



# MAKING KNOWLEDGE NETWORKS WORK FOR THE POOR

## FINAL REPORT



***“It is an added burden that the poor can ill afford to have to mine for information as well as for food, for shelter, for an income”  
(Zimbabwean interviewee)***

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## **Executive Summary**

***Knowledge is the sense that people make of information***

*Making Knowledge Networks Work for the Poor* is an initiative that seeks to improve the integration and co-ordination internationally of information and knowledge resources on appropriate technology. The overall aim of the project is 'to improve the integration and co-ordination internationally of information and knowledge resources on appropriate technology', and the purpose of the preliminary study was to consider the role of a network in bringing about this aim.

The project emerged out of a recognition by both development practitioners and donors that poor men and women face a series of problems in locating and using other people's knowledge and information for their own benefit. In particular, information about new technical options is required both to enable adoption of appropriate technologies, and to facilitate technology adaptation and development.

The project undertook a number of activities including the following:

- 1) A preliminary investigation of key centres of knowledge resources on technology and poverty reduction available on the internet
- 2) Discussions on effective and sustainable networks at WSSD
- 3) Case studies of organisations working with the poor in Peru, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka
- 4) A workshop to identify requirements for an appropriate technology information and knowledge to contribute to the information systems of poor people and to brainstorm the concept of a co-ordinating network

***The need for better co-ordination between information generators and providers was recognised...***

The research confirmed that:

- there is poor co-ordination amongst information providers
- poor people have difficulty accessing the right kind of information
- many of the information systems that do exist to provide information to the poor are not demand-driven, they overlook local knowledge, they do not understand or ignore the role of intermediaries, and they do not monitor usage
- the ICTs revolution provides opportunities but can undermine traditional, local communications, by taking attention away from them and supplanting them

***... as was the need for sharing of good practice in information services***

***The focus (of any future initiative) should be to make existing networks work better***

The main findings of the project were:

- The proliferation of networks is itself a problem. Development practitioners complain of 'information overload', and there is confusion about the role of each network with respect to another.
- Networks are themselves 'not networked', so that information users cannot get an overview of what information is available, and where.
- Networks do not incorporate and strengthen the systems that people already use to access information (e.g. social networks), and consequently do not understand why they do not reach their target audience.
- It is also important to recognise and value local knowledge and information channels, through participatory approaches.
- Organisations do not always communicate effectively with their constituencies, and are often guilty of confusing information dissemination with communication.
- Development practitioners and those engaged in the provision of information services aimed at reducing poverty, emphasise that 'face to face' communication is the most effective mode of transferring information. The challenge, therefore, is how any information system or network can engage with this mode of communication.
- The role of the information intermediary is key in addressing this challenge, but they are little understood and quite often overlooked.
- Participation in knowledge networks can be influenced by institutional competition for resources, especially when knowledge and information is seen as an organisational asset.

***There is a role to be played as a 'broker of (AT information) brokers'***

The creation of a new network would not necessarily resolve these issues, unless it attempted to consolidate and provide additional facilities not already on offer to users. However, there was doubt amongst project participants and informants about the need for another network. Rather, it was suggested the focus should be on making existing networks work better. The need for better co-ordination between information generators and providers was recognised, as was the need for sharing of good practice in information services and systems. This suggests that there is a role to be played as a 'broker of (AT information) brokers', and to be a catalyst for better communication and co-ordination within networks and between network members.

***An Infomediary Network for AT would target the information brokers...***

***... to unlock and facilitate the transfer of local knowledge and to complement it with external information***

Such an initiative should work with infomediaries to unlock and facilitate the transfer of local knowledge and complement it with external information, appropriately packaged and disseminated using innovative and appropriate communications techniques as defined by users.

## **Introduction and Background**

***"The elimination of poverty and protection of the environment requires improved access to knowledge and technologies by poor people." (DFID)***

Much has been written about the potential role of appropriate technologies to bring about sustainable livelihoods, and to reduce poverty. This potential has never been fully realised, partly because access to knowledge, and to the technologies themselves is limited for poor men and women who could put them to use.

*Making Knowledge Networks Work for the Poor* is an initiative that seeks to improve the integration and co-ordination internationally of information and knowledge resources on the use of technology for poverty reduction (e.g. through networks and partnerships covering the North and the South). Its aim is to ensure that the information generated and supplied meets the needs of poor women and men, by strengthening mechanisms for assessing the demand of information, the process of distillation and transformation of information, and the capability to employ appropriate formats.

The project emerged out of a recognition by both development practitioners and donors that poor men and women, and the institutions that service their needs, face a series of problems in locating and putting to good use other people's knowledge and information in the pursuit of sustainable livelihoods. Both DFID White Papers (1997 and 2000) state that '*the elimination of poverty and protection of the environment requires improved access to knowledge and technologies by poor people*'. In particular, information about new technical options is required both to enable adoption of appropriate technologies, and to enable technology adaptation and development.

### **What is knowledge?**

***Knowledge is the sense that people make of information***

In 'Information, Knowledge and Development', one of a series of perspective papers produced by the Panos Institute, a distinction is made between knowledge and information as follows:

*Knowledge is not the same as information: it is the sense that people make of information. Knowledge is infused with the insights, expertise and capacities of those who have it. People need to be able to make their own sense of information - to interpret it, to evaluate it, to reach their own understanding of it - whether the objective is to decide how to vote, to decide whether to wear a condom during sex, or to determine what price to charge for their produce at market.*

Information, defined by the participants to a Kenya workshop as 'propaganda, messages sent across, data with meaning', is shared or

transmitted through the process of communication. Without the 'conveyor belt' of communication, information stays in the same place and does not add value. It is the process of communication that moves information around from source to recipient and back again – becoming modified during the exchange. It is communication *and organisational commitment* to effective communication of knowledge that holds the key to making knowledge networks work for the poor.

### Communications holds the key to scaling up

There are a number of separate, but related themes emerging within the development community that 'make the case' for communications as the fulcrum of more effective aid delivery.

*The problem is that information about technology options is not getting to the right people in the right form*

First, traditional co-operation on project implementation (where it exists, usually at a local level) is increasingly being seen as *not enough* to bring about long-lasting impact. Strategic and co-ordinated engagement around knowledge generation and communication, as *well as* project implementation, is increasingly seen to be necessary for the poor to benefit significantly.

The problem is not that there isn't enough information about technology options, but rather that it often does not get to the right people in the right form. There exists a prolificacy of agencies, private and public, government and non-government, which are inventing and generating information about appropriate technologies as well as promoting and supporting the adoption of some of these technologies for poverty alleviation the world over. But despite this, the necessary information is not getting to the people whose lives it should be benefiting. At every level, better co-ordination of information generation and dissemination is being recognised as necessary to achieving development objectives.

Second, donors are beginning to ask for evidence that information dissemination is 'demand-driven'. Users, at the same time, are becoming more assertive about what kinds of information they need, in what form and when. This means that the intermediaries, responsible for information brokerage and delivery, are starting to look for the most appropriate communications techniques that will make information available to its target audiences.

Third, the current fashion for creating, storing and sharing knowledge that exists at every level of development organisation, could be harnessed to unlock the huge repository of knowledge that exists in the

***ICTs make it possible to communicate with anyone in the world, anywhere, any time ...***

south. Appropriate communications techniques could play an important role in mobilising this knowledge for the benefit of other southern communities who could benefit from the survival strategies and innovative approaches of men and women living in similar conditions of poverty.

Fourth, Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) are making it possible, at least in theory, to communicate with anyone in the world, anywhere, any time. Every six months, internet access, international telephone service, fax machines, modems and wireless communications become cheaper, easier to use and more sophisticated. More and more people are able to access the technologies that bring them global news and enable them to communicate with audiences that they will never see or know.

Communications can be used to make linkages between disparate groups of people with similar goals, not to bring about a specific ambition or objective, but simply to let the groups decide what they have in common and what they can learn from each other's experiences.. This strengthening of 'horizontal' communication makes it possible for changes to be planned and executed without any of the groups or individuals actually moving out of their own countries. To work together, people no longer need to be together. They no longer have to depend upon a 'middleman' who hears their story, filters it, and tells it to another audience with their own understanding, filtering and interpretation sewn into its very fabric. 'I can tell you my story in my own words for your personal consumption through the internet, by producing my own community newsletter, by talking on the radio for your ears.'

***... but the world of communications is a world divided***

Communication has been called 'the new participation' because it has the potential to significantly shift the power within development programmes from the practitioner to the beneficiary in the same way that participatory processes did when they began to be mainstreamed in the 1980s. Communication could be the tool that enables 'beneficiaries' to become their own advocates and activists, defining their own problems and putting pressure on structures and processes that used to shackle them in poverty.

### Full of empty promises?

But for many the excitement of 'what could be' hides the reality of 'what actually is'. Many millions of people still rely on traditional means of communication to access and share information. Techniques such as asking the village elders and schoolteachers, relying on relatives working in the cities, community meetings, and perhaps listening to the radio. So the world of communications is a world divided where, on the one hand, people with access to every kind of technology complain of information overload while at the other extreme, many millions live in an information vacuum. In the middle is a place where significant improvements could be made in the way that information is recognised, handled and brokered for the benefit of the poor. It is in this place where *Making Knowledge Networks Work for the Poor* seeks to make a difference.

*Is setting up another network necessary when part of the problem is that some existing networks do not work properly?*

### What is the Problem?

A recent flurry of investigation (see bibliography) reflects the growing interest in the field of knowledge management and communications approaches, and some useful tools have emerged to help understand the information and knowledge 'bottlenecks' that exist. Of relevance to the project are the following:

#### Poor co-ordination amongst information providers

The definition of 'appropriate technology' varies widely: at its widest, it could incorporate most kinds of development intervention (e.g. agriculture, small-scale enterprise, sustainable development solutions) and any attempt to co-ordinate or network information at that breadth would be hopeless if not impossible.

There is duplication of effort and activity because no overview exists of who are the main providers of information on technology for poverty reduction in the public domain. New initiatives are set up which can compete and sometimes undermine existing 'invisible' initiatives.

*Organisations may not collaborate strategically with each other because they compete with each other*

Setting up another network is not necessarily the answer when part of the problem is that some of the existing networks do not work properly. There is a danger that a global network could become yet another delivery mechanism for faster, better access for those (mostly in the north) who already have fast, comprehensive access to information on technology and poverty and who complain of information overload.

One of the reasons why organisations do not collaborate strategically with each other (in the field of information as well as for projects) is because they are forced to compete with each other (e.g. for donor funds, for public attention, for successful engagement with those they wish to influence etc.). So long as there is pressure to be 'at the cutting edge' or 'leader in the field', there will be reasons for organisations not to share with others what they have learned, and what development approaches work.

### **Poor men and women cannot access information they need**

*Information is often disseminated without understanding the needs of the users*

- Men and women living in marginalised communities cannot access the full range of information and knowledge that has been generated on technology and poverty. Often they only have partial knowledge of what exists and often they do not know where to find what else exists or how to access it.
- The materials that are available and accessible are not appropriate to meet their needs, either in their content (i.e. doesn't reflect their reality) or packaging (language, presentation of information etc.) There are often gaps in information flows between information generators and providers, and intermediaries (who act as information and service providers for the poor) on the one hand, and between these intermediaries and the poor themselves.
- Information and knowledge is often disseminated without understanding the needs of the users, or the contexts in which they can access and adopt the information.

### **User-driven information systems are a rarity**

*Organisations can be a facilitator of knowledge sharing between communities*

- Organisations are often guilty of overlooking local knowledge when generating and disseminating 'new' information. The most valuable role they can sometimes play is as a facilitator of knowledge-sharing between communities.
- Research programmes appear to give little consideration to understanding the intermediaries that transform and transmit their findings to different information users.
- Many organisations 'in the business' of providing information and services to poor people do not begin with what people want to know, but instead disseminate information that they – the organisation – have generated through projects etc. which may not be useful to their constituents. This 'push (by the institutions)' vs 'pull (by the end users)' could be because:

- (a) institutions do not recognise that this is happening
  - (b) they do not see their work as primarily responding to the needs of the poor
  - (c) potential users are not able to articulate and communicate their need for information to those who are in positions to deliver it.
- Inadequate tracking of where information goes and how (and if) it is taken up and translated into real benefits for the community, means that there is little feedback for improving subsequent information delivery.

**ICTs are more than just the Internet**

### **‘Fast and furious’ media are replacing traditional forms**

- The Internet provides a platform for delivering a wide range of information but to a narrow audience (usually not poor men and women).
- Information and Communication Technologies are **more than just the Internet**. ICTs include radio, video, film etc. which are often more appropriate and more accessible for the target audience.
- The internet could be a powerful facilitator of information sharing, but empowerment of poor people is unlikely unless foreign content is matched by the expression and communication of local knowledge that is relevant to local situations.
- Local content faces competition from globalised brands and knowledge. Most formal content and communication channels in developing countries - the internet, television, universities and research networks - help to push 'external' content into local communities.

### **Finding Some Solutions: The Project**

**Local content faces competition from globalised knowledge**

The original purpose of *Making Knowledge Networks Work for the Poor* was ‘to develop a proposal for a network of knowledge resources on technology and poverty reduction to facilitate the world-wide provision of information and exchange of knowledge about technology and poverty reduction that meets the needs and priorities of poor women and men’. Four specific outputs described how this purpose would be fulfilled:

- 5) A global ‘map’ of key centres of knowledge resources on technology and poverty reduction
- 6) Discussions on effective and sustainable networks at WSSD
- 7) Preliminary partnership for the global network
- 8) Identification of requirements for a global knowledge network to contribute to the information systems of poor people

The project undertook a series of five activities to achieve these outputs and to begin the necessary process of dialogue between the many actors in the appropriate technology community. These activities were to:

***Basic tenets are***

***... respect and acknowledge local knowledge;***

***... find out what people want and respond to it;***

***... ensure participation in information delivery systems;***

***... co-ordinate strategically with others***

- Profile the ways in which organisations systematically respond to the information needs of poor men and women through a series of 'mapping workshops' in selected countries, with the intention of using these findings to investigate the way major information providers on technology and poverty communicate with end users.
- Investigate in greater depth a smaller sample of organisations that exhibited particularly strong or innovative communications approaches.
- Start the process of 'mapping' major nodes of information and knowledge on technology and poverty with a presence on the internet, for consideration as a larger mapping activity.
- Hold a mid-term workshop at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in August 2002, to 'map' similar initiatives and identify potential participants of a proposed knowledge network.
- Hold an international workshop at the Schumacher Centre for Technology and Development in the UK to share the findings of the case studies and to bring together those involved with similar initiatives, to collaboratively discuss and brainstorm the next stage of the process.

The main findings of the project consolidated and added qualitatively to what we already know about unlocking and making available knowledge on appropriate technology solutions to poverty. Basic tenets of good development, such as respecting and acknowledging local knowledge; finding out what people want and responding to it positively; engaging participation in information delivery systems; co-ordinating more strategically with other providers of information etc., all emerged as fundamental to the task of making knowledge and information – and the networks that deliver it – work for the benefit of poor men and women.

**All these things we know: but still people around the world often do not have access to the kind of information they need to solve their own problems, even though the bulk of this information exists in some form, somewhere.**

***Organisations themselves need to review organisational priorities***

For the situation to change, organisations themselves need to review organisational priorities; enforce and make practical principles of 'learning and sharing'. Put the communities with, and for whom they work, first; invest in innovative information activities that respond to what people say they need to make a difference in their lives; and put aside ambitions to be 'the leader in their field' if it stands in the way of collaborative working that would bring greater benefits to the poor.

### **How do we network and could this be strengthened?**

***What makes an organisation an effective communicator?***

A series of mapping workshops were held in Peru, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Bangladesh and Zimbabwe (full reports are in Annexes 2A and 2B). The workshops gathered together the key institutions, networks and service providing organisations that provide appropriate technology knowledge and information to poor men and women in each country. Facilitated by an ITDG office, the workshops aimed to chronicle the role of each institution in communicating knowledge on technology as well as the connections between them, and the factors that made them effective communicators of knowledge to benefit poor men and women. Outputs of the workshops included the following:

- List of institutions that staff and their partners organisations consider are playing a significant role in increasing access of poor men and women to knowledge on appropriate technology;
- Of the above, selection of the few that play the most important role in bringing about greater access to information and knowledge through the internet;
- Characteristics/features of the institution, or the techniques that they use, that make them particularly effective in communicating with poor men and women;
- Identification of three or four institutions that should be further investigated through case study research.

***All information is not destined or appropriate for poor men and women***

The workshops found that a number of organisations do employ a significant array of communications techniques to share information about the work that they do; through workshops and direct work in the field, through promoters and demonstrations, printed materials such as bulletins, manuals, magazines, records, bibliographical records, brochures, videos, announcements and posters, mass media especially radio and the range of ICTs depending on the infrastructure available in that country. There were also examples of information sharing at all levels, and good intentions of ensuring that information was demand-driven and of good quality.

However, it was also clear that information is generated and shared for a number of different reasons and not all of it is therefore destined or appropriate for poor men and women. For example, much information is generated for management purposes, either for the practical maintenance of the organisation or to satisfy donors who fund the project work.

*There is need for information to be entertaining – but the essential message can be lost in the entertainment*

Also, where information is intended for the end-user, different countries expressed different levels of awareness of the processes needed to make that information appropriate. For example, the Peru workshop drew up a series of recommendations to ensure that information is not only needed by the end user, but acknowledges and complements what the people already know. Participants understood the need to incorporate people's cultural characteristics in the ways in which they communicate, and the need for information sometimes to be entertaining, (e.g. delivered using theatre and other interactive mediums that encourage people to join in and share what they know). Although experience from Zimbabwe warned that entertainment can sometimes detract from the message that is trying to be transmitted.

The recommendations included:

- It is necessary to start off with a diagnosis and propose solutions by the population. This will also allow us to take advantage of the same systems for the exchange of information.
- The information must be provided in a clear language, so that the population understands; nevertheless we are to enable the receivers to be able to understand other types of information that cannot be assimilated.
- To use different methodologies for the information provision.
- To think about the need for systems to be socially sustainable. For the local community to have ownership over the systems and have a significant participation in the planning.
- It is necessary to assure permanent mechanisms of feedback.

In Sri Lanka, the workshop identified 29 possible 'infomediaries' for investigation. An infomediary is an intermediary that acts as a broker of information to communities either formally because it is a person whose job includes information delivery e.g. extension worker, or informally because it is a place where people meet and exchange information e.g. post office. Of these, 11 were regarded as information generators as well as infomediaries (elders of the village, family members, NGOs, rural banks, divisional secretariats, middlemen, native doctor, CBOs, Priests, Samurdhi Animator, village fairs).

***A rich diversity of institutions act as information brokers, but they are under-utilised***

It seems that although there is this rich diversity of institutions and positions that exist in a community, which have the potential to act as 'intelligence' on what people know and need to know as well as pass on information from outside the community, these are an under-utilised resource.

Recent work by ITDG shows that there are often gaps in information flows between information generators and providers and intermediaries, and between intermediaries and the poor (Knowledge and Information Systems of the Poor, ITDG 2002). These gaps occur because information provision (and often research) is not demand-led, the medium, format and language are inappropriate, and information flows are uni-directional.

***Social networks enable people to develop basic learning skills and to de-code information***

ITDG's recent research into the knowledge and information systems of the poor highlights the importance of social networks in the acquisition of information. Such networks, based on different kinds of linkages (family, neighbours, friends, work, etc.) vary in strength and effectiveness as information channels. Strong, tight social networks, for instance, can restrict the flow of information, though they also serve to reinforce trust among vulnerable groups. Social networks are important in enabling people to develop basic learning skills and the de-codification of information, and some social groups need particular attention because of their potential to be information catalysts (e.g. youth and women).

***"Knowledge is a collection of facts and ideas. It is an awareness of facts. Notable in the definition of knowledge is awareness. Knowledge is an internalised wisdom within a person"***

At the Kenya mapping workshop, the participants concurred from the outset that there were too many networks that resulted in confusion and consequent under-utilisation of the information that is made available to the users. In an attempt to identify what made one network effective and another ineffective, they presented three criteria that might be used to create effective knowledge brokers. The first ranks the organisation's existing communication activities as high, medium or low. The second promotes ways of making the information audience-centred, e.g. by denoting the end user's education and other demographic factors and using it to appropriately package the information. The third promotes the dissemination of knowledge in a non-confrontational way that doesn't 'push ideas down people's throats', but rather offers information for people to decide themselves whether it is useful for them to act upon.

The participants went on to identify the key characteristics of knowledge networks:

- Belief in the poor as a resource
- Use existing networks and improve their co-ordination
- Survey the information needs of the people
- Format and disseminate information through the most appropriate channel(s)
- Willingness to share acquired information and denounce information hoarding
- Ability to effectively and clearly communicate
- Build on the strengths of existing networks
- Adding value and constantly updating accrued information
- Involving the poor at all stages of communication
- Display integrity, commitment & genuine participation

*Indicators to show effectiveness should be in place from the beginning, to show progress – or lack of it*

They identified a series of indicators that would show whether a network is effective, and which could be laid down at the beginning of the initiative as a baseline:

- Presence both in national media and on the ground
- Effective and continuous member participation
- Sustained members' contributions and gains
- High rate of goal attainment and a marked transformation in the community as a measure of impact
- Growth and rate of retaining members in relation to a realistic timeframe
- Sustainability evaluated (within a practical timeframe) against the short term and long term objectives
- Sustainability of projects beyond the cessation of the network
- Best practices model used as a reference case by upcoming network initiative
- Inclusive, working with people at all levels
- Systems and procedures regarding pertinent issues like information acquisition, evaluation and monitoring to be in place
- Capable of linking and working with other similar networks
- Gathered and disseminated widespread knowledge and information
- Replicable and modifiable in other regions with similar characteristic needs

***A network would need effective co-ordination of activities, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities***

The Kenyan group discussed what would make a suitable 'enabling environment' for such a network to be successful they agreed that there would need to be effective co-ordination of activities, including an efficient secretariat and a structure with clearly defined roles and responsibilities outlined. The network would need to employ appropriate information, communication and dissemination technologies, have a stable and sustainable resource base, and active participation by members. There would need to be a shared vision and aspiration as a basis for the network.

***A network would require a 'bonding element'***

The group anticipated that the network might lack mandate and credibility and have an inadequate resource base that would inhibit its success. It was also suggested that trying to pull together such a diverse range of organisations would leave the network without an adequate 'bonding element' since different organizations live for different objectives. This might lead to difficulties in establishing a common goal to bond the different networks together. The fact that some organisations prohibit disclosure of information to 'outsiders', especially those institutions viewed as competitors, would constrain operations of the network, as would any attempt to take on an advocacy role which might impose on existing organisations' territory. Failure to deliver tangible benefits in the short term would disappoint members and encourage 'fallout' from the network, leading to a downward spiral of activities, performance and outputs.

### **Understanding how organisations communicate and what is best practice?**

Following on from the mapping workshops, a number of organisations were selected in Peru, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe for further investigation. The full case study reports are given in Annex 4a and are also available on ITDG's website ([www.itdg.org](http://www.itdg.org)). A set of criteria was established to guide the selection of organisations. The objective of commissioning these more detailed case studies was to profile the systems used by a variety of infomediaries working in different sectors and at different levels, to understand the extent to which they pass on and *repurpose* information they receive from others 'higher up' the information hierarchy, (e.g. institutions such as ITDG, DFID, IDRC etc.), to satisfy their particular constituency's information needs.

Criteria for selection of organisational case studies were those organisations that:

- Display a range of techniques to share their own knowledge and learning with their constituency and show an understanding of the communications preferences of their constituents;

- Bring full range of information sources from elsewhere into the domain of its intended beneficiaries, and shows that the selection is driven by an understanding of their needs and knowledge gaps, and preferred communications channels;
- Make accessible relevant policy and advocacy information by 'translating' it (repurpose and packaging and appropriate delivery) for their constituency;
- Act as brokers to bring together constituents with other agents/agencies in the private, public and government sectors to close the gap between information and service providers and their traditional consumers;
- Are mandated to talk on behalf of their constituency to raise issues for information and influence in circles accessible to the intermediary organisation;
- Show evidence of encouraging knowledge generation and sharing by those with whom they work, attempting to capture this knowledge and share it with others in horizontal forms of exchange;
- Actively encourage the questioning, influencing and supplementing of information sources by constituency, and displaying systems to incorporate this feedback and pass it on.

A number of organisations were interviewed in Peru, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe. The sample overall included private sector institutions providing information for e.g. small-scale enterprise sector, transport services etc. as well as NGOs, networks, government departments and social networks. etc. During interviews conducted by a researcher, the following lines of investigation were pursued:

- What are the techniques used to identify the information needs of the institution/network's target audiences?
- What are the systems that enable all information provision to respond to identified demand?
- Are the systems of information dissemination sustainable and what makes them so?
- How much of the information they receive is passed on 'intact', how much is repackaged to be appropriate, and how much is not passed on?
- What are the communications approaches used to ensure that messages flow both ways and are appropriate for the users?
- What is the learning and sharing environment inside each organisation, which provide incentives or disincentives to capture knowledge generated by their constituency and to share it with others horizontally (i.e. to other intermediaries and with other similar audiences) and back up the information chain?

- How is impact detected and improvements made as a result of what is learned?

A formal questionnaire was devised to aid the investigation. The case studies revealed both great similarities and great diversity in the communications techniques employed by different institutions. A number of themes emerged that are worth discussing further:

***Attitudinal training ensures an institutional belief in, and respect for, the knowledge, skills and lifestyles of the people***

- ***Respecting local knowledge***

Case studies from Peru and Zimbabwe highlighted organisations that successfully build on people's knowledge and strengthen their knowledge systems (CIPCA and Silveira House). For the former, close working relationships with the communities developed through 20 years engagement on the ground were given as reasons for this successful outcome. First, trust has been established and second, an understanding is built of the people's capacities and skill, and the people themselves are involved in an analysis of where the shortfalls in their knowledge are and what type of interventions would be appropriate to fill the gaps. For Silveira House, a belief in and respect for the knowledge, skills and lifestyles of the people with whom they work is institutionalised in 'attitudinal training' for all members of staff. This ensures that every worker crafts into their programme of work the opportunity for people to reflect on their own circumstances, and to build confidence to analyse their problems and identify solutions to them.

***Financial incentives can be provided for those who refer to and use the knowledge generated elsewhere in an organisation***

The case study from Silveira House is an example of how, by institutionalising the organisational culture or belief in respecting people's knowledge, the whole organisation has managed to communicate effectively with its constituency (rather than simply 'telling them what it knows', or disseminating the information that it has).

Other mechanisms for institutionalising 'respect for knowledge' include staff training, procedures and protocols for carrying out work that respect and facilitate knowledge, and creating incentives for the generation and sharing of knowledge internally. One way of doing this could be by rewarding projects that tap knowledge and succeed in transferring indigenous knowledge 'horizontally' to other communities and motivating it 'upwards' to influence policy etc. Or by making it an organisational requirement to produce a certain number of information products each year that originate from, or build on local knowledge. In this respect the development community could possibly learn from the commercial world, for example, IBM provides budgetary incentive for

those who refer to and use the knowledge generated by other parts of the organisation; similar incentives exist if the knowledge they generate is taken up somewhere else in the organisation.

- ***The need for durable communications systems***

A number of organisations profiled in Peru and Zimbabwe raised the question of how to create communications systems for effective information capture and delivery that sustain themselves after the life of a project.

On the one hand, it makes sense to capitalise and consolidate on the structures and mechanisms that are likely to be in place over long periods of time, e.g. government agricultural extension services, local and district councils etc. Yet, in Peru people didn't trust the information carried by national government structures because they were seen to be instruments of the discredited government of former President Fujimori. In Zimbabwe, the current government of President Mugabe and the instruments of his political party are actively promoting information and messages that undermine ongoing sustainable development messages. For example, ZANU PF workers entering a district where the opposition MDC held the local office said to the people that they should abandon their planting regimes and the water irrigation techniques advocated by local NGOs because 'the party will feed you if the rains fail'. Many people believed them. This is a chilling example of how effective political communication channels can be, even when the message itself may be false or destructive.

***NGO programmes often last only as long as the donors put money into their operational work***

Another option, to utilise the non-government structures in a co-ordinated way that builds on what information and expertise each one has to offer to its own constituency, has the apparent advantage of being 'apolitical'. If a facility can be introduced which overcomes organisational politics and competition for funding and status in a local area this could service people's needs. An example of this good practice is evidenced in ITDG's work in Chimanimani which also co-ordinates with government to deliver information and services in response to identified needs.

However, NGOs are often driven by funding cycles, and their programmes last as long as the donors are willing to put money into their operational work, and as long as the organisation itself deems the activities to be consistent with their mission. Often, this means that by the time NGOs have been 'on the ground' long enough to establish trust with the people and understand what kind of services and information would strengthen their livelihoods, they are moved to another area and another project.

The third scenario is to build on the social structures that exist within each community whose members are the residents and the individuals and structures within each person's circle of operation and influence. These 'social networks' are dynamic and may change in form and function over time, but their fluidity reflects the changing needs and circumstances of the communities and therefore provide a dynamic and practical demand for information and services.

*In membership organisations 'the members define not only the function but the form of the organisation itself'*

- **Face to face communication is best**

Many organisations stated that face-to-face communication is the most effective way for both parties to learn: for the organisation to understand what kind of information the user needs to supplement his or her own knowledge assets and in turn, for the organisation to be able to 'dig into' its own stores of knowledge (from its own project experience, from workshops, from the internet etc.) which satisfies that demand. But difficulties may occur when the organisation becomes distanced from the face-to-face and tries to satisfy national or international knowledge demands.

Organisations with local constituencies repeatedly showed themselves more able to meet the needs of their constituencies using appropriate media, and incorporating feedback and learning cycles. In Peru, the Popular Education and Social Research Centre working in Lima recommends training the people with whom they work, so that they have the skills necessary to access and utilise information. In Zimbabwe, attempts are being made to work with farmer innovators at the community level so that they can carry out one-to-one communication and can be used as intermediaries for external agencies to furnish with external information. Again in Zimbabwe, member-based organisations showed themselves to be the most in-tune with the information needs of their constituencies 'because the members define not only the function but the form of the organisation itself: without them the organisation ceases to exist'.

One way to 'scale-up' activities is to create a forum that links the different levels of information user with infomediaries and brokers and information generators. The purpose of such a forum could be to identify and strengthen the capacity of the innovators and to link them together in a way that would:

- (a) exploit the information systems that the poor are already using
- (b) tap into the knowledge base of the poor and bring it into the public domain both for others like them and for those who are building development policies and programmes using externally-generated information and knowledge

*“It is an added burden that the poor can ill afford to have to mine for information as well as for food, for shelter, for an income”  
(Zimbabwean interviewee)*

*There is often no culture of sharing between organisations*

(c) complement and link with other networks operating at different levels.

In this way, the intelligence on what information is needed, in what form, by whom could still be systematically gathered and used to guide what external information is brought in, re-purposed and packaged for appropriate dissemination.

- ***Competition for resources and status threatens any co-operative venture***

The case studies from Peru highlighted the situation of potential conflict that exists between agencies operating at a local level in Latin America. There is said to be no culture of sharing, either within or between agencies, partly because they do not analyse their own learning and do not want to show this omission, and partly because knowledge is an asset and it diminishes an organisation's power base to give some of it away. Organisations will invest in their own communications infrastructure rather than collaborate with others and this inhibits information sharing across organisations and across sectors.

At an individual level, people may share information but not all individuals have equal access to the places where information is shared, and women in particular have limited access to the spaces where information is given out. The failure of organisations to effectively communicate is invisible, it is argued, because the social science techniques used for assessing communications impact in the region rely on one-way information transactions such as surveys and case studies which do not require two-way information exchange.

In other regions or countries, this competition was not felt as fiercely except in the private sector where information is a product alongside other commercial products.

### **Mapping information resources available on the Internet**

An internet scan was conducted in response to one of the project's early findings that part of the problem lies in the confusing array of organisations supplying information on appropriate technology. The scan attempted to test the practicality of 'mapping' major knowledge providers on AT for poverty alleviation – with a view to undertaking a more exhaustive scan during the next phase if the results were found to be useful. The search engines used included Google, Altavista and AskJeeves.

A set of criteria was established to direct the search, which gave emphasis to southern knowledge-providers and attempted to highlight the range and depth of materials accessible through the website; with the linkages to other information providers (which would hint at a more comprehensive 'portfolio' of information available to the user). The search also focused on the interactivity of the site, i.e. whether users could question the information provided, or submit their own resources for display that again would provide a more complete and useful array of knowledge to future users. The search was conducted in English and therefore valuable sites, particularly generated in Latin America, were not featured. The results are shown in Annex 1.

There are limitations to such an exercise. First, there are thousands of sites that could include information on appropriate technologies (depending on your definition of the subject). By the time the mapping was complete, the information would be out of date. Second, that the information made available on websites is only accessible to those with internet-access, and there was little indication in the search of whether – and how - this information is made available as 'hard copy' to others.

However, the process did highlight a number of best practices for website design and unearthed a range of useful southern sites, 73% of which were judged for a general public audience, and 60% for development specialists. Those sites with 'free' information (as downloadable pdf or html files as well as information that could be sent for by post) and clear links to other organisations providing related information were deemed most useful. Others with two-way communications and enquiry services were judged as valuable.

### **Working together to move forward: Workshop at Bourton Hall**

The **Making Knowledge Networks Work for the Poor** workshop in November aimed to share the results of the case studies, and to identify with participants the practical steps that could be taken to strengthen poor people's access to information that is useful, relevant and appropriate to their needs and circumstances. The proceedings of this workshop can be found in Annex 5.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

***An effective knowledge networking strategy includes***

***... facilitation of knowledge horizontally;***

***...providing platforms for southern voices to advocate for themselves at the policymakers' table; and***

***... supplementing local knowledge with external information***

The aim of the project was 'to improve the integration and co-ordination internationally of information and knowledge resources on appropriate technology', and to consider the role of a network in bringing about this aim.

There are a number of different ways of making information and knowledge work for the poor, which can be tackled separately but concurrently for the whole picture to be improved. The study identified the following broad categories:

- Tapping the knowledge that exists within local communities, and facilitating the transfer of this knowledge 'horizontally' either within the community or to others like it within national boundaries or further if the contexts are appropriate;
- Enabling local voices to advocate for policy change, e.g. by providing a platform for those challenging conventional development approaches at the policymakers' tables/conferences etc. or representing 'southern voices' at international forums;
- Bringing in external information and knowledge to supplement local knowledge using structures (people, institutions) that already exist and will do so for the foreseeable future.

The study confirmed that the key questions being addressed by the project are relevant to others, viz.:

- that there is poor co-ordination amongst information providers, including providers of information about appropriate technology; and that there are differences in terminology and concepts, and duplication of effort amongst information providers;
- resource-poor women and men in developing countries have difficulties accessing the right 'kind' of information - they do not know what exists and/or how to get it; it is in inappropriate, and inaccessible formats;
- many of the information systems that do exist to provide information to resource-poor people are not user-driven - they overlook local knowledge, do not understand or ignore the role of information intermediaries, they do not monitor usage; and,
- the ICTs revolution can undermine traditional, local communications, by supplanting them and by taking attention away from them.

***A facility that acts as a 'broker' of appropriate technology information is needed***

The project did not make as much progress in the design and development of a proposal for a global knowledge network on the use

***The challenge is how to design information systems that engage with social networks***

of technology for poverty reduction, as was originally envisaged during project design. One reason perhaps was the lack of appreciation at the start of the time and effort that would be necessary to achieve this in a way that is consistent with the principles of good networking (e.g. informal structures, inclusive decision-making, the need for champions). Other reasons derive from the consultations undertaken during the project, which raised questions about the need and role for a new knowledge network. The key findings were:

***The focus (of any future initiative) should be to make existing networks work better***

- The proliferation of networks is itself a problem. Development practitioners complain of 'information overload', and there is confusion about the role of each network with respect to another.
- Networks are themselves 'not networked', so that information users cannot get an overview of what information is available, where.
- Networks do not incorporate and strengthen the systems that people already use to access information (e.g. social networks), and consequently do not understand why they do not reach their target audience.
- It is also important to recognise and value local knowledge and information channels, through participatory approaches. A knowledge network focused on appropriate technology should facilitate the dissemination of local knowledge as well as access to 'international' knowledge. It should facilitate exchanges between local-level organisations, and intermediaries, and organisations in both North and South.
- Organisations (including those participating in the project) do not always communicate effectively with their constituencies, and are often guilty of confusing information dissemination with communication (involving true exchange of information). The way an organisation participates in a network and shares information is also likely to be a reflection of its internal practices on knowledge sharing.
- Development practitioners and those engaged in the provision of information services aimed at reducing poverty, emphasise that 'face to face' communication is the most effective mode of transferring information. This is consistent with research findings that for the majority of people the primary source of information is via social networks. The challenge, therefore, is how any information system or network, and particularly one that is intended to deliver information to people living in poverty, can engage with this mode of communication.
- The role of the information intermediary (infomediary) is key in addressing this challenge, but they are little understood and quite often overlooked. The study points to the necessity of including information intermediaries in poverty-focused, demand-oriented knowledge networks.

***Better co-ordination between information generators and providers is needed***

***... as is the need for sharing of good practice in information services***

***Participation in knowledge networks can be influenced by institutional competition for resources***

- It is important to recognise that participation in knowledge networks can be influenced by institutional competition for resources, especially when knowledge and information is seen as an organisational asset. Information systems and knowledge networks should not be dependent on a project approach and the business of donor proposals, etc.

The creation of a new network would not necessarily resolve these questions, unless it attempted to consolidate and provide additional facilities not already on offer to users. However, there was doubt amongst project participants and informants about the need for another network. Rather, it was suggested the focus should be on making existing networks work better. The need for better co-ordination between information generators and providers was recognised, as was the need for sharing of good practice in information services/systems.

***Target information brokers working at a community level...***

The study identified a need for a facility that acts as a 'broker' of AT information. A facility that builds capacity for effective communication between intermediaries, the communities and the knowledge generators (recognising that the knowledge generators could be individuals in the community, government officers, or NGOs). The facility should display and 'make the case' for a different kind of networking that puts information and knowledge transfer at its centre and is judged by those it seeks to serve (i.e. the users). Such a facility will be a catalyst for better communication and co-ordination within networks and between network members.

***...and work with them to unlock and facilitate the transfer of local knowledge and, complement it with external information***

The new facility would include those organisations already working in the AT field that are willing to introduce information systems that respond visibly to people's expressed needs, and that are willing to put resources into co-ordinating information delivery with other members. Workshop participants felt that ITDG would be suitably placed to play such a role in the AT field.

It seems clear that an effective way of making information and knowledge on appropriate technology work better for the poor would also be to establish an initiative including or targeted at the intermediaries and information brokers working at community level. Such an initiative would work with intermediaries to unlock and facilitate the transfer of local knowledge and complement it with external information, appropriately packaged and disseminated using innovative and appropriate communications techniques as defined by users.

Specific areas of activity for such a future initiative might include the following:

- Profiling and sharing existing information packages
- Learning from others
- Making information user-driven
- Walking the talk

- Being creative with designing indicators for impact assessment
- Create an enabling environment for learning and sharing
- Being innovative in the use of media

ITDG is considering such an initiative and a proposal to progress with specific ideas described here will be submitted to DFID in the near future.

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