project goals and objectives, allocate budget, and assign responsibilities Design incentive system for staff and partners to practice KM |

| | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Start-up | Full understanding of the project by all implementers (detailed unpacking of the proposal and concepts in operational terms) Implementers at all levels (including field level) need to understand the purpose and added value of KM and learning Set up a dialogue and interaction process that enable all staff to communicate freely, try out new ways of doing things, and suggest improvements during implementation |
| Supervision / coaching support | Identify and document lessons, and analyse the effectiveness of implementation processes with the team Identify and track instances where KM has contributed to improved performance and results |
| M&E /review | Reviews need to be have a stronger focus on learning, as opposed to compliance Stronger process monitoring based on learning questions Define ways to measure impact of KM&L |
| Project completion | Lessons from both successes and failures should be rigorously identified, analysed, documented and used to inform other development initiatives. |

The need for high quality process management for navigating complexity

Looking at the lessons above, it is clear that integrating and managing KM and learning is an organisational development process with performance enhancement as a goal. It is a complex intervention where many elements need to be adapted, revised, and where considerable innovation is required to make it work. The management of such change processes is organic, systemic and by its very nature, complex. Any organisational structure is bound to create a certain level of divisions and silos in order to reduce complexity. KM should be about creating the links that will break down those divisions and silos, and lead to common understanding and ways of working together to improve the whole system.

This raises the question of where to position KM process management within an organisation in order for it to be successful. Obviously, as a cross-cutting task, it will be difficult for it to function effectively if hosted in one division or department of an organisation. KM process management needs to be situated in top-level leadership with access to all departments. It requires leaders with the dedication and clout to make it work across the organisation. The complexity of the process of managing and integrating KM and learning needs to be broken down into manageable packages of work. The challenge is that there are so many variables and factors over which one has no control or influence. Therefore, if the ambition is too broad and a KM initiative is too broad, there is a high risk is that the influence is so diluted that the initiative will fail as a result. On the other hand, if the actions are very focused

and at one level only, the success is also highly vulnerable as changes within the organisation might overrun the efforts and diminish them.

We have learned that a process of systemic prioritisation is helpful in focusing KM interventions where the opportunities are, while having the whole system in view and dealing with new issues as they arise. The growth of the intervention is then organic, as more elements need to be addressed to achieve the change one wants, but the complexity is manageable as one only works on the issues that are blocking and need to change. With time the complexity grows, but one also knows the system much better and some of the early actions are completed.

This systemic way of managing the process requires a clear vision of what to achieve with KM, an entry point (for example in our case it was the projects in East and Southern Africa), regular reflection, and the space and freedom to react immediately as stumbling blocks emerge. Rapid feedback loops from practice, and analysis and systematisation of lessons are crucial for successful process management. Fast adaptation and continuously challenging oneself are also crucial. It is basically a fast action learning process, where each loop creates new knowledge and lessons and leads to a new way of dealing with emerging challenges. It is challenging to maintain a clear overview of such complex processes, but the desired outcomes and goals, along with some critical milestones give direction and provide the points of reference. It requires a good team of reflective practitioners under the guidance of a senior leader.

We have developed KM strategies in a number of other organisations. Basically the principle of ‘start anywhere and follow it everywhere’ (Wheatley 2007: xx) applies. Even though one might have a comprehensive strategy, it requires an entry point and adaptive management of the process if one wants the bits and pieces to be connected and integrated systemically. Often we tend to make things too complex, and we confound complexity with complicatedness. Good process management should simplify things by enabling prioritisation based on experience from practice and fast learning. In this way, the process is broken down into doable pieces, while keeping the elements of the system connected, and complexity becomes manageable.

Conclusions: the future of KM?

Knowledge is the central asset of most development organizations. This will make KM even more important, provided its return on investment can be demonstrated. At present, the value of KM is easily challenged and can be discredited because it is often a lot of action with little visible outcome. KM needs to be demystified. In evaluation, there has been a shift towards

utilisation-focused evaluation (Patton, 2012, Sage Publications) in recent years. Probably the same utilisation-focused approach is required in KM: a clear purpose and outcomes that can be seen and measured in the form of performance enhancement.

In our experience, the future of KM lies in its deeply systemic integration into organisational processes and systems. It should no longer be called KM – it should be a way of working. It is about learning for performance improvement, more than capturing and organizing knowledge. Any organisation engaging in KM and learning needs to be clear that it is systemic, it is complex and it is an organisational change process, rather than simply adding a few tools and methods into the system. It needs to be clear that KM and learning are time consuming and expensive, particularly at the beginning when a foundation investment is required to make the system run smoothly. Basically, KM is about good management, team work, authentic and honest commitment to impact, allowing common sense to rule, and creating an environment where people are encouraged to reflect, share, learn from each other. Specific KM frameworks, methods, tools can be useful if the basics are in place – otherwise their effectiveness is minimal. Ticking boxes will not create any value added.

The critical question for the future of KM will be: are our development organisations and the broader development context ready for such flexible performance improvement efforts and changes? We are working in a time when compliance counts more than anything else, including impact, when the trend is going more towards total bureaucratisation, where the space for creativity and trying out and failing is getting smaller and smaller. Organisations are reacting to development effectiveness pushes with results and performance frameworks, sophisticated monitoring and evaluation, theories of change and overly rigorous planning, using KM tools and social media etc., but the question is whether all these are leading to better performance. Our impression is that something fundamental is missing: the common sense and sense making, seriousness about impact and the committed leadership needed to go that extra mile in order to connect the dots and make systems perform better. In the private sector, all this is natural of course - otherwise one is out of business. Our take is that KM will only be successful in future if this serious commitment to improve performance is the mantra, instilled in people at all levels, with a sense of urgency to make change. Then the costs of good KM will be outweighed hundredfold by the benefits.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our colleagues Edward Chuma, Miriam Cherogony and Joe Ramaru for their excellent contributions during this experiment, and all the participants in the KM&L process in East and Southern Africa. Without the active engagement and enthusiasm of the participating projects we would not have gone far. We would also like to thank IFAD's management for its support and the funding of the initiative.

Hagmann, J. and H. Gillman. 2017.
The future of knowledge management in large development programmes and organisations:
lessons from a large-scale institutional experiment.
Knowledge Management for Development Journal 13(1): 4-24
<http://journal.km4dev.org/>

References

- Collison, C. and Parcell, G. *Learning to fly. Practical knowledge management from leading and learning organizations*. West Sussex: Capstone Publishing Limited, 2001, 2004.
- Greijn, H. *Learning for organizational development*. In Capacity.org, Issue No 33, April 2008. P. 3.
- Hagmann, J. *LearningWheel – creating common frameworks for joint learning, action and knowledge management*. AGREN Newsletter No. 52, July 2005.
- IFAD (2007) Knowledge management strategy. Rome: IFAD. 38pp.
<https://www.ifad.org/documents/10180/ad197dcd-93f9-4e50-ab3d-d773619a89e5>
- IFAD. *Learning for improved performance. An integrated knowledge management system*. Rome, 2010.
- IFAD. *Putting knowledge management and learning into action. An emerging framework*. Rome, 2010.
- Independent Evaluation Department, Asian Development Bank. *Knowledge Management in International Financial Institutions. Evidence from Evaluation*. Evaluation Cooperation Group Paper, December, 2014.
- PICOTEAM. Systemic Competence Development. An approach to develop the facilitation capacity to manage systemic change and performance enhancement.
<http://picoteam.org/files/PICOTEAM%202014/PDF/SCDFinal.pdf>
- Ramalingam, B. *Implementing knowledge strategies: lessons from international development agencies*. London: Overseas Development Institute, Working paper 244. April 2005.
- Ramalingam, B. *Organizational learning for aid, and learning aid organizations*. In Capacity.org, Issue No. 33, April 2008, pp. 4-6
- Senge, P.M. *The Fifth Discipline. The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization*. London: Random House Business Books, 2006.
- Wheatley, M. *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time*. San Francisco: Barrett-Kohler Publishers, 2005, 2007. pp. 110.
- World Bank, Independent Evaluation Group. *Learning and Results in World Bank Operations: How the Bank Learns*. Washington, 2014.

About the authors

Jürgen Hagmann has worked in development cooperation for more than two decades. His main fields in which he facilitates change is rural, agricultural and economic development, natural resource management, governance at different levels, local development

Email: jurgen.hagmann@picoteam.org

Helen Gillman is Senior Knowledge Management Specialist in the Global Engagement, Knowledge and Strategy Division at the International Fund for Agricultural Development, (IFAD). She is a member of the KM4Dev Core Group. Email: h.gillman@ifad.org