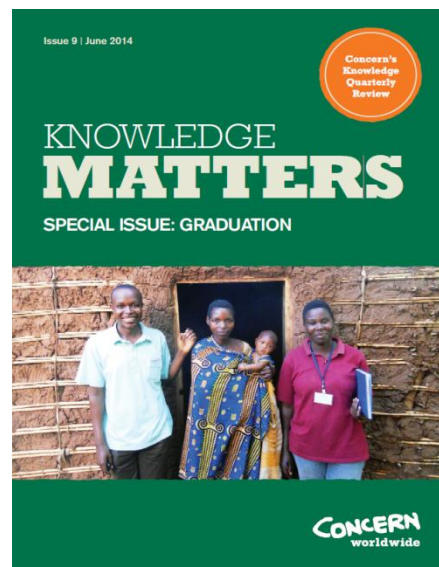
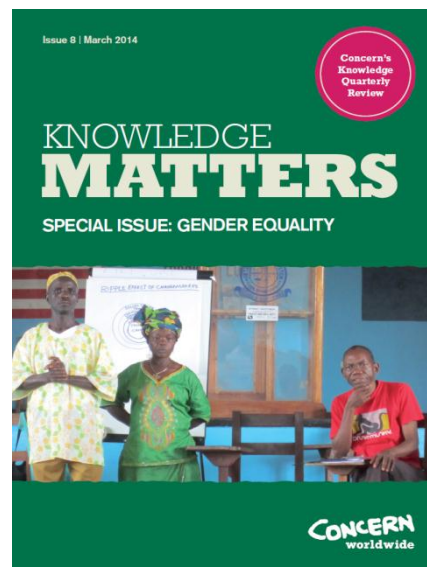


Praxis Note No. 68

Knowledge sharing in action: The case of Concern Worldwide's *Knowledge Matters*

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CONCERN
worldwide

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This Praxis Note describes how Concern Worldwide has been able to provide the means, motivation, and opportunity for staff to document and share their experience-based knowledge for organisational learning purposes. This is an area that various organisations struggle with. It is hoped that the issues discussed in this note could prove useful to others who seek to crack the ‘knowledge sharing genie.’

Introduction

‘People will share knowledge through workshops; they will learn together. But encouraging people to document is a Herculean task.’

- Eliud Wakwabubi (2011)

The above statement, by a senior Kenyan development practitioner, captures one of the underlying challenges confronting international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in the 21st century. Whilst documentation of learning is essential for any development and humanitarian effort, in practice this has proven problematic.

Over the years, Concern Worldwide has struggled to effectively capture and share the rich experiences and knowledge of its field staff. A number of factors help to explain this problem. These include the pressure to deliver programme results and write narrative reports for donors, staff turnover, and the need to ‘get on with the job’. These have all contributed to the de-prioritization of the documentation of learning.

In a bid to overcome the barriers to the documentation of learning, a pilot initiative was started in 2012 as part of a broader knowledge sharing (KS) drive. The initiative was a regular internal publication called *Knowledge Matters*.

Knowledge Matters started out life as a quarterly publication with only two staff members sharing their documented learning. It has now grown to a community of 70 contributors and continues to grow. The writers are usually practitioners who share their experiences on various issues

from digital data gathering to gender equality. The publication is publicly available online.

Editions of *Knowledge Matters* typically start by giving the reader an overview of knowledge sharing within Concern. The articles go on to discuss a case study, including the challenges faced. They conclude with a number of key lessons.

Concern Worldwide

Our identity: Concern Worldwide is a non-governmental, international humanitarian organisation dedicated to the reduction of suffering and working toward the ultimate elimination of extreme poverty in the world’s poorest countries.

Our vision for change: A world where no-one lives in poverty, fear or oppression; where all have access to a decent standard of living and the opportunities and choices essential to a long, healthy and creative life; a world where everyone is treated with dignity and respect.

Our mission: Our mission is to help people living in extreme poverty achieve major improvements in their lives which last and spread without ongoing support from Concern. To achieve this mission we engage in long-term development work, respond to emergency situations, and seek to address the root causes of poverty through our development education and advocacy work.

Knowledge sharing within Concern

The majority of Concern’s work is implemented through projects and programmes in its countries of operation. The organisation is an INGO whose work is geared towards improving the conditions of the world’s most vulnerable populations. Its practical and action-oriented work influences the way it conceptualises knowledge. As a result, experience-based knowledge is valued more by field staff than other forms of knowledge, such as academic knowledge.

Knowledge management versus knowledge sharing

At Concern, we give preference to the term 'knowledge sharing' (KS), as opposed to 'knowledge management' (KM). This is because to some, KM has negative connotations in terms of control and power.

KS in contrast takes a more people-centric perspective to the capture and sharing of knowledge. The emphasis tends to be less on technological solutions and more on people-centric solutions. Under KS, the emphasis is placed on sharing knowledge as opposed to controlling knowledge.

Evolution of knowledge sharing

To ensure that Concern produces and disseminates experience-based knowledge, the organisation has undergone a process of change since the mid-1990s, continuing in the present. In 1997, the Policy Unit was created, with a remit to focus on policy development, programme design and best practice monitoring.

The original key functions within the unit were: policy development, technical assistance to the field (both field visits and desk support), networking, and rapid deployment for emergencies. In 1999, the Policy Unit became the Policy Development and Evaluation Directorate (PDED) with a similar remit but now incorporating new functions including the development of quality standards, strategy facilitation, and evaluation against policies.

In 2008, the Strategy, Advocacy and Learning (SAL) Directorate was created from PDED. The new directorate has the following key functions: strategy development, programme quality, advocacy, technical assistance and learning.

The rebranding of PDED into SAL in 2008 marked the beginning of an explicit focus on the creation of an enabling environment for knowledge sharing and

learning. This also marked another phase in Concern's KS drive. This involved the development of a suite of information, communication and technology (ICT) tools that would allow staff to effectively collect and connect their knowledge with the organisation's. During this period, the information technology (IT) department took the lead in developing Concern's approach to KS. The result was a technology-centric version of KS. Knowledge repositories in the form of databases were created and the assumption was that staff would use these databases to improve their practice.

For example, a knowledge repository was created which housed over 4,000 documents. However, the technology-heavy solution did not necessarily yield positive results as the uploading of content required an in-depth understanding of Microsoft SharePoint. This was especially true for staff that had to upload content to various SharePoint sites. Also, for field offices to use the databases, they needed to be connected to the organisation's intranet. Technophobia – as well as limited connectivity, stakeholder buy-in, and access – bedeviled this phase of the KS drive.

The above factors all contributed to the limited successes of the organisation's early KS activities. These limitations were acknowledged by the organisation itself, as stated in its 2011 strategic plan: "Concern has made improvements in organisational learning and knowledge management in the last five years with considerable investment in improved ICT systems although progress in optimizing the use of these systems has been less than hoped for." (p.12)

Concern is not unique in this respect. A study by Swan et al. indicated that: 'The idea of "learning lessons" from projects was widely adopted amongst the studied organisations in as much as tools such as "end of project reviews" and "lessons learnt" databases were made available.... However, our interviewees suggested that these tools were rarely used in anything

more than a ritualized way.’ (Swan et al. 2010, 334).

In an effort to ensure that KS practices would be used in more than a ‘ritualized way,’ Concern decided in 2010-11 that SAL would take greater responsibility when it came to KS. This was manifested in the creation of the Programme Approaches and Learning Unit (PALU) in 2009. PALU is housed within SAL.

One of PALU’s core objectives is the creation of an enabling environment for the promotion of knowledge sharing and organisational learning. In 2011, it developed an action plan for better collection, use, and dissemination of organisational learning. The action plan sought to proactively develop and foster a culture of learning amongst staff members and teams, as well as develop processes and products to enable fruitful collaboration. One such process is *Knowledge Matters*.

Knowledge Matters

Knowledge and learning is central to professional practice (Leicht & Fennell, 2011). However, the documentation of knowledge and learning within INGOs is fraught with challenges. Some commentators have pointed to the need for agencies to focus on success stories in a competitive funding environment as an explanation of why the documentation and sharing of knowledge and learning is de-prioritized (Bracken et al., 2014).

Others point to organisational culture as a significant explanatory factor: ‘Without managerial and institutional support to specifically put aside reflection time, it has been and likely always will be difficult to get people to take the time out for reflection. This is a perennial problem regarding “learning” in most sectors, and depends on the commitment by the organisation to learning.’ (Perkins 2011, 3). Fully aware of these obstacles to the documentation of learning, Concern decided to pilot *Knowledge Matters* in 2012.

Defining knowledge and learning

Knowledge is information that individuals have reflected on, understood, internalized and are able to use.

Learning is a developmental process that integrates thinking and doing. It provides a link between the past and the future, requiring us to look for meaning in our actions and giving purpose to our thoughts.

Source: Britton (2005)

The Approach

Knowledge Matters is a quarterly internally peer-reviewed publication. The publication is the primary vehicle by which staff share their experience-based knowledge (the rich, lived experience of Concern staff). The publication is committed to encouraging high-quality analysis and fostering greater levels of critique within the organisation. It does this by distilling and synopsising all of Concern’s evaluative and research works, as well as having staff write articles documenting their experience-based knowledge.

Knowledge Matters serves as a tool for sharing experiences and good practices, and for discussion of substantive issues related to various thematic issues. *Knowledge Matters* has an editorial working group that works as an enabler/facilitator of knowledge flow between staff.

Results

Knowledge Matters has provided an entry point for the organisation’s renewed focus on knowledge sharing practices. This time around, the organisation’s approach has centered on connection (connecting people who have knowledge and want to share it), as opposed to collection (compiling knowledge in databases). The results of this renewed effort have been impressive.

When *Knowledge Matters* first launched in January 2012, there were only two staff members sharing their experiences. In contrast the March 2014 edition featured 17 contributors sharing their knowledge in relation to gender equality. Over the last two years, a total of 70 staff members have shared their knowledge on various topics ranging from maternal and child health to community resilience. Along the way, new issues have been identified that will be documented for future editions.

Knowledge Matters has improved connections between headquarters and field staff, as well as between country offices, contributing to a levelling of the knowledge hierarchy within Concern and enabling inputs from the bottom up. Now any staff member has a platform through which they can share their knowledge on a particular issue. This has assisted in linking policy and practice, a challenge faced by all INGOs. As Perkins writes (2011): “Development agencies often possess valuable tacit knowledge and expertise of addressing poverty and vulnerability at the field level. However, they often pay insufficient attention to translating this field knowledge into policy and wider practice.”

Knowledge Matters has sought to assist the organisation to move from an ‘expert’ driven model of KS to a more ‘facilitator’ driven approach to KS (Foley 2008). The publication is helping to facilitate a new way of working, one in which staff share knowledge amongst themselves, across ‘silos’ and between country offices and headquarters. The organisation’s culture now values and rewards the sharing of knowledge rather than rewarding those who ‘own’ knowledge. This cultural shift is in its infancy and is still rather informal, with recognition being based on visibility in the contributing authors’ section of the publication. This a promising start, though. What is important is that the centrality of knowledge to Concern’s work is being reawakened in the minds of staff.

Why the success?

Knowledge Matters works because there is a group of people who interact, learn

together, build relationships and have developed a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. At the heart of this is trust and reciprocity. Colleagues know that when they share stories of failures and challenges, they won’t suffer negative consequences.

As this trust has grown, staff have shared more knowledge, expecting nothing in return except appreciation for their contribution and a validation of their expertise. In discussions with contributors to *Knowledge Matters*, it was noted that many indicated a preference to use knowledge as identified by colleagues in ‘the field’ where possible. This suggests that the moral imperative for learning is already high in Concern and might explain why contributions to the publication have grown steadily since its inception in 2012.

Another key driver behind the success of *Knowledge Matters* is the editorial working group. This group plays a number of roles: it acts as a sounding board for potential issues that might be captured in future editions; it provides an understanding of purpose; and it acts as a champion of knowledge. In playing all these roles, the editorial working group has excelled at connecting colleagues across the organisation who want to be part of the knowledge sharing agenda. This facilitative role provides a critical lifeline to *Knowledge Matters*, especially during the lull period between publications.

Potential challenges going forward

When *Knowledge Matters* started out, the primary audience was Concern staff. However, the publication is increasingly being shared with peers and donors. These two groups have shown a keen interest in the publication.

The above development poses potential challenges for the editors of the publication. One of the strong points of the publication is the emphasis it places on organisational learning. The staff who write for the publication provide an honest reflection on the challenges they confront

in implementing programmes. This is done with the intention of seeking advice from colleagues but also with providing key learning for colleagues.

With the interest shown by donors and peers, there is a real risk that the content of the publication will be diluted. It might end up becoming another advocacy or communications narrative demonstrating the success of the organisation. This is a dilemma the editorial working group has to grapple with in the months and years ahead.

Another potential challenge faced by the publication as its audience changes relates to the content contributors. One of the unique features of *Knowledge Matters* has been the encouragement of and gradual uptake in national staff documenting their knowledge. The occurrence of this is important because for the most part it is national staff who interact with communities every day and have the information and knowledge generated through participatory processes at their fingertips.

However, if the publication becomes a public relations tool, national staff might increasingly be sidelined in favour of international staff and consultants. This could make both the process and product appear extractive. Other INGOs have faced similar problems with the documentation of learning: "We found that for many organisations, when documentation did happen it was often done by staff from the international offices, rather than by national or local staff." (Wakwabubi 2011, 117)

The editorial working group is aware of the above challenges and is actively exploring ways to mitigate against them.

What lessons can others take from *Knowledge Matters*?

The relative success of *Knowledge Matters* as a platform for staff to share their experience-based knowledge has generated a number of lessons, which highlight the importance of trust and

collective reflection, along with context-relevant knowledge, as critical factors in cultivating a culture of knowledge sharing.

Having a clear theme to document

Effective knowledge sharing requires a clear topic to document and a means to package and reuse the knowledge. Knowledge sharing efforts can falter because the topic is too broad. The early days of *Knowledge Matters* suffered from this. For example, the first few editions of the publication did not focus on a particular theme; as a result these editions did not have a lot of content. In contrast the thematic editions had significantly more content. The lesson here is clear: it is important when determining the topic of any knowledge sharing initiative that it be focused on addressing specific issues as opposed to general ones.

Clear guidelines for packaging

The current ICT age gives us all access to a vast quantity of information and knowledge. The challenge is that it is not distilled to give us a summary of what we need to know.

To meet this challenge within *Knowledge Matters*, the editorial working group developed clear guidelines on how topics are to be packaged for the publication. The final product is designed to appeal to potential readers. Clever use is made of Concern's branding guidelines to provide the reader with a distinctive *Knowledge Matters* feel. Having someone with a communications background on the editorial working group has embedded this practice.

Context-relevant knowledge

The contributors to *Knowledge Matters* work in similar environments as their readers. This ensures that the issues, challenges, and lessons that are documented in *Knowledge Matters* speak to the needs of colleagues across the organisation. For an action-oriented organisation like Concern, it is important that the knowledge generated is actionable. This is something that

Knowledge Matters endeavors to achieve. This helps in giving legitimacy and authenticity to the publication.

Concluding thoughts: motive, means, and opportunity

The motive for doing *Knowledge Matters* was to create and cultivate a culture supportive of organisational learning. Whilst providing clarity on the need for *Knowledge Matters* was important, the initiative would have floundered without the editorial working group (the means).

Given the action-oriented nature of Concern's work, creating the space (the opportunity), on a quarterly basis, for staff to reflect on, document, and share their experiences has also been critical to the success of *Knowledge Matters*.

In essence, for knowledge sharing practices to contribute to organisational learning, it is critical that the motives, means and opportunities are clearly articulated and understood. Finally, it is recommended that others who are interested in fostering a culture of knowledge sharing consider the approach described here and explore how they might apply some of the lessons which this approach has generated.

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