

## **Knowledge sharing in communities of practice in international development**

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## **Abstract**

The international development sector comprises a large industry, spread throughout the world – in almost all countries – which is linked to development aid. Knowledge in the sector needs to be shared across organisations and various knowledge divides, including that of language. In this landscape, communities of practice can play an important role because of their ability to link actors from many different organisations and different constituencies. After a brief review of the literature, four communities of practice in the development sector are considered from the perspective of domain, community and practice: the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4dev) community; Solution Exchange; Health Information for All 2015 (HIFA2015); and the Smart Toolkit. Given the wide proliferation of communities of practice, the communities cannot be considered as representative and they are probably much larger in terms of members and with a longer period of existence than most communities of practice. However, they do illustrate the potential of communities of practice in the development sector. They have been successful in sharing knowledge and information among a wide variety of development actors. They comprise both intentional and non-intentional communities, although the Smart toolkit and KM4Dev have both had intentional and non-intentional phases. All four of the communities are able to cross geographical distances, and three of them could be said to have global coverage.

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The international development sector comprises a large industry, spread throughout the world – in almost all countries – which is linked to development aid. To illustrate its scale, it can be defined in terms of the financial flows but also in terms of the organisations involved. In 2012, members of the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) provided USD 125.6 billion in net Official development assistance (ODA), representing 0.29% of their combined gross national income (GNI), although this represented 4.0% drop in real terms compared to 2011<sup>2</sup>. ODA has three qualifying elements: it is provided by government; its main objective is promotion of economic development and welfare; and it is provided with concessional financial terms (OECD-DAC 2008). Spain became sixth largest bilateral aid donor, increasing its aid from less than USD 2 billion to almost USD 7 billion in just six years. However, due to economic problems, development aid dropped to just over USD4 billion in 2011 and is decreasing steadily.<sup>3</sup> ODA does not include financial flows from international foundations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and from non-DAC donors, such as China, and thus represents a considerable under-representation of the total financial size of the international development sector.

In addition to its large size in financial terms, the sector comprises a global range of actors, both organisational and individual, working to achieve development as has been elaborated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Ferguson and Cummings 2008: 76), although the MDGs are due to be replaced in 2015. Organisational actors include the international organisations, such as multilateral organisations (United Nations, World Bank, World Health Organisation, etc.) and the bilateral donor organisations in developed countries (also called the global North in development terminology), and their government counterparts in developing countries (the global South). Bilateral donor organisations include, for example, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID)<sup>4</sup> and the Department for International Development (DFID), UK. The range of development organisations also include the so-called civil society actors, such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which range from large multi-country operations, such as the Save the Children Fund, to small NGOs and community-

based organisations (CBOs) directly working on the ground in developing countries. In terms of individuals, it includes a wide range of professionals, ranging from policymakers in the international organisations and at national level, researchers at universities and research organizations, and development practitioners, including health professionals, knowledge and information managers, extension agents, and many more, such as journalists and activists (Ferguson and Cummings 2008: 76).

The development sector thus comprises a broad and diverse range of organizations, individual professionals and activists. However, Ferguson and Cummings (2008) argue that:

*development efforts often transcend organizations, professional constituencies, and geographical boundaries, making knowledge management increasingly relevant because of its power to cross these divides. (2008: 79)*

Knowledge in the sector needs to be shared across organisations and various knowledge divides, including that of language. It is possible to conceptualize knowledge in the development sector as not only the knowledge encompassed by the range of actors but also sector-wide or system-wide knowledge. In this landscape, communities of practice can play an important role because of their ability to link actors from many different organisations and different constituencies. Online communities are able to link people and organisations across continents.

In this paper, the lessons from the experiences of communities of practice in the development sector will be updated from an analysis undertaken in 2005 (Cummings and van Zee 2005). The lessons of this experience may not be directly relevant to the organisations in the business sector because these communities are generally organisation-bound. However, these experiences will be relevant to other non-development activities which may be less organisation bound, such as the health sector and academia.

## **An introduction to communities of practice<sup>5</sup>**

Wenger argues that communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and who interact regularly to learn how to do it better. They include families developing their own practices, routines and rituals; workers organizing their lives with their immediate colleagues and customers; students at school; bands rehearsing in garages; recovering alcoholics at weekly meetings; and scientists. These communities are not generally computer-mediated although they can be: 'Across the world wide web of computers, people congregate in virtual spaces and developing shared ways of pursuing their common interests' (Wenger 1997). They are very informal and pervasive. Membership of multiple communities is the norm: some of which one is a core member, and some of which membership is more peripheral. To define a community of practice, Wenger argues that three characteristics are crucial: the domain, the community and the practice.

#### *The domain*

A community of practice has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people. Members value their collective competence and learn from each other, even though few people outside the group may value or even recognize their expertise.

#### *The community*

Within their domain of interest, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. However, members of a community of practice do not necessarily work together on a daily basis. To illustrate this point, Wenger cites the example of the Impressionist painters who used to meet in cafes and studios to discuss the style of painting they were inventing together. These interactions were essential to making them a community of practice even though they often painted alone.

#### *The practice*

A community of practice is not merely a community of interest, for example people who like certain kinds of films. Key to the paradigm is the fact that members of a community of practice are *practitioners* who develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems,

namely a shared practice. Developing these resources takes time and sustained interaction. It also involves reification which is the 'process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into thingness' (Wenger, 1998: 58). In the development sector the term 'practitioners' is used to make a distinction between the people who work for civil society, and those who work for academia (researchers) and multi-lateral and bilateral development organisations (policymakers). However, in Wenger's understanding researchers and policy makers are also practitioners because they also have a practice.

It is the combination of these three elements (domain, community, practice) that constitutes a community of practice. These three elements have to be developed in parallel to cultivate a community of practice. Wenger argues that communities of practice are not called that in all organisations: they are also known as learning networks, thematic groups, or clubs. He is also not prescriptive about the term 'communities of practice' and using no others: 'The kind of social theory of learning I propose is not a replacement for other theories of learning that address different aspects of the problem' (Wenger 1997). Wenger here is pointing out that he does not see that his approach should be exclusive.

### **Communities of practice in development**

Since the 1990s, the role of communities of practice in development organisations has received increasing attention. As Wenger predicted, these communities have many different names, depending on the institutional context, including so-called 'communities of ideas' (Engel 1997), 'formal knowledge networks' and 'virtual teams' (Willard 2001), 'knowledge networks' (Box 1990), 'thematic networks' (IICD website), 'virtual knowledge communities' (Cummings et al 2005), 'international networks for knowledge sharing' (Resource Centre for Development, Skat Foundation 2004) and 'thematic groups' (World Bank website). They are widespread within and between development organizations. The variety of different names for what are effectively similar entities is illustrative of substantial creativity.

Many of the communities of practice are online, although they quite often have an face-to-face component. Organisations and groups of development professionals are

taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the new technology to initiate a vast range of communities of practice. Such communities have been used to upgrade the quality of the activities, outputs and impact of development organisations, to facilitate a collective learning process, and to contribute to a ‘shifting up’ of development activities to an international audience (Engel 1997). A substantial number of development organisations are positively exploiting the potential of these communities by creating intentional communities of practice. An example of the growth in the number of communities can be demonstrated with the example of Dgroups<sup>6</sup>, a platform of collaborative tools and services established by a group of development organisations. In July 2003, Dgroups supported 360 virtual communities, comprising 8125 members. In March 2014, Dgroups counts 2,415 communities, with around 191,318 registered users. It delivers around 460.000 email messages each day, half of which are exchanged with African countries.

In development, a typical community of practice comprises a group of practitioners focusing on a specific subject field, facilitating sharing of information and skills. They can be members of the same organization. However, the great strength of such communities is that, enabled by ICTs, they are able to facilitate contact between practitioners working in different organisations in different parts of the world. However, they are not uniform with differences between membership composition (homogenous versus heterogeneous), dispersion (distributed versus centralised), location (within organisations/networks and between organisations and networks) and focus (broad and far-reaching versus closely defined) (Hearn and White 2009). In general, however, they can be effective as platforms for information and knowledge sharing which has a social component (see Table 1). Such information and knowledge sharing ultimately leads to improved development programmes and improved development outcomes.

**Table 1: Knowledge sharing within communities of practice**

Different components of the community	What is being shared	The role of what is being shared	The result of knowledge sharing through communities of practice		
			Short-term	Medium-term	Long-term
Information	Documentation of projects, articles and links	Improved access to information	Better informed dialogue	Improved approaches	Improved development outcomes
	Re-use of assets	More efficient	Better informed	Improved	

## Knowledge sharing in communities of practice in international development

		use of information	decision-making	development programmes	
Knowledge sharing	Facilitating quick responses to questions and answers	Enhances formal training	Greater use of past experience and lessons	Improved development projects	
	Access to a pool of expert knowledge	Increasing understanding of specific contexts			
	Discussion of current issues	Facilitates progress from novice to expert Mapping of knowledge			
Social component	Personal contacts	Increased satisfaction	Increased commitment		
	Increased social interaction	Sense of belonging  Increased access to networks	Increased engagement  Development of reciprocity		

Source: Updated from Cummings and Van Zee 2005

## Communities of practice in development: the state of the art

Hearn and White argue that communities of practice are well positioned to act as 'effective bridges between knowledge, policy and practice' (2009:1), providing three examples of where communities of practice can be useful, namely by facilitating collaboration between researchers and practitioners; researchers working together to influence policy; and involving policymakers in the process of generating knowledge. Given the potential of communities of practice, many organisations are using them as tools to facilitate collaboration between different development actors. This reflects Johnson's argument that communities of practice, originally used as 'a heuristic to analyse how learning occurs in social settings has become a "tool" to promote learning' (2007: 280). Amin and Roberts have also recognised this phenomenon:

*As CoPs thinking proliferates, the original emphasis on context, process, social interaction, material practices, ambiguity, disagreement – in short the frequently idiosyncratic and always performative nature of learning – is being lost to formulaic distillations of the workings of CoPs and instrumentalist*

*applications seeking to maximise learning and knowing through CoPs. (2008: 2).*

In addition (2007), communities of practice can support or hinder social change:

*...although communities of change whether de facto in existence or intentionally created, have the potential to concentrate and direct energies in support of social change, they equally have the potential to ab a conservative force that can adhere to ways of being and modus operandi. (Johnson 2007: 281)*

For Johnson, 'reification' in the context of international development comprises 'forms and means of designing, negotiating, agreeing, accounting for and evaluating interventions between donors and beneficiaries' (2007: 281). Like communities of practice themselves, reification can take on progressive and conservative forms.

We now review four cases of large communities of practice in the development sector from the perspective of domain, community and practice. We then provide an overview of common elements and consider whether these communities have had a progressive or conservative influence on social change. These communities of practice have not been chosen at random: two of them (Solution Exchange and HIFA2015) have been selected because they are generally acknowledged as good examples and were previously selected by White (2010) in her analysis of communities of practice. The other two (KM4Dev and the Smart Toolkit) represent communities of practice of which the author has been an active member. Given the wide proliferation of communities of practice, they cannot be considered as representative in any way and they are probably much larger in terms of number of members and period of existence than the run of the mill communities of practice. However, they do illustrate the potential of communities of practice in the development sector.

### **Case 1: KM4Dev**

Probably one of the most vibrant communities of practice in the development sector comprises the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev)<sup>7</sup> community which has been in existence since approximately the year 2000.

### *The domain*

The domain of KM4Dev comprises knowledge management and knowledge sharing issues and approaches. This translates into a very broad focus because knowledge management and knowledge sharing is the approach and this can be applied to many different themes such as the health sector and agriculture from grassroots to global level.

### *The community*

As a community, KM4Dev has evolved the following supporting principles<sup>8</sup>:

- Open and interactive in nature
- Supports and encourages a mix of individuals (Northern and Southern participation, large and small organizations, academics and practitioners, male and female)
- International development is the specific, underlying context to our exploration of KM/KS issues and approaches

The borders of the community are rather fuzzy because joining the mailing list, the website and attending a face-to-face meeting confer membership, although members are registered in any way. The mailing list currently (16 March 2014) comprises 1882 members spread over 104 countries (see Figure 1). As can be seen in Figure 1, membership is distributed globally, although it is highest in the USA (212 members) and Western Europe (UK has 120 members and Switzerland 105). There is a strong community feeling as can be demonstrated by these quotes from members:

*I feel so moved by all the positive reactions I received every day since I posted my request. Just as if I have numerous secret hidden friends ready to give a hand ! It's a feeling not easy to express; the kind of strength you sense when you're not alone and that makes you dare and never afraid of taking new challenges... merci beaucoup. (Yennenga Kompaoré, Burkina Faso)*

*I'm proud of being part of this collaborative community. Thank you all. (Marcelo Yamada, Promon Engenharia, Brazil).*



**Figure 1: Distribution of KM4Dev membership** (Source: KM4Dev<sup>9</sup>)

As Smith and Makowski point out, the informality and reciprocity of KM4Dev is in stark contrast to the participants' working lives:

*Many members of KM4Dev work directly or indirectly for large development institutions, whether national governments, non-profits or UN agencies. Within their agency work-life, the members of KM4Dev operate in complex, hierarchical, formal, and possibly political structures. Part of the effectiveness of the KM4Dev community is that it is so much less formal and that people participate as individual practitioners. (Smith and Makowski 2012: 193)*

#### *The practice*

Since the year 2000, the members have developed a share repertoire of reified resources, including experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems, namely a shared practice. One of the shared tools is the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* which is now in its 9<sup>th</sup> year of publication. To the author's knowledge, this is the only community of practice in the KM field to have its own journal. In the *Global Ranking of Knowledge Management and Intellectual Capital Journals: 2013 Update*, the journal was rated as 19, 14 and 17<sup>th</sup> of the top 25 journals in this field on the basis of expert opinion, citation index and combined experts/citation index respectively (Serenko and Bontis 2013). KM4Dev comprises both online (with a website and mailing list) and face-to-face elements.

In an article published in 2009, Ferreira compared the KM4Dev community to a new Enlightenment:

*In less than 10 years, KM4Dev has become a global network of development agents who share the idea that knowledge can contribute to the development of poor countries and groups in a disadvantaged situation. KM4Dev is already playing the role of a cognitive bridge for development agents worldwide, and the demand of methodologies and tools of development agents have shaped the flow of knowledge among the members of the net. KM4Dev plays that role with a high level of efficiency, providing reliable answers to development agents at a daily base, almost in real time, and at very low costs. (Ferreira 2009: 17-18)*

KM4Dev has proliferated with French and Spanish language communities: SIWA<sup>10</sup> and Sa-Ge<sup>11</sup>, although the SIWA group may no longer be active.

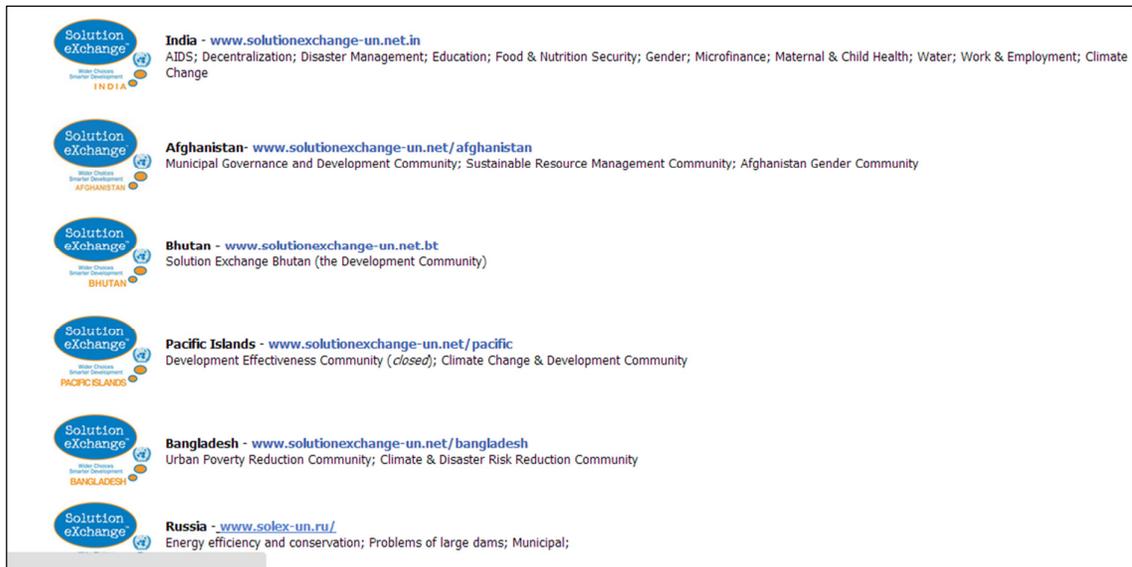
## **Case 2: Solution Exchange**

*Solution Exchange, an initiative of the UN agencies in India, is harnessing the power and passion of communities of practice to help attain India's development objectives and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by connecting the nation's development professionals and enabling them to share, learn from each other, and collaborate. (White 2010: 95)*

### *The domain*

Solution Exchange<sup>12</sup> comprises a group of communities of practice which aim to effectively address development priorities and the MDGs; tapping into the knowledge, experience and energies of members for collective problem-solving.<sup>13</sup> It is a meta-community of practice spread over a number of different MDG-related domains. Currently 18 Exchange communities of practice are active in India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, the Pacific, and Russia (see Figure 2). According to White (2010), UN's Solution Exchange, lead by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), has achieved something very important by not only hosting the 'social container' for the interactions, but making the results searchable and available to a much larger network of people.

## Knowledge sharing in communities of practice in international development



**Figure 2: An overview of Solution Exchange country platforms**

### *The community*

Since first being introduced in India in 2005, Solution Exchange has been used by 25,000 professionals from government, the UN, NGOs, research and academic institutions, donors and the private sector.

### *The practice*

Solution Exchange is about peer-to-peer problem solving, both online and face to face. Everyone in a community is a member of a moderated mailing group, supported by UN staff. When a member faces a challenge, this is sent by e-mail to the community. Over the next 1-3 weeks, members respond with advice, experience, contacts or other suggestions. Once the discussion closes the discussion and the resources recommended are synthesized into a *consolidated reply* that is circulated to community members. In addition, community members meet face-to-face in annual forums and regional events to interact, learn and make new connections. Members also collaborate on assignments, tapping into each others' knowledge, expertise and different perspectives. As a result of Solution Exchange, development practitioners can attain better results for:

- Informed decision making: knowledge at their fingertips;
- Faster feedback on issues which speeds up the plan-to-action process;
- Building local capacities while reducing costs; and
- Enhanced development effectiveness.

According to the website, here are some examples of how services have been provided:

- The UNDP official covering the Bihar flood relief received from Disaster Management and Water Community members over 60 examples of low-cost emergency water purification systems, in one week;
- The UNDP official charged with developing a national policy on ICT in education tapped the ICT for Development and the Education Communities to expand the consultation process across India;
- The Community AIDS members encouraged the wider adoption in India of community-based responses to HIV through the AIDS Competency Process; and
- The Food & Nutrition Security Community introduced a successful pilot scheme to increase the nutritional content of the Indian national school feeding initiative (the Mid-Day Meal Programme).

### **Case 3: Health Information for All 2015**

#### *The domain*

Health Information for All 2015 (HIFA2015)<sup>14</sup> is a global community of practice, launched in October 2006, to prevent avoidable death and suffering due to lack of healthcare information in developing countries. The goal of the campaign is that by 2015, every person worldwide will have access to an informed healthcare provider. According to Pakenham-Walsh (2012), access to appropriate health care information for health care providers relies on the global knowledge system made up of health professionals, policymakers, researchers, publishers, librarians, information specialists, and others. This knowledge system has a number of intrinsic weaknesses which need to be dealt with at national level but require an international effort in which HIFA 2015 can play an important role. This is necessary because:

*In some countries, particularly in Africa, more than 80% of avoidable child deaths occur before even reaching a health facility. Many factors contribute, but health care knowledge, timely recognition of danger signs, and appropriate action are fundamental. (Pakenham-Walsh 2012: 10)*

#### *The community*

According to the website, HIFA2015 is a campaign and knowledge network with

more than 7,000 members representing 2,500 organisations in 171 countries worldwide. Members include health workers, publishers, librarians, information technologists, researchers, social scientists, journalists, policy-makers and others. More than 95% of members find HIFA2015 forum 'useful' or 'extremely useful' for networking (Hanley and Davies 2011). HIFA2015 has sub-communities in Portuguese<sup>15</sup> and French.<sup>16</sup>

### *The practice*

An evaluation of HIFA2015 in 2011 (Hanley and Davies 2011) considered that HIFA2015 has become a successful, interactive, global network involving a diverse range of healthcare providers from high and low income countries. In the evaluation, members report tangible gains to their knowledge in understanding and addressing health information needs through participation in the forum. For those in low-income countries, this is particularly through access to people, skills, resources and experiences from elsewhere. HIFA has established a strong, institutional base ready and willing to organise together to advocate for healthcare information provision. There was evidence of at least some cases of HIFA2015 advocacy and individuals drawing on learning from HIFA bringing about changes in local healthcare provision. HIFA2015 is operating on a severely limited budget and has achieved considerably more than its budget might suggest (Hanley and Davies 2011). On the HIFA2015 website, there are a number of quotes from members, explaining how they value HIFA:

*HIFA is the most interactive network and it has facilitated the visibility and connectivity of most professionals. A lot of members have even found powerful connections leading to employment, projects, mentorship, and research of very high value globally. HIFA is not just an ordinary forum but a practical one driven by self motivated coordinators. HIFA members effectively use the forum to reach millions: information is indeed power. (Kenneth L Chanda, National Institute of Public Administration, Zambia)<sup>17</sup>*

*HIFA has become a household name among the general practitioners in Lagos! Can you imagine? These are indeed exciting times! From Maiduguri to Calabar, Port Harcourt to Sokoto, Lagos to Markurdi, they talked. What a discussion! Thank you thank you thank you. Together, we can make a*

*difference! Together, we will make a difference!* (Olayinka O. Ayankogbe, Head, Family Medicine Unit, University of Lagos, Nigeria)

#### **Case 4: The Smart Toolkit**

##### *The domain*

The Smart Toolkit focuses on the evaluation of information projects, products and services, such as websites, radio programmes, and blogs. It looks at evaluation within the context of the overall project cycle, from project planning and implementation to monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment, and then at evaluation process itself, the tools involved and examples of their application. The theme running throughout the toolkit is: participatory evaluation for learning and impact. The emphasis is on internal, self-evaluation, rather than external evaluation (CTA, 2010).

##### *The community*

In 2001, a group of information professionals from various development agencies began working together to produce a manual that would support self-evaluation by information practitioners working at information services directed at development. These practitioners were supported by three development organisations based in the Netherlands:

- Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA), an institution of the Lome Convention of the European Union in Wageningen;
- International Institute for Communication and Development (IICD), a Dutch institution based in The Hague; and
- Royal Tropical Institute (KIT), Amsterdam.

The writers and collaborators who voluntarily devoted their time and energy to developing the smart toolkit are primarily information professionals (information managers, librarians, documentalists and others) drawn from both the global North and global South, working in government agencies, the private sector, non-governmental organisations and universities. In Annex 2 and 3 to the 2010 edition (pp. 295-299), a list is provided of the professionals who contributed to the development of the toolkit in a series of workshops held over the 2001-2009 period in the Netherlands, Germany, St Lucia and Tanzania (CTA, 2009).

The tools were tested in African, Caribbean and Pacific countries, as well as Asia, Europe and the USA, with many of the tool writers acting as supervisors and providing guidance along the way. Many of the individuals and organisations who tested the tools in practice were drawn from networks developed as a result of the increased collaboration within the information community.

### *The practice*

Although the toolkit was not framed as a community of practice, it had concrete practice-based objectives: building the capacity of information professionals in the self-evaluation of their own products and services; based on this improved capacity, facilitating them in the preparation of a manual so that they could transfer this new knowledge to other information professionals; and training based on the Toolkit to transfer this knowledge to others. The manual has been published in two editions (CTA 2005, CTA 2009<sup>18</sup>) and provides wealth of information for those unable to attend the training courses. The 2009 edition has also been published in French (CTA, 2010).

## **Common elements**

The four case studies of communities of practice have a number of common elements.

### **Information and knowledge sharing**

Information and knowledge sharing appear to be key functions of these communities. Social interaction, collaboration and reciprocity are key processes. Answering specific queries within the community is another common feature, particularly of Solution Exchange, KM4Dev and HIFA2015. However, the framework of information, knowledge sharing and social interactions, presented in Table 1, does seem to underestimate drastically the processes of reification which are taking place in the communities. All four communities are producing reified resources which are of relevance far beyond the boundaries of the communities of practice which originally created them and which, in a number of cases, can be seen as global public goods: HIFA2015 is producing a large number of information resources of relevance to health providers in many developing countries; and the KM4Dev community has

created the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* which is a resource of relevance beyond the community members. Solution Exchange was also noted for the way the knowledge it generated was searchable and of use to others outside its communities; while the manual produced by the Smart toolkit has been used to train and inform development practitioners also beyond the community which created it. This creation of global public goods is not something which generally appears in the community of practice literature. This may be a function of the size of these communities, or it may be because they are part of the international development community.

### **Intentional/non-intentional**

The case studies presented represent a range of 'intentional' and 'non-intentional' communities. For example, KM4Dev was created intentionally by Bellanet, a project of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada, but for a number of years has functioned as a non-intentional community, guided by its Core Group of members. The Smart Toolkit started its life as a non-intentional community but became intentional as the three organisations involved provided resources to leverage the intrinsic vision of capacity building of information professionals. Both HIFA2015 and Solution Exchange are intentional: one aiming to improve health providers' skills by providing access to knowledge; and the other providing UNDP and other institutional/non-institutional actors with access to improved knowledge on which to base their decisions.

### **Face to face and online**

All of the communities of practice combine face-to-face and online interaction. Online interaction – particularly via e-mail – seemed to be vital to these communities because they are dispersed. Indeed, HIFA2015, the Smart Toolkit and KM4Dev are communities with a global scope, making it possible for practitioners to meet in virtual terms when opportunities to meet in person are severely limited.

### **Global reach**

Related to the above, all four communities are very widely dispersed. HIFA2015, KM4Dev and the Smart toolkit are distributed across the world, and are very much present in developing countries. These communities are not only able to cross the

boundaries between organisations but they are also able to span geographical boundaries. Reflecting this global reach, three of them (KM4Dev, HIFA2015 and Smart toolkit) are to some extent available in other languages.

## **Conclusions**

The four communities of practice examined provide examples of the potential of such communities in the development sector. They have been successful in sharing knowledge and information among a wide variety of development actors. They comprise both intentional and non-intentional communities, although the Smart toolkit and KM4Dev have both had intentional and non-intentional phases. All four of the communities are able to cross geographical distances, and three of them could be said to have global coverage.

None of these communities of practice appears to be progressive from the social change perspective: they appear to be improving development with information and knowledge but they are not necessarily challenging the status quo. They certainly do not appear to be reshaping relations between donors and beneficiaries of development aid, although HIFA2015 and KM4Dev may come closest to having an advocacy role. However, many of the professionals involved in these communities are probably working in complex, hierarchical, formal, and political structures. In this context, these communities provide such professionals with informal spaces in which to interact with their peers.

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<sup>1</sup> The introduction to the international development sector has been partly derived from a number of other publications by the author, including Cummings and Hellsten (2010)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/aidtopoorcountriesslipsfurtherasgovernmentstightenbudgets.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2013/feb/26/spain-trailblazer-age-aid-austerity>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.aecid.es/en/aecid/>

<sup>5</sup> This section has been derived from Cummings and van Zee 2005

<sup>6</sup> [www.dgroups.org](http://www.dgroups.org)

<sup>7</sup> [www.km4dev.org](http://www.km4dev.org)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.km4dev.org/notes>

<sup>9</sup> <https://dgroups.org/groups/km4dev-l/members/overview>

<sup>10</sup> <https://dgroups.org/sulabatsu/siwa>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.km4dev.org/group/km4devfrancophone>

<sup>12</sup> The main source for this case study is the website

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.solutionexchange-un.net/>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.hifa2015.org/>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.hifa2015.org/hifa-pt/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.hifa2015.org/hifa-evipnet-francais/>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.hifa2015.org/what-people-say-about-hifa/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://publications.cta.int/en/publications/publication/1557/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.km4dev.org/group/km4djournal/forum/topics/author-copy-the-new-enlightenment-a-potential-objective-for-the>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.hifa2015.org/wp-content/uploads/HIFA2015-Evaluation-Report-Executive-Summary.pdf>