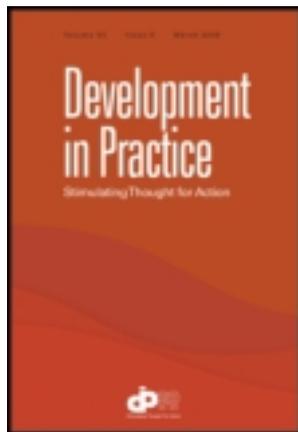


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# Which knowledge? Whose reality? An overview of knowledge used in the development sector

*Mike Powell*

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*This article provides an overview of issues relating to the use of knowledge by development organisations. It starts by exploring the various definitions of knowledge that exist in a world of many cultures and intellectual traditions, and the role of language. It considers their relationship with each other and with the many and varied ‘informational developments’ – information-related changes in work, culture, organisations, and technology across the world. It argues that these issues pose a number of fundamental strategic challenges to the development sector. The second part considers where, in practice, development organisations get their information and knowledge from and identifies problems with many of the channels used. Its conclusion is that most current practice consistently militates against the type of relationship and type of communication that are essential if development policy and practice is to be anything other than an imposition of external ideas, however well intentioned.*

## How is knowledge perceived?

Do development organisations really understand the historical realities of the societies that they exist to change? More importantly, how much do they understand of the perceptions of those realities by the people upon whom all development interventions ultimately depend – the ‘beneficiaries’ who are intended to live in new and better ways, and those others whose actions can directly influence their lives?

This article, focusing on theory and practice in the influential Northern offices of development organisations which oversee policy development and exercise overall control of many programmes and budgets, argues that the current understanding and use of knowledge within the development sector is generally poor, and that this fact represents a major barrier to the effectiveness of development interventions. Furthermore, it argues that current trends in information, knowledge, and communications management practice within the sector are making matters worse, and that strategic opportunities offered by new technologies and new models of information exchange have not been properly understood, let alone exploited. This is of particular concern at a time of great innovation and (for better or worse) rapid informational developments – that is the connected series of information-related changes in social, economic, and cultural as well as technological life – which themselves affect how knowledge is perceived, valued, and used. In another context, it is also a time when

the global budget for development assistance is set to double, which will inevitably focus greater attention on its efficacy.

This article cannot, of course, pretend to offer a complete analysis of all available evidence or of all questions raised. It can, however, attempt an overview, which sets out the most salient issues and identifies areas of practical concern. It does this by presenting a number of theoretical questions relevant to what we understand by 'knowledge', and by considering their implications in a development context. It then describes and analyses some current practices and trends within the sector. It concludes by considering what needs to be done to use knowledge in a more development-friendly way.

First it is important to be clear why 'knowledge' and perception are so central to the value, purpose, and practice of development organisations. In order to do that, we need to reflect on the nature of development. The largely quantitative representation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – targeting percentages of the global population for access to vaccinations, primary education, and safe water supplies, among others – and the growing preference for meeting such targets through sets of contractual relations, reporting upwards to central authorities, give credence to a view of development as a set of deliverable actions at the end of which 'development' has taken place, as a giant service industry. A 2005 article in the business section of *Newsweek* (Foroohar 2005) talked of the growth of NGOs as a 'billion dollar industry' and commented 'a big reason for this is the growth of the global service economy – most NGOs are, after all, service providers, delivering things like health care and education'. Such analysis, which was being applied to the activities of non-profits in the USA as well as in the rest of the world, risks misunderstanding the nature and purposes of development organisations. There have been and are many different visions of development – as self-help, as solidarity, as 'civilising mission', as colonial self-interest, as economic development, as modernisation, as part of global integration. All visions, no matter how top-down or directive, view development as a process which involves change for the better, however defined, which in turn involves people doing things differently. This has to be more than the delivery of a service, because the issue is not simply the provision of a service – clean water, for example – but the creation of socio-economic circumstances whereby clean water is produced on a sustainable basis. It is a process which cannot happen, and can certainly not lead to the intended outcomes, unless it is based *both* on a good understanding of the particular socio-economic reality that the 'development' is intended to change *and*, just as importantly, on an appreciation of the perceptions of local populations as to their options in that reality. Without such 'knowledge', interventions fail, as we have seen time and time again. Development – and this includes any process of meeting the MDGs in a sustainable way – is fundamentally a 'knowledge industry'.

## Working with knowledge

The differences between a service industry and a knowledge industry are not simply semantic or for use in compiling statistics. They have profound implications for organisational structure, culture, and economics. While a service industry is primarily concerned with delivering a known commodity as efficiently as possible, a knowledge industry is engaged in assembling a combination of components – including, it should not be forgotten, efficiently delivered services where appropriate – in the way most likely to achieve the desired aim. How this is done is frustratingly variable: it is possible to spend hundreds of millions on developing a new drug or a blockbuster film and lose it all – or to have incredible success on a small budget. The decisive factor is that of successfully linking the range of knowledge components necessary to achieve your aim. This may be a less predictable process than simply delivering a service, but it is not one that needs to be left entirely to chance. The questions to be posed of any development

organisation – from a residents' association in the *bairro* to the World Bank—are: *How well informed are you about the reality that you seek to change? How conscious are you of the perceptions of other stakeholders? What are you doing to use and improve the knowledge that you have?*

Before answering these questions, we have to pause and consider what 'knowledge' means – not only to ourselves, but also to the other stakeholders involved – and think about which 'knowledge' we are referring to. Current writing on knowledge management typically offers a neat hierarchy of data, information (data given structure and meaning), and knowledge (information understood and made sense of). This is not incorrect (and the recognition of the importance of information in the construction of knowledge has a significance that will be discussed later), but it gives a misleading impression of simplicity.

Let us consider a very practical example. Describing a '*compound 1-[4-ethoxy-3-(6,7-dihydro-1-methyl-7-oxo-3-propyl-1H-pyrazolo [4,3-d]pyrimidin-5-yl) phenylsulfonyl]-4-methylpiperazine citrate*' is an expression of knowledge, albeit one which makes sense only to a chemist. Saying that 'the compound' is a new drug which is likely to make billions of dollars in profits makes that knowledge more generally understandable. It might be of specific value to potential investors and to patent lawyers. Adding that 'the compound' is better known as Viagra, and explaining that it is a drug which allegedly helps the sexual performance of ageing males, completes the explanation. Such knowledge might be valuable to those of us who may wish to take it.

Arguably the basic knowledge in each case is the same, but its meaning and use depend on the context in which it is presented, and on the skills and needs of its recipients. Along with much other 'knowledge', there would be distinct gender differentiation in the way it is received, understood, and acted upon. Were we to substitute the formula for rhinoceros horn, the 'knowledge' might be more culturally acceptable to some and raise political and environmental concerns among others.

This is but a simple illustration of the difficulty of defining and understanding knowledge. It is (and in Western society it has been for some 2400 years) a highly contested concept, and one that poses problems in a number of dimensions.

There is the issue of definition. The notion of knowledge as justified true belief, espoused by philosophers of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Enlightenment, underpins most Western scientific thought, but it has been and remains far from unchallenged, both within and beyond Western tradition. The first global book on knowledge management in industry (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995) explicitly argues that the absence in Zen-influenced Japanese culture of the separation of observer from what is being observed – a founding principle of Enlightenment notions of reason – lies behind the more innovative handling of knowledge within Japanese companies, compared with their Western competitors. Hinduism offers knowledge as a balance of knowledge of self with knowledge of the external world. The African concept of Ubuntu relates knowledge to a more collective sense of identity. At a global level, the range of interpretations is infinite.

There is also the issue, highly relevant to the development sector in the light of observed gaps between research policy and research practice, of when knowledge can be said to exist. If we are interested in applying knowledge to development problems, our concept of knowledge needs to extend to the user's successful receipt and understanding of such knowledge. Failure to achieve this means that we may have created knowledge, but we have not created the conditions in which it can be applied. Successful communication and application of knowledge therefore depend as much on the recipient as on the provider. Geoff Walsham, citing earlier work by Polanyi, suggests that no explicit knowledge – he was discussing items like databases and emails, but his argument could apply to any form of expressing explicit knowledge in any culture – has any meaning unless it connects with the tacit knowledge held by the user.

This, he argues, involves a process of sense-reading by the researcher, followed by sense-giving as that reading is expressed, followed by a separate episode of sense-reading on the part of the recipient. This, he concludes, consists of a far more complex process than the notion of knowledge transfer 'depicted by the 'knowledge as commodity' literature' (Walsham 2005). Given that such a process is inevitably situated within a context of social relations, it can be seen that knowledge is part of society rather than independent from it. This notion is of central relevance to any attempt to communicate between different societies.

This in turn links to the multifaceted issues of knowledge and power and which forms of knowledge are socially valued and empowering. Such connections exist – and need to be analysed – within all societies, but the issues that they raise are particularly pertinent to the structures of the most economically developed societies and the structures of the relationship of these societies with others. There is much original research relating to class, gender, and cultural biases in how knowledge is valued, some of which has previously been summarised by this author (Powell 1999, 2003). What is of more recent significance is the move beyond constructing an ideological basis for valuing and rewarding knowledge to establishing it as a source of economic power: as private property, protected by radically extended intellectual-property laws and enforced by international agreements, negotiated and enforced without regard to equity.

The crucial point that needs to be made about 'knowledge' in relation to development is that there is no universal understanding of what it is. We all 'know' the world through a combination of our education, language, culture, and belief and, just as importantly, our actual physical realities – gender, location, socio-economic environment. How life is 'known' – that is, how it is experienced and understood – inevitably varies profoundly according to these differences. The issue for anyone working on development issues cannot be simply how to deal with 'knowledge', but how to act effectively in an environment of multiple 'knowledges'. How can this be done? What relationships are possible between different 'knowledges'?

One option is to assume that because your offices are located in one of the richest and most powerful countries in the world, then your 'knowledge' must be better than other people's. 'Knowledge is power', as the old English saying has it, and 'power', Mao Zedong argued, 'comes out of the barrel of a gun'. One is reminded of Portuguese colonial law, which refused legal rights to all Africans except that tiny minority who had rejected their Africanness and become '*assimilado*': in other words, those who had adopted the customs, language, religion – the 'knowledge' – of the Portuguese. Not, one hopes, a model for present-day development policy for many reasons, not least because such an attitude to knowledge is fundamentally flawed and can be as dangerous to the people who hold it as to those who suffer its results.

Somewhat more respectable is the notion of 'global knowledge', which includes most of the 'modern' scientific canon, and that 'local' or 'indigenous' knowledge which can be accorded greater or lesser degrees of respect, depending on the context in question. There are two dangers in this approach. One is that it is essentially hierarchical, so that it is hard to avoid condescension in the relationship between the global and the local. The other is that, as 'global' is usually understood to mean current Euro–North American, it contains the delusion that Euro–North American is not itself 'local' – very much rooted in specific historic, philosophic, and socio-economic environments and with varying potential for external replication. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty observes: 'The physics of relativity confirms that absolute and final objectivity is a mere dream by showing how each particular observation is strictly linked to the location of the observer'; and 'this does not make the need for scientific research any less pressing; in fact, the only thing under attack is the dogmatism of a science that thinks itself capable of absolute and complete knowledge' (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 44-5).

If this is true for physics, then how much more so must it be the case for the study of human development?

So does this mean that anything goes? Is all 'knowledge' equal? What about 'knowledges', such as those based on fascism or patriarchy, that can do great damage to other people? Two alternative approaches come to mind. One is argued by the Kenyan novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong'o in relation to the study of literature. Why is the study of literature so Eurocentric? European literature, he argues, is regarded as the epicentre of world literature, and all other forms are treated as subsidiary satellites. Why is it not possible to conceive of a world of multiple centres, in which each focuses on that which is most relevant to it, taking an interest in what might be of value from elsewhere? The potential parallel with development thinking is clear. Ngugi's vision is consistent with that propounded by Amilcar Cabral, leader of the national liberation struggle in Guinea Bissau and Cabo Verde, as he talked of the relative backwardness of Guinea Bissau and how to change it. Recognising that the people of Guinea had not invented much that was valued in the modern world, he nonetheless argued that they were a people who had historically developed knowledge to deal with the challenges they faced and who would do so again, learning from and contributing to what he termed 'universal' knowledge, once national liberation had created the conditions in which such a process could take place freely. This vision of national liberation puts the process of decolonising the mind on a level with decolonising the state and the economy, and indeed sees all three as inextricably connected (Cabral 1980).

The notion of local validation of the value and universality of external knowledge, and the idea of a 'universal knowledge' built by and used by humanity as a whole according to its particular needs and circumstance are arguably central to any philosophy of development as a process which needs to be led by people working with common human values.

## Language

It is not possible to discuss knowledge and development without thinking also of language, a phenomenon which shares many of the same characteristics and which is equally vital to communication and thought. Its study also has suffered from a misplaced universalism:

*The universal applicability of (Western) traditional grammar was so firmly entrenched in the minds of classically trained teachers and the educated public that even today many otherwise well educated people are remarkably resistant . . . to the idea that what they were taught as traditional grammar is inapplicable . . . to the totality or even the majority of the known languages of the world.* (Lyons 2001: 6)

The same former Professor of Linguistics, in a valedictory overview of his subject, asserts without any doubt that: 'Of the many thousands of languages currently spoken throughout the world in widely different cultures, none is more "primitive" or more "advanced" than any others – in any relevant sense of the terms primitive and advanced' (Lyons 2001:12).

Language is not simply an instrument of speech but is, for most of us, also the main medium of thought. Even as thought, it represents a social process. Volosinov argued, at a different time and in a different context from the understanding of knowledge offered by Walsham (2005), that the process of speech, or even of verbally assembling ideas within our own minds, involves a social interaction between the speaker and the person(s) being addressed which has to be understood dynamically, sociologically, and with reference to the relevant ideologies within which the interaction takes place.

These understandings of language have a direct relevance for development practice in a number of ways. First, they emphasise that the issue is not simply one of translating speech but of appreciating the intellectual, ideological, and social understandings upon which speech is based. The use of language encompasses a structure of thought and shared understanding that may not be simply translatable. This indeed was one of the findings of a review of the

translation strategy for *Development in Practice* carried out by this author, and briefly reported in the journal (Powell 2003: 415-16), which found bilingual, regionally oriented development practitioners in West Africa struggling to interpret and reconcile the very different development discourses coming out of Anglo-Nordic and Francophone intellectual traditions.

Second, there are the basic practical difficulties of being forced into using a second language or of being excluded from development discourse altogether. Nearly all the barriers to the use of knowledge described in the second half of this article are exacerbated for people whose first language is not English. If you are an academic, you must publish in English – or your work will receive little attention or citation. If you use ICTs, in particular the Internet, you often cannot avoid operating in an English-language environment. Your autonomous local-knowledge processes will be ignored unless you voice them in English or, at the least, in one of the other major international languages. The very concept of log-frame analysis is based on Anglo-Nordic perceptions of reality and is arguably untranslatable into most languages and most understandings of reality across the globe.

Awareness of these negatives, however, should not obscure the potentially positive. The vision of liberation presented by Cabral and described above can also apply to language. A startling example would be that of Catalunya, now an autonomous province of Spain, which over the last 25 years has combined massive economic growth and social development with a flowering of intellectual output. Understanding the causality of this trend is beyond the scope of this article, but no Catalan would see such processes as being divorced from the regaining of the Catalan language from its repression under the Franquista dictatorship (when it was illegal to speak it in public). If this is true for one of the most highly educated parts of Spain, how might it also be true for the many parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America where local languages are actively discouraged and have little official status?

Despite the efforts of many agencies to translate key documents (usually from English into other languages), the development sector is becoming increasingly dominated by the English language. As such, it is disempowering itself by ensuring its ignorance of vitally (and in the case of China increasingly) important mainstream intellectual traditions. By failing to engage systematically with local languages, the sector limits its understanding of and its ability to communicate with most of its intended beneficiaries. Addressing the issue of language fully would have large financial and organisational implications, but failure to do so carries the high costs of ignorance and inefficient communication. If development is to be about life, it has to be able to connect with the languages within which its beneficiaries live.

## Informational developments

The application of knowledge to development policy and practice takes place in a wider context of what can be termed ‘informational developments’ (Hamelink 2003: 123) – that is, the connected series of information-related changes in social, economic, and cultural as well as technological life. Informational developments are taking place in every society, but it is a serious mistake to assume that they constitute a uniform process globally or share a common destination, rather than a variety of new processes each influencing and being influenced by the society in which they are taking place (UNRISD 2005).

Nora and Minc, asked in 1978 to produce a report on the impact of telematics (computer-mediated communications) for the President of France, foresaw such developments leading to an inevitable reshaping of economic and social relations and of the locus of conflicts within society:

*They [new social movements] are only starting the transition toward the very highly productive society where conflicts will predominantly be over cultural factors and*

*where appropriating them will become the moving force of history. It is then that slowly but surely telematics will affect the major instruments of culture: language, in its relations to the individual, and even in its social function; and knowledge, as an extension of collective memory and as a tool for achieving the equality or discrimination of social groups.* (Nora and Minc 1980: 128)

The issue of ‘equality or discrimination of social groups’ is fundamental to the mission of most development organisations, especially NGOs. The struggle to appropriate cultural factors will take place with or without their participation. Failure to understand the potential relevance of development practice – the only multi-billion dollar multinational concern with an explicit mandate to support the poor and their socio-economic and cultural participation in processes that affect them – could affect the outcome of this struggle. Anita Gurusurthy and Parminder Jeet Singh (2005) describe how the international debate on ‘the information society’ surrounding the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) has been dominated by neo-liberal interpretations of its nature and development; they suggest that this may have made development actors, especially those from civil society, suspicious of the whole project. Such non-engagement, they argue, plays into the hands of neo-liberal forces intent on imposing their control on all aspects of this future. Nor is it simply a question of resisting this control, but rather one of proposing alternatives that have the capacity to transform and enrich development theory and practice:

*It is however important to realize that in refuting neo-liberal models of ICTD [Information and Communication Technologies for Development] and IS [Information Society] one cannot simply go back to where things were before the new ICTs emerged. The power of these ICTs and their far-reaching impact on our social life is real and has to be contended with. In fact, they need to be exploited for progressive social change and it is necessary to understand the structural and institutional changes needed for this purpose – and to invest in them. We must first comprehend the nature and the far-reaching significance of the changes taking place all around us. The nature of market and business interactions have changed; social communication, organizational structures and activities are greatly impacted; fundamental changes have occurred in all domains – from education and entertainment to government and banking. So many social paradigms are being re-built that the paradigm of development may also require a complete re-look. The new context has to be appropriated in theory and practice for building a new development framework in the IS.* (Gurusurthy and Singh 2005:20)

The reason for considering, however briefly, these features of how different knowledges exist and how they relate to each other and to a changing world is because they demand strategic choices from all – politicians, businesses, development organisations – who aim to act across the many barriers of class, gender, language, culture, religion that exist. These choices relate to

- openness and willingness to negotiate differences of knowledge and perception;
- awareness that English as a lowest common denominator may be functional but excludes the thought and expression of millions from debates and interventions which directly affect their lives;
- the economic and developmental implications of the way in which knowledge and information are defined and marketed as well as of investments in ICT;
- the contested models of communication – hierarchical versus peer-to-peer – and their implications for external relationships and public image;
- the implications for internal organisational culture and structure of choices made.

## Development practice

The second part of this article looks at common sources of knowledge and information for development organisations. It considers to what extent they meet the need for the range of knowledges and understanding which, as argued above, are necessary if policies and programmes are to be well founded and have their desired impact. Information is important in this context, because development workers are very much in the business of creating their own knowledge: using their experience and education to structure and interpret information from a variety of sources. These include

- programme information
- formal research
- organisational knowledge-management processes
- ICT systems
- voices.

These will each be considered in turn.

### *Programme information*

Programme information, whether it is internal to the development organisation or the result of funding someone else, can be an invaluable source of evidence upon which to build learning and knowledge. Development organisations have always kept records of their activities for internal administrative purposes, as well as to meet external monitoring requirements. Such records can be analysed from various perspectives and used in the planning of subsequent work. The knowledge gained – that one particular type of truck breaks down a lot in muddy conditions, for example – may not be profound, but it is certainly essential if you are planning a relief programme in a rainy season. Substantial qualitative information is also often generated. This may include the output of participative work with local populations, technical surveys and studies, notes of meetings and other observations logged in mission reports, and evaluations.

There are, however, a number of problems in making efficient use of these sources from a knowledge perspective. One is that to make use of such information, people need to know that it exists and how to find it. Although evaluations are occasionally made public, or lessons learned are turned into working papers, most programme information is simply tucked away in the file of the project concerned. The fact that a meeting with villagers exposed concerns other than those addressed by the programme, or that a number of similar health surveys had in fact been carried out in different programmes and could usefully be studied together, will seldom be known – even to the other organisations concerned, still less to the wider development community. Information systems are generally not good enough to catch the multiple potential uses of such information, and staff turnover means that often even informal means of information exchange are ineffective. This narrow and limited use of information is inefficient in terms of the cost of producing it and reduces the ability of organisations and of the sector as a whole to develop knowledge derived from their past work. It can also be highly alienating for those local people involved who, not infrequently, find themselves being asked the same or similar questions time after time, without necessarily seeing much tangible benefit as a result.

A second issue concerns the purpose of collecting programme information, the selection of information that is collected, and the implications of the process of collection for all stakeholders in the programme. This is studied in detail in a book emanating from five years'

research funded by the British government's Department for International Development (DFID), which considered the impact of new NGO management practices. Entitled *The Aid Chain: Commitment and Coercion in Development NGOs* (Wallace *et al.* 2006), the book describes in detail the way in which over recent years Northern NGOs have imposed standard methodologies for planning and reporting programme work on their Southern 'partners':

*There is an almost invisible and little analysed bias towards valuing and favouring systems that are developed in the north, with their accompanying detailed explanations, models and practices over the local knowledge, concepts, language and understanding of civil society and staff in the south. They have to learn the new aid paradigms if they want to be included and funded. Donors and international agencies do not have to learn the local language or cultural norms in return; far from it and these universal frameworks are now seen as appropriate ways to work in contexts of extreme diversity.*

*... At the same time staff on the frontline, staff with extensive field experience, staff engaging with these procedures while trying to work with local realities all said that the tools do not work once implementation starts. There were no exceptions in the research and this was a really striking finding. The disjuncture between the paper based plans, objectives, activities and indicators and the day to day realities poor people and NGOs staff try to grapple with in a wide range of different contexts and cultures is too great to be bridged. The paper based plans and timetables are left in the office, while NGO staff try to find ways – many very innovative, others very inappropriate – to work with poor communities, marginalized groups, and the neglected. They then revert to the written tools again when it comes to reporting and accounting for donor aid money; often one set of people do the front line development activities, while others complete the required paperwork. More time, training and focus is given in most aid chains to ensuring that managers and finance staff can complete the documentation to a satisfactory level, than is given to training frontline staff. Yet the evidence shows their deep need for support and training on issues as diverse as understanding the meaning and shape of gender inequality in different cultures, listening to the most disadvantaged, finding ways to give excluded people confidence to join in development activities, and how best to develop trust and good communication with groups, individuals and communities that have so long been by-passed by development. (Wallace *et al.* 2006 (forthcoming), final draft, Chapter 10, quoted with permission)*

This research and its conclusions are of profound importance to the current practice of development and it deserves to be widely read and debated. This is in part because its findings are far from unique. Indeed there is a strong similarity between the findings of Tina Wallace and her collaborators and those of other overlapping studies, such as Lindhout (2006), Preston (2005), and Mawdsley *et al.* (2002). The latter, for example, concluded:

*The problem is the sheer volume of documentation and the fact that the current bureaucratic trend is reducing the time and quality of contact between partners, holding back or even damaging development efforts in the process. (Mawdsley *et al.* 2002:139)*

It is ironic that imported methodologies, intended to produce greater accountability, themselves undermine the processes in which the money has been invested. The issue is not that of accountability, which is of course necessary, but that of appropriate methods for the information environment in which development takes place. To link back to the discussion on *Working with knowledge* above, the tools that have been produced are based on the linear processes of a service industry, rather than the complex interactions of a knowledge industry. They do

not consider the relationships among different knowledges (or, if they do, take a reactionary position of domination and control); nor do they consider the potential damage done to the agencies that impose them by undermining and distorting one of the potentially most effective channels for acquiring detailed local knowledge. Knowledge, as we have seen, depends on effective communication. Basing a relationship on a long list of pre-set questions aimed at meeting the donor's needs is hardly an auspicious start to learning about the needs of the community or the local organisation that may be seeking support.

### *Formal research*

Formal research on development issues or on the societies in which development interventions are planned forms a vast resource. Much of it, whether undertaken by consultant researchers or by academics, is funded from development assistance budgets. However, its use and value to the work of the development sector is constrained by two factors.

First, the overwhelming majority of internationally published work on development issues and places is produced by Northern researchers, such as this author, or at least by Northern institutions. There is no reason why such work should not be encouraged, but to ignore locally produced work is both inequitable and, as it restricts available interpretations of knowledge, unprofessional. Southern-based researchers face multiple barriers to international publication, while locally produced scholarly journals are seldom well distributed internationally, or cited by Northern researchers if they are. This means that most locally produced intellectual research – with its methodologies and research questions potentially (see Cline-Cole in this issue) responding to local priorities – is not seen and therefore not used by development practitioners, policy makers, or even many academics based in the North. As-Adebayo Olukoshi observed:

*A review of the literature employed to inform the UN's analysis of Africa's problems shows a remarkable absence of African material. It is a clear case of trying to read and change Africa without reading and taking full cognisance of the views of Africa's scholars. Yet, it is inconceivable that a full understanding of any society can be sought without an investment into ways of engaging the perspectives of its intellectuals. (Olukoshi 2004)*

The same could be said of any other international user or funder of research on Africa.

Second, the format of most formal research – monographs, long reports, or refereed journal articles – is not appropriate to the working practices of the sector, in which individuals are generally under severe pressure of time and often need to keep track of issues in a wide range of different subject areas. There are recorded instances of programme and policy staff never having read the output of research funded to support their work; and the reading of executive summaries or even abstracts rather than a full report is common. There have been some moves in recent years to create a more varied range of information channels, especially the World Wide Web, and some donors, including DFID, who require 10 per cent of any research budget to be used for communications purposes, are actively encouraging this trend – but there is much resistance. Academics are accustomed to setting their own research agendas, rather than responding to needs expressed by others, and they esteem themselves and their colleagues by the frequency and status of what they publish in academic format. In the UK at least, this also forms the basis for monitoring individual and institutional value and prospects for career advancement. As I was told by someone in a prestigious international health institute linking with a cross-sectoral programme working to deliver information on HIV/AIDS and other vital health issues to people working with them on the ground: *'I know this is very important, but working on this is actively harming my career'*.

### *Organisational knowledge-management processes*

'Knowledge management' as a purposeful set of deliberate activities is a term that did not gain common usage until the mid-1990s; in development terms, it arose from the World Bank's definition of itself as a 'knowledge bank' in 1998. Since then, some sort of knowledge management has become common in many development organisations, although what it consists of varies widely. While there is a growing literature on 'knowledge and development' in general, detailed studies of practice within development organisations are rare. One of the more recent was published by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), based on a review of knowledge-management strategies in 13 development organisations of varying type and size (Ramalingam 2005). Ben Ramalingam's conclusions match the experience of many who work in this field. They include the following:

1. That there is a continuing problem:
  - 'major challenges of knowledge and learning in the development sector still need to be addressed' (p. ix).
2. That the centrality of knowledge to development strategies is not recognised or, if it is, not acted upon:
  - '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' (p.19).
3. That the common prioritisation of internal, and often headquarters-oriented, information and knowledge-management issues often distracts from exchanges with those immersed in the Southern realities that organisations aim to be changing:
  - 'continual demands for information "from the field" by head office create a tension that makes learning difficult in many of the organisations concerned' (p.15).
  - 'a large number of participants identified the need for knowledge strategies to address internal issues before addressing these broader issues... 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 knowledge sharing with those in the South' (p. 26).
  - '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' (p. 27).
  - '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' (p. 30).
4. That knowledge and learning work is often marginalised:
  - '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' (p. 30).
  - 'A danger 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' (p. 20).

## *ICT systems*

An effective ICT infrastructure is increasingly important for the internal and external needs of office-based organisations anywhere. Problems of cost, Internet access, training, support, or even electricity make it far harder to maintain this infrastructure in many parts of the world than others. However, there are also choices to be made, illustrating that what is often seen as a simple internal technical issue has long-term implications which relate to an organisation's response to the strategic questions raised above.

For example, all organisations do and should apply software in different ways, according to their particular requirements. However, organisations working in the same sector will need to deal with similar data-handling issues; and, as most software is constructed through linked modules (called objects), there is considerable scope for sharing or adapting these modules rather than building a whole programme from scratch, which indeed is how software developers of all types vary their products for particular markets. There are two models for developing software. One (proprietary) retains all the knowledge related to the programme as private property within the company that produces it. The other involves various communities of developers and sharing their knowledge through various licence mechanisms (Free, Libre, or Open Source), known collectively as FLOS. In this author's opinion, there are technical and operational merits to each option. It is also the case that many of the larger software companies make their products available free or at low cost to development agencies, both North and South. However, the potential for avoiding long-term dependence, for encouraging software businesses in developing countries, for being able to re-use relevant components by making them available for the ICT systems of 'partners' and, ultimately, for shaping the design of the software to reflect the needs of the development sector more accurately exists only in the FLOS model. It is not, however, an option which has been much favoured by the wealthier members of the development community.

Another example would be the content of an organisation's web site. Is it designed purely around that organisation's own activities and knowledge, or does it contribute to the wider development information environment through linking to the output of others, particularly 'partners'? Is the web site going to be a gate or a gateway? Many of the web sites of international NGOs, for example, contain no links to the web sites of their Southern 'partners'. Instead of using the medium to facilitate connections throughout their own constituency and the knowledge production of those that they fund, the impression is given that they seek to limit communication to their own interpretation of the work that they support. Again behind the immediate questions of audiences, design, and content lie significant strategic questions of openness or control which relate to the highly contested development of 'information societies', North and South.

## *Voice*

A common criticism of participatory methodologies is that they are too often used as a technique for the planning of particular projects already identified by a donor, rather than being an authentic and autonomous discourse by which groups of people may come to see where they share ideas and priorities and where they do not (Hickey and Mohan 2005). Another common criticism is that local politics are often disregarded. In fact participatory processes, often locally initiated, can be used to explore and express a much wider range of issues, including local power relationships, depending on how they are applied and, often, by whom they are applied. Support for this type of work, for South–South networks and for other local-level informational developments, has a long history in the development sector. Recent examples

include the work of *Dialogues Politiques* (run by ENDA in Dakar), work on cultural literacy with the *Movimento sem Terra* (Landless Movement) in Brazil (Baron and Souza), and the Reflect Programme (Action Aid).<sup>1</sup>

Such work is usually judged on its individual merits and valued in terms of its impact on local participants. It has, both as individual examples and collectively, another potential role: that of contributing to a body of knowledge on people's perceptions of development and on ways in which local knowledge and processes are applied to local issues. This role is currently 'potential', because it is relatively rare that the output of such work is collated, analysed, and used in the knowledge systems of Northern-based organisations. If, however, the current weakness of Northern knowledge of Southern perceptions is accepted, then such work acquires an additional value, and one might expect to see greater investment in it. If so, a careful scrutiny of past practice may help to develop appropriate methodologies for supporting these processes.

If the aim is to encourage the free expression of people's priorities and views, then people must be free to choose the form or even the dimension of expression that has most meaning for them. For example, Jaabe So and Adrian Adams in *A Claim to Land by the River* (reviewed in *Development in Practice* 8(3): 379) not only use an original 'multi-voice' format in presenting their text but place their argument – and their claim to land – on the basis of a timescale alien to most development professionals. Much participatory work, such as 3D modelling, has been progressed through thinking in spatial terms. Within the foreseeable future, developments in ICT will enable a capacity to handle oral information that will match current capacity for the written word. Development organisations that are serious about listening need to consider how to invest in the production of such expression and in their own capacity to receive, handle, and use it.

## Conclusion

The previous section may be accused of emphasising the negative. Of course there are many examples of good, even inspirational, practice, but these tend to be occasional, rather than built into the processes by which most development organisations work with information and knowledge. What is intended is to demonstrate that every channel for knowledge generation, retention, and use within development agencies has significant problems, and that these problems are structural in nature. Much of what both development organisations and development researchers do in practice undermines the flows of knowledge that they themselves require if they are to achieve their goals.

It is not argued that this is necessarily a result of taking a deliberate choice against equity, participation, and two-way communication in favour of domination and control. Some developments, such as the reporting requirements described by Wallace *et al.* (2006), have arisen from other strategic concerns, in this case accountability, which undoubtedly need to be addressed. However, all organisations need to struggle with competing demands. Much is made of the relevance of the private sector to development work, but no business can afford to ignore, for example, long-term research and development or customer relations for the sake of short-term profit. Indeed, there are well-known tools designed to enable managers to seek an effective balance. Most development organisations have made large investments in trying to address information and communication issues at operational levels. But they have failed to recognise the fundamental significance of conceptions of knowledge, and use of knowledge, to development; they have failed also to recognise how contested are the choices involved, and how the pursuit of other priorities can affect organisational effectiveness in this area. Development organisations and research institutions of all types need to consider

their position with regard to the strategic questions posed and rethink their working practices, organisation, and external relationships accordingly.

Given the intense need for good local knowledge and participation when it comes to the 'how' of meeting the MDGs, and given the number of development organisations for whom values of human solidarity, justice, and equal opportunity are central to their mission, such reflection will, for many, lead to major changes in how they manage and do development. Since not all will make the same choices, this may destroy some existing consensus and, in so doing, re-ignite debates about purpose, methodologies, values, and power in development work.

For those committed to change, this will involve constructing a different information environment for the development sector as a whole, as well as for individual organisations. One feature of this new environment is that creating it needs to be a collaborative exercise. Another is that it needs to consist of and be able to accommodate multiple, if overlapping, centres of thought, knowledge, and language. It will require more investment in and greater attention to knowledge production, by all social strata, in the South. In the wider context of informational developments, it will involve the creation and use of new information artefacts. There will be many challenges, but also a real opportunity for practitioners and scholars to move on from existing constraints and form new working relationships.

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## Notes

1. For ENDA, see <http://diapol.enda.sn/> and for Reflect see <http://217.206.205.24/Initiatives/ict/home.htm>. The work of Baron and de Souza is available in Portuguese as Baron 2004, reviewed in English by this author in *Development in Practice* 15: 5, August 2005.

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