

Online knowledge sharing tools: any use in Africa?

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As a practitioner of the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for development, I have worked with many different organizations in the developing world. Presently, working for a Dutch non-governmental organization (NGO) Hivos [www.hivos.nl], I pro-actively and wholeheartedly promote the use of the Internet as a knowledge sharing tool amongst our partner organizations in Africa. And yes, undoubtedly progress has been made: our partners have become more visible online and their websites flourish. Nevertheless reality shows that the use of the Internet as a knowledge sharing tool remains limited; many partner organizations seem to use the Internet first and foremost for marketing purposes. In light of the increasing attention that donor organizations themselves pay to knowledge sharing in development and the use of ICTs in knowledge sharing exercises, I cannot help but wonder why this seems to be so difficult in Africa. With this article I will explore a few possible underlying reasons for this and, at the same time, I hope this will be a starting point for further thinking and debate.

Introduction

Most development practitioners and development cooperation agencies agree that knowledge is at the core of sustainable development processes. This increased awareness has resulted in the upcoming trend of development oriented knowledge sharing programmes. Closely interlinked with the increased attention for knowledge sharing are the high hopes on efficiency gains and increased impact by the use of online knowledge sharing tools. Soeftestad, in an advisory paper to the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), summarized the general underlying expectations of development agencies as follows:

the old adage that 'knowledge is power' is brought to bear on the analysis [of knowledge management systems], and it is argued that ICT can help leverage the situation for disadvantaged poor by delivering the right knowledge on their doorstep at the right time. (Soeftestad 2001, p. 5)

As the donor community itself is under continuous scrutiny from the general public and their government representatives, they need to take into account the priorities set by the general public and their political representatives. In this day and age, the general public and their representatives in Europe and the USA place great emphasis on transparency and accountability. Over the last 10 years or so donor organizations, dependent on the goodwill of politics and

public opinion, have devised a set of monitoring and evaluation tools to increase transparency and accountability. At the same time, donor organizations too have recognized the value of learning and have become more and more learning organizations. As a result, they have an increased information need and have become keen champions of knowledge sharing strategies. This realigned focus towards information generation and knowledge sharing in the North has also impacted the development and information generation agenda for the South.

Knowledge sharing has taken place at all times but, over the last two decades, the emergence of digital technologies in general and the Internet in particular have revolutionized knowledge sharing activities. The two World Summits on the Information Society (Geneva 2002 and Tunis 2005) have also emphasized the importance of ICTs as a development tool in general and a knowledge sharing vehicle in particular. In the WSIS Declaration of Principles, Government representatives from all over the world re-affirm their belief in the beneficiary impact ICTs can and will have as the catalyst of the Information Society and in spreading knowledge to all corners of the globe.

There is no doubt that ICTs, particularly the Internet, can contribute to the effective dissemination and exchange of information and knowledge. Many different online knowledge sharing tools have sprung up, including interactive web portals, tools to create online communities of practice and informative e-mail services. Yet, even though the Internet holds such promise as a knowledge sharing vehicle, Africa and African organizations have not yet fully caught on.

The reasons for this seem to be threefold. Firstly, civil society organizations (CSOs) in Africa often work for target groups which do not have the infrastructure, means, capacity and facilities to exploit the benefits of the Internet. To reach these groups more traditional methods of knowledge sharing need to be used such as face-to-face meetings, radio programmes and paper publications. Secondly, the capacity of CSOs to apply, promote and monitor the use of on-line knowledge sharing tools is often still relatively low. Furthermore, the use of the Internet as a knowledge sharing resource is often further hampered by the cultural and social principles underlying the knowledge and tools offered online (which are often developed in or by people from the North) and the cultural and social realities of recipients in Africa. As a result, CSOs that do use the Internet tend to approach the Internet first and foremost as a marketing tool to create upward visibility, aimed at those stakeholders that impact the organization financially or organizationally such as international donors and government agencies. In the following sections, this article will explore each of these reasons in more detail:

Discrepancies in capacity, infrastructure and facilities

The Internet is still far removed from the daily reality of many African people. Problems arise in simple terms of physical access. In many rural areas and urban slums, connectivity and electricity are volatile and insecure commodities. Many poor people are illiterate or have poor English language skills, and there is thus very little content that poor people can directly use. And even if the Internet is available, poor people still have to make a decision on whether the

investment required in terms of time and money to access the Internet is really outweighed by the benefits. This means that there seem to be few incentives for African CSOs working with poor people to use Internet based knowledge sharing tools to reach this particular target group. CSOs working in rural Africa and African slums are well aware of these setbacks and therefore often act as information brokers. They use the Internet to find information and repackage this and share it with their rural constituencies through a wide range of media including workshops, brochures and radio programmes. These organizations do not feel a real need to create space on their own website or elsewhere to create knowledge sharing instruments to the benefit of their target groups.

Wougnet [www.wougnet.org], for example, a Ugandan CSO and Hivos partner which aims to empower women by using ICTs, has a knowledge sharing programme in the rural areas of Apac, a district in Northern Uganda. Rather than encouraging the rural women they work with to use web based knowledge sharing tools which in an environment with little electricity and low capacity would have relatively little use, it uses extension workers as information brokers to collect information from the Internet and repackage it into radio programmes, oral stories or leaflets for further dissemination to the women in the rural areas. Women farmer groups participating in the programme have been given a radio to listen to the radio programmes and a mobile phone to communicate their questions and insights with the radio station and the project staff. An extension worker visits them regularly to share new farming techniques and other relevant information and skills with them. Rather than share knowledge online, the online environment is a starting point for sharing knowledge offline.

Besides the practical obstacles that CSOs face in using the Internet, there is the added lack of capacity to find, assess, value and absorb information found on the Internet, not only among the target group but also in the CSO itself. Researchers and practitioners have found that there are several problems that compromise the reliability of content found online. Content may be misleading or commercial and therefore one-sided. Content may be deceptive or simply not true. CSOs in Africa, and elsewhere, need to be able to implement checks and balances and to critically assess the information they find. Furthermore, research has shown that online knowledge sharing networks and forums have a tendency to become introverted and might reinforce existing prejudices and social constraints. Many of these forums become static if not managed well. Maintaining such forums therefore requires very strong facilitation and mediation skills, and can be very time consuming. Many African CSOs recognize that they do not have sufficient skills at present to use such forums effectively (Johnstone 2005).

Social and cultural differences in knowledge generation, dissemination and use

Soeftestad identified a set of three prepositions which seem to underlie the use of ICTs in development cooperation. The first two prepositions made by development agencies is the assumption that stakeholders will have access to ICTs and will have the capacity to use them. As has been discussed in the previous section, this is far from true. The third preposition of

development cooperation agencies seems to be that stakeholders share a similar Western frame of reference in terms of cultural and social backgrounds (Soeftestad 2001). This preposition, often undervalued in the technology oriented debate, is of a crucial importance. The very essence of the Internet is based on Western cultural and social notions. It is relatively egalitarian, open, informal and based on the written word. This is not necessarily similar to the way knowledge is shared in African communities which tend to have a more hierarchical, formal and oral knowledge sharing tradition. Quite a few scholars argue that this will hamper the use of the Internet in knowledge sharing by African people. Hamel, for example, has emphasized the importance of Africanization of knowledge and knowledge tools including the Internet (Hamel 2003).

CSOs working at the grassroots level are well aware of these differences and seek to adapt their knowledge sharing activities accordingly. Johnstone's research into knowledge sharing practices of South African CSOs dealing with HIV/AIDS illustrates this. One of the NGOs interviewed offered the opportunity to recharge mobile phone for free in their office. In the meantime, people could have an informal one-on-one chat about HIV/AIDS related issues in their communities. None of what is said during these conversations is formally recorded and there are no written records on the information shared; the service is very discrete. This avoided exposure in the community and offered a safe haven for knowledge sharing on an issue that is otherwise taboo. To offer this kind of safe haven outside the social structures of the community is much harder to achieve in the online realm (Johnstone 2005).

Online marketing and networking versus online knowledge generation and sharing.

Instead of exploring the online realm for knowledge sharing African CSOs tend to use the Internet first and foremost as a marketing and networking tool. The website is primarily used as a business card or glossy brochure to draw the attention of possible financial sources of income, notably the donor community. Secondly, especially when an organization has reached more mature stages, the website and online tools, such as listservs and e-mail lists, are used to create and maintain an institutional network of influential and supporting practitioners, stakeholders and agencies. Indirectly, this also strengthens the relationships and continued support from the donor community.

The competition for donor funding is fierce and many organizations are competing for the same resources. It is therefore crucial that a CSO is able to develop and present the information that the donor needs to justify its existence to its backers. However, this is not enough. CSOs need to ensure that they not only generate this information but ensure that it is recognized, seen and positively valued by the donor community. The donor justifies its existence to politicians and the general public. The CSO justifies its existence to the donor by ensuring that the donor can justify its existence. CSOs recognize the Internet as a valuable medium through which they can show donors that they can fulfil donor requirements and, at the same time, promote their work.

In research into the impact of donors on ICT use by NGOs in Tanzania, one of the interviewees said: ‘we got e-mail in 1998 before other NGOs and so it was only for contacting donors (Mercer 2004). In this same research, the researcher noted that participating CSOs in Tanzania tended to have an outward rather than an inward orientation when using the Internet, in which outward refers to regional and global organizations, notably donors, and inward refers to their own target groups and peers. Those who managed to attract donor funding improved their websites, thus attracting more funding, creating a CSO elite (Mercer 2004). Johnstone noted that South African CSOs use the Internet as a media strategy, particularly in linking to local and international elites and expanding network links with other organizations (Johnstone 2005, p153). Even though it is doubtful that success with the donor community can solely be attributed to the use of the Internet as a marketing and networking tool, it most certainly helps, especially if the CSO presents information that is in line with the information needs of donors.

In the competition for funds African CSOs often have to make do with slim institutional funding. Maintaining a website is a time and money consuming activity. In the trade off between the different uses of the Internet, it is very understandable that CSOs will limit the use of the Internet to marketing purposes as the impact of this is most obvious. In fact, the Northern hemisphere is not doing much better. A research assessing 184 websites of voluntary NGOs in Canada – one of the forerunners in ICT deployment amongst CSOs – indicated that they too, and for the very same reasons, focus mainly on being present online and providing information relevant for their backers and their direct stakeholders (Cukier and Middleton 2003).

The donor perspective

The donor is faced with two challenges: the first is to be transparent and accountable to their constituency and backers. This necessitates the donor to collect specific monitoring and evaluation data from their partners in the South. The second challenge is related to the increased role of knowledge sharing in development, an awareness it shares with many CSOs in the South. The question at heart is how to overcome the knowledge sharing gap that seems to exist between the North and the South. High hopes have been set on the application of ICTs.

The previous sections have explored the reasons why African CSOs hardly use the Internet as a knowledge sharing tool beyond sourcing information. Practical problems, a lack of capacity within and outside of the CSO, and specific cultural differences make it difficult to effectively integrate the Internet in the knowledge sharing process. Organizations see more direct benefit from using the Internet for marketing and networking purposes. Nevertheless, CSOs and donors alike still recognize the potential of the Internet as a vehicle of knowledge sharing activities. So what can be done about this?

First of all, donors should clearly separate their information need for monitoring and evaluation purposes from their knowledge sharing for development activities. Monitoring and evaluation, related to the provision of financial and capacity building resources, should be part and parcel of a cooperation agreement between the donor and its partner, and as such should be included in

primary institutional support. Knowledge sharing activities by the partner should be considered as part of the activities with which the partner aims to achieve its development objectives. This requires a different approach.

In knowledge sharing programmes, listening to what the partner organization has to share about best practices in terms of knowledge sharing activities on the grassroots level is a first requirement. The partner organization has a wealth of know-how on the practical problems and cultural, social political subtleties which determine knowledge sharing strategies. Very often, organizations themselves have good ideas about how the Internet can be used as a knowledge sharing tool, often embedded in a mixture of other (digital) media. A nice example of the is Ednah Akiikis' case study on knowledge sharing activities by the Busoga Rural Open Source and Development Initiative (BROSDI) in rural Uganda. Through interlinked use of SMS, radio, video, dance, drama and the website, this programme seeks to share meaningful agricultural content found online and elsewhere through media that fit into the local cultural setting. Johnstone's research also showed that local organizations are well able to define the most effective knowledge sharing strategies. The donor should recognize and value these bottom up strategies.

Yet the donor is in a good position to open new doors. Usually donor agencies have good access to new insights, technologies, applications and tools. The donor itself can act as an information broker to its partner organizations. Lessons learnt, insight gained – published in journals such as this one – are often closed to CSOs working in the remote areas of Africa. The donor can be an intermediary between their partner organization and this wealth of information that is out there. Furthermore, donors are encouraged to strengthen the capacity of their partners through capacity building, not only in terms of technology but also in terms of valuation of a tool or content, the organizational implications of new tools, and the offline skills required to apply them in knowledge sharing activities. In this way, CSOs will be able to make informed choices between the different methods and media and their uses, including the Internet.

Donors and practitioners should continue to promote the use of digital tools for knowledge sharing yet, at the same time keep, an open mind for the limitations of these technologies. Efforts to develop local solutions, including the *Africanization* of the Internet, should be encouraged as it increases a sense of ownership and can integrate local knowledge sharing habits. This applies to the technology itself but even more so content and application development. In the end, what donors should do is accept that African CSOs will find their own way of using the Internet as a knowledge sharing tool.

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Abstract

There is no doubt that ICTs, particularly the Internet, can contribute to the effective dissemination and exchange of information and knowledge. Yet, even though the Internet holds such promise as a knowledge sharing vehicle, Africa and African organizations have not yet fully caught on. The reasons for this seem to be threefold. Firstly, civil society organizations (CSOs) in Africa often work for target groups which do not have the infrastructure, means, capacity and facilities to exploit the benefits of the Internet. To reach these groups more traditional methods of knowledge sharing need to be used such as face-to-face meetings, radio programmes and paper publications. Secondly, the capacity of CSOs to apply, promote and monitor the use of on-line knowledge sharing tools is often still relatively low. Furthermore, the use of the Internet as a knowledge sharing resource is often further hampered by the cultural and

social principles underlying the knowledge and tools offered online, and the cultural and social realities of recipients in Africa. As a result, CSOs that do use the Internet tend to approach the Internet first and foremost as a marketing tool to create upward visibility, aimed at to those stakeholders that impact the organization financially or organizationally such as international donors and government agencies. In order to counteract this, donors should clearly separate their information need for monitoring and evaluation purposes from their knowledge sharing for development activities. Donors and practitioners should continue to promote the use of digital tools for knowledge sharing yet, at the same time keep, an open mind for the limitations of these technologies. Efforts to develop local solutions, including the *Africanization* of the Internet, should be encouraged as it increases a sense of ownership and can integrate local knowledge sharing habits.

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