KNOW-HOW3000 – Insights from a Practitioners' Perspective on Knowledge Management

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A comparatively small NGO network in the context of development cooperation, KNOW-HOW3000 delivers some insights on how knowledge management (KM) actually works on the ground. At the same time, this example illustrates potential benefits for development practitioners to be gained from the current scientific research on KM.

Institutional Setting, initial Objectives and Design of the Network

As the biggest Austrian "Non-Governmental Development Organisation" (NGDO), HORIZONT3000[2] has been engaged in development cooperation for more than four decades, relying on two instruments as main pillars of its work: the framework program for technical assistance[3] and the framework program for co-financing.

HORIZONT3000's core business is capacity development for local partner organisations – mostly Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Latin America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. The knowledge was traditionally provided, especially through the program for technical assistance, as a one-way-road from North to South. But already in the 1990s, this traditional pattern was questioned, modalities of cooperation changed, and at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, it was evident that most of the knowledge processed and used in the cooperation between HORIZONT3000 and its partners was generated within the community of southern partners itself. Successful co-financing projects would then very often rely on peer learning processes among partner organisations in the South, and the technical assistants sent out by HORIZONT3000, rather than actually representing sources of knowledge themselves, had turned to become facilitators of learning- and change processes, mostly in the field of organizational development, for the local partner organisations. Therefore, in 2009, when formulating the 3-years co-financing framework program 2010-2012 with the Austrian Development Cooperation (ADC), HORIZONT3000, in order to adapt its strategic approach to the changed environment of NGO development cooperation, undertook radical changes in its approach to cooperation: The core business of implementing capacity building projects was complemented by a separate set of activities for KM which later on was known as KNOW-HOW3000.

Structure and methodology of KNOW-HOW3000

As outlined above, an important underlying assumption for the design of KNOW-HOW3000 was that, on the one hand, after years and, in some cases, decades of engagement in development cooperation, many partner organizations had accumulated a lot of knowledge - which, on the other hand, was hardly shared and, even less, put in practice by others. Thus, the idea was to design an array of activities and events which aimed at identifying, analysing and sharing innovative and useful instruments and methodologies (so-called "good practices") throughout the network of partner organizations within HORIZONT3000's co-financing framework program.

To that end, the team in charge of KNOW-HOW3000 planned the following specific activities:

- Systematic analysis of project activities in order to identify innovative and promising methods and instruments with a specific potential for replication in other socio-cultural contexts;
- Presentation and discussion of the identified "good practices" to the wider community of local partner organisations on so-called regional conferences (1st stage) in Africa and Centro America and, (2nd stage) on global conferences in Vienna.

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[2] HORIZONT3000 was founded in 2001 as the merger of three predecessor organisations, which had been founded and governed since the 1960s by the same group of member organisations – see www.HORIZONT3000.at.

[3] HORIZONT3000's program for technical assistance offers qualified development workers to southern partner organisations on the basis of 2-years-contracts up to a maximum project duration of 5 years. See http://www.horizont3000.at/index.php?m=155&l=en

- Support to local partner organisations willing to apply some of the good practices in their own context.
- Systematization of the most interesting "good practices" ("Systematization" is a methodology for participatory reflection of past experiences in order to learn for the future. See box below for a more detailed description[4]).
- Design and implementation of an Intranet platform for the exchange of documented good practices, manuals and tools.

Systematization – participatory knowledge generation

Systematization, concept developed in Latin America since the 1960ies is usually realized in five steps:

1) The Framework: The targets (what is the intention of the systematization?), the extent (which parts of the experience should be systematized?) and the central questions are to be identified on this very stage.

2) The Context: Secondly, the various contexts of the project have to be identified and written down.

3) The History of the Project: In this third stage, the history of the project is written – it is important to describe the real course of the project, not the planned one. At this point, the main focus is on what happened in the past and especially how it happened – it should strongly be avoided to analyse or to evaluate.

4) The Critical Analysis: Now it is time for questioning the history of the project. But the point of this analysis is not an evaluation of the activities, but an understanding: „Why have we done what we have done?". The more insight we gather out of the practical experience, the more it will be possible to identify learned lessons – and therefore create knowledge.

5) Sharing Experiences: The experiences of a systematization process should be transmitted to other people so they can benefit as well. This can be done in various forms – in print, via internet, by creating movies or radio programmes.

Through reflecting and critically analysing (interpreting) the own practical experiences knowledge can be extracted. Indispensable in this process is that analysis of experiences and construction of knowledge be done exclusively by those who participated in the activities. No external experts are admitted to analyse and evaluate the project and generate knowledge from their point of view.

When developing the KNOW-HOW3000 project, the team in charge came up with the idea to introduce the concept of systematization to the African and Asian partners in the programme, too. The underlying idea was to establish systematic collective reflection on activities in the past in order to generate insights and to "scan" institutional memories all over the network for good practices.

A total of 19 "good practices" have been systematized during 2010 and 2011. Impressed by the insights reported by the partner organisations, the team in charge of KNOW-HOW3000 decided to carry out a special systematization on the process of design, implementation and steering of the KNOW-HOW3000 project itself, and although the final document is not finished yet (it is scheduled for spring 2013), the various discussion sessions already rendered a lot

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The relationships and interactions between HORIZONT3000 and its partners worldwide, and among the partner community, already represented a network since cooperation started. But the specific KM measures within the co-financing framework program of HORIZONT3000 transformed this existing network into a KM network. In the current implementation period 2010-2012, this KM network involves:

- HORIZONT3000 and the 7 constituting member organisations in Austria
- Around 80 local partner organisations (mostly CSOs engaged in sustainable development, but also some catholic dioceses and parishes, universities and local authorities)
- Some sector-related research institutions in Austria (Boku University, Technical University of Vienna, Boltzmann Institute for Human Rights)
- Some like-minded Austrian NGDOs with similar sector priorities
- The ADC unit for support to CSOs

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[4] Anton Luger, a technical advisor working with HORIZONT3000 in Ecuador in the 1990s compiled, together with his local colleague, several methodological elements and wrote a manual on systematization, (See: Anton Luger and Dara Cisneiros: Aprendiendo de nuestra experiencia. Manual de sistematización participative; Quito, Ecuador, 2003). From then on, systematizations were carried out increasingly with HORIZONT3000 partner organizations in Ecuador and Central America.

To a lesser extent, exchange occurred also with the sector-related units of ADC, Austrian MFA, and of the Austrian NGO platform "Global Responsibility".

Performance assessment

Used to the instruments of Project Cycle Management (PCM) required by most public donors of Development Cooperation, HORIZONT3000, in order to assess the performance of its KM project, formulated expected results, and, consequently, objectively verifiable indicators (OVI) such as:

- Number of "good practices" identified, participatively assessed and documented
- Number of shared "good practices" successfully adapted by other partners
- Access to knowledge exchange via Intranet
- Knowledge of southern partners about the elements of the KNOW-HOW3000 initiative and effective use of their possibility to participate in the further development of the program

For certainly being the most meaningful measure for progress in an initiative aiming at generating and sharing knowledge, the team in charge of KNOW-HOW3000 took a close look at the number and kind of "good practices" which were, after being identified, analysed and shared, effectively taken over by other partners in the network. A lot of detailed monitoring and reporting was carried out in order to analyse and document what kind of knowledge was generated and shared, and how all this happened.

For a quick overview over the knowledge elements shared during the first two years of implementation of KNOW-HOW3000, table 1 (on the next page) shows some key information extracted from the of KNOW-HOW3000 annual report 2011:

Table 1: Overview over the KM elements that have been shared within the KNOW-HOW3000 network

KM Element / Good Practice	Origin and Description of sharing process	Extent to which it was taken over by other partners in the network
Systematization – a participatory process of generating and sharing knowledge	• Trainings in the method of systematization • Publication of sharing documents (print, DVD or online) • Presentations at regional and/or international conferences	• Partners trained on the method are implement systematizations • Partner organisations outside of this programme also benefitted from the knowledge and took it into their own programmes • Some partners presented non-systematized experiences at regional and int. conferences, but applying the structure of systematization reports
ERI – an approach to rural development (Enabling Rural Innovation[5])	• Trainings on the method for project partners • Exposure visits for project partners • Presentations of the method at regional and/or international conferences	• Project partners can replicate their knowledge in trainings for farmers • 5 project partners in East Africa decided to take over the method from 2013 on • Pilot projects for replication in West Africa in 2012
EcoSan toilets (dry toilets for arid regions)	• Presentation at regional conference	• Some project partners have taken up the new technologies after their presentation.. For instance DESECE has decided to use EcoSan toilets instead of pit latrines for their new office buildings.
Meta-Systematization on *community promotion strategy*	• Presentation at regional conference	• One partner organisation in Guatemala has integrated some parts of the presented and discussed community promotion strategy into their project intervention.
Participatory Management of Natural Resources	• Specific trainings on methods • Exchange visits for technical and methodological knowledge-sharing	• Within the Senegal country program, knowledge transfer on participatory management of natural resources (code of conducts for environmental protection) has taken place from one organisation to at least 3 others.
Climate change adaption	• Exchange visits • Presentation at regional conference	• A visit of Senegalese representatives to South Africa led to an action plan of the respective CSO in Senegal to stronger discuss and integrate climate change in schools and district councils.
Curriculum for the Integration of men in women's rights education	• Specific trainings on methods • Exchange visits for technical and methodological knowledge-sharing	• Three project partners ACA, STIPA and DESECE produced a joint curriculum for the integration of men in women's rights education.
Sustainable organisational development	• Specific trainings on methods • Exchange visits for technical and methodological knowledge-sharing	• One project partner (Entasekera) has improved its capacity for sustainability organisational development after receiving technical assistance from another FP-TA project in Uganda

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[5] Enabling Rural Innovation (ERI) An approach brought to HORIZONT3000 and its partner organizations through a partnership with the Centre of Development Research (CDR), of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU) in Vienna. The priority of ERI is to achieve food security in rural households before enhancing market orientation. For more information on ERI, please refer to CDR http://www.boku.ac.at/cdr.html or to the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) - http://www.ciat.cgiar.org/Paginas/index.aspx

After the second year of implementation of the KM initiative, the reports as well as an external Review and the systematization documents confirm that the overall attainment of the expected results of the program, as formulated in the program document, are very satisfactory; especially the number of good practices identified, analysed and successfully shared, was surprisingly higher than expected – note that Table 1 only shows those good practices that have been actually *taken over* by other partner organisations. The number of good practices just identified, discussed and documented on the various occasions for exchange is by far higher.

Some positive side-effects materialized:

- The intensified cooperation strengthened relationships between the different partners in the network; the intensity of content-related discussions increased notably, and some kind of community feeling arose and grew. The understanding of the importance and the potentials of KM increased considerably among the decision-takers relevant for KNOW-HOW3000, who approved an almost 50%-increase of the budget for KNOW-HOW3000 for the next 3-years period 2013-2015; some KM-tools introduced through KNOW-HOW3000 were adopted even by other initiatives not directly involved in the original KNOW-HOW3000-network[6].

- KNOW-HOW3000 had a positive motivating effect. Key staff involved in the program unit accepted to do an enormous amount of extra hours, and most representatives of participating organisations involved reacted with similar enthusiasm.

And there were even some **unexpected positive side-effects**: The methodology of systematization, which was originally developed by partners in Latin America, turned out tremendously successful in Africa, and the diffusion of knowledge once stimulated by regional and global conferences developed its own dynamics – there was increasing south-south exchange and networking among local partner organisations without direct interaction of HORIZONT3000.

Of course, a detailed analysis of the performance of KNOW-HOW3000 revealed not only success, but also some setbacks.

First, there were delays, and even cancellation, of some activities due to substantial **underestimation of the human resources** necessary to carry out the programme. As KNOW-HOW3000 introduced a number of new instruments and activities with which neither HORIZONT3000 nor the involved partner organizations had sound experience, the resources necessary for their implementation could not be precisely estimated at the time the programme was planned and budgeted.

Second, for **lack of expertise on IT** and efficient content management technology, it took the team too long to discover that the existing IT environment of HORIZONT3000 was inappropriate for the planned intranet solution and to decide on the necessary structural changes. As a consequence, KM via intranet did not effectively take place until ends of 2012.

The third issue underestimated was **institutional communication**: Although championing in generating and sharing knowledge with external partner organizations throughout the network, the team in charge of KNOW-HOW3000 tragically did not manage to keep the staff within HORIZONT3000 and the member organisations adequately informed about the initiative at all stages, which, in turn compromised sometimes acceptance and support for the new initiatives.

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[6] TRIALOG, an EC-cofinanced initiative, led by a consortium of 12 European NGDOs (www.trialog.org) adopted the concept of systematization to document and reflect its 12-year-experience on building NGO platforms in the EU-12 member states.

Insights: lessons learned from KNOW-HOW3000

Looking back and reflecting on KNOW-HOW3000 as a case study in the wider context of current research on knowledge networks, some interesting observations can be made:

1. Face-to-face-exchange versus IT-based content management

In terms of identifying, sharing and supporting the adaptation of good practices throughout a wider network, KNOW-HOW3000 proved pretty sucessful. Remarkably, however, as reported above among the major setbacks, the content management system via internet that was judged indispensable for KM from the very beginning - and is still demanded by many partners in the network – did not go online yet. And the team in charge of KNOW-HOW3000 is not happy at all with that fact because, there's no doubt that there is a lot of information that can be easily exchanged via that channel, to the additional benefit of the partners involved. But the success story outlined in Table 1 provides a nice proof of the notion already acknowledged by several researchers: that, "*In contrast to information, which is defined as self-contained facts, knowledge is conceptual, a unique combination of facts that interact in intangible ways*" (Amsden, 2001, p. 3). It is estimated that **"[…]** *as much as 80% of knowledge residing inside institutions is thought to be tacit and thus hard to share except face to face* (Serrat, 2008). Or, as one technical advisor[7] once put it:

"Learning takes place when people come together. It is the encounter with others that makes people reflect upon their own knowledge and convictions. By confronting with others, people complement and fine-tune their knowledge."

The authors were amused to learn about the survey done by Latinobarómentro all over Latin America on the question *"How do individuals share knowledge?"* that came down to the striking answer: *"they ask friends."* (Acs & Szerb, 2010). Consequently, content management solutions via Intranet must not be discarded, there's an obvious need to exchange information via that channel. But due importance (and resources) must be given to the component of face-to-face exchange fora, since they are the places where important elements of learning occur.

2. The role of enthusiasm in KM

Among the risks and assumptions, the authors of the funding proposal of this initiative, formulated the fear that some members of the partner community might be reluctant to the invitation to engage in exchange activities and share their knowledge – this fear appeared legitimate, considering that, first, the participating organisations would have to commit some own human resources which could not be covered by the budget of the KM initiative and, second, some representatives might hesitate in discussing openly their strengths and weaknesses, and taking their experiences to conferences which might be perceived as competitions for "best" practices in a given field. But after two years of implementation, it became evident that the enthusiasm of the participating organisations for sharing knowledge turned out by far higher than ever expected:

"Participating in the workshop on systematization has lit a flame within me which will keep me going,"

said Jennifer Okusia, by that time program assistant in the Regional Office of East Africa, on a KNOW-HOW3000 seminar in May 2010. Or, as another participant put it: "*This program makes us feel part of something bigger, to share our ideas with like-minded colleagues in other countries, and, what counts most, we feel we can really exercise influence on how those projects are designed and executed.*" (Malick Ba, staff of the NGO Symbiose in Nioro/Senegal, January 2010).

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[7] Clemens Schermann, austrian theologian and life coach, technical advisor with HORIZONT3000 in Papua New Guinea from 2001 to 2003

The case study strongly confirms the results of the surveys reported by several authors which found *high levels of enthusiasm for knowledge management* (Syed-Ikhsan & Rowland, 2004; Singh Sandhu et al., 2011). A nice positive side-effect in well-endowed national and international public bodies and in the corporate world, this feature develops fundamental importance in the NGDO-context, characterized mostly by very scarce resources, and where intrinsic factors account for the biggest part of the motivation challenge.[8]

3.   Quantity and quality in assessing performance in knowledge networks

Research on knowledge networks, especially on scales as big as the international level, typically focuses on quantitative indicators to assess "connectedness"[9] which represents the intensity with which actors engage in networking, (and translates into the volume of information exchanged, the number of meetings held, etc.). There's nothing wrong about that approach, since, first, several well-performed studies reliably prove a positive correlation between those quantitative indicators for connectedness and network performance, and, second, especially in the case of a big and complex network, it is hard to collect and empirically analyse qualitative information. But the very small and well-documented case of KNOW-HOW3000 allows a closer look on how exactly knowledge was shared in various moments.

Obviously, connectedness comes at a price which applies to all actors who engage in knowledge networks, but it is especially the small NGOs with very limited resources that have to evaluate carefully how much *connectedness* they can afford, in addition to their core business. A colleague working in another Austrian NGDO once summed up his frustration in the following statement: *"We observe that our target groups are sick and tired of conferences and exchange meetings. People are transported around the globe, just to end up yawning in tedious powerpoint-presentations and boring discussions. It's an enormous waste of resources! We have taken a very critical position to all kinds of 'conference tourism'".*

Surprisingly, the success story of KNOW-HOW3000 in terms of knowledge management (identifying, analysing, adapting "good practices" to new contexts) took place although the basic structural and quantitative features of the network did not change significantly between 2009 and 2012! Of course, from 2010 on, various specific activities and events took place to generate and share knowledge, but if the overall travel mileage and event-permanence of all people involved in KNOW-HOW3000 were summed up and if the annual figures for the years from 2010 to 2012 were compared to those before the start of KNOW-HOW3000, (HORIZONT3000s development cooperation always involved various types of meetings and communications), no remarkable difference would show from 2010 on, to account for a quantitative correlation with the increase of knowledge successfully exchanged. What made the difference in the case of KNOW-HOW3000 was not the *quantity*, but the *quality* of interaction in the network.

"After 40 years of adult education, I can share the following experience with you: Of, let's say, 100 people who participate in an event, 90 walk away, without any change in mind or behavior. Maybe 10 return to their working environment and actually put in practice something they learned. And, sometimes, there's one fellow who returns home and changes the world! And that's why I always kept doing it."[10]

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[8] Head of an NGDO program unit comprising around 12 full-time staff, co- author Thomas Vogel can draw on his own professional experience in HR management

[9] For a comprehensive discussion on the concept of connectedness, see: Axel Marx and Jadir Soares: "Measuring Networks across Countries: an Empirical Exploration", published in the 2011 Report on "Networks for Prosperity" by UNIDO and Leuven Centre for Global Governance Studies, as well as: Colleen Carroll, Jadir Soares and Axel Marx: "Measuring Connectedness - Different measures, different results? (Paper prepared for the Expert Group Meeting on Knowledge Networking and Network Governance, 18 September 2012, Vienna International Center)

[10] Statement by Jim Campbell / ICAP, in a Meeting in Brussels, Mai, 2011

What have been the main qualitative elements that account for the performance of KNOW-HOW3000? Surely, the long-term-partnerships with local organizations in beneficiary countries played a crucial role, since they provided a basis of trust and overtness necessary for in-depth analysis of performance and lessons learned. But, in KNOW-HOW3000, at least as important as *trust* was *methodology*: The widespread application of systematizations as instruments for collective reflection turned out a key tool for the creation and sharing of knowledge. And, not less important, the team in charge of KNOW-HOW3000 invested quiet some energy in the methodological design of trainings and exchange events such as the regional and global conferences. Interactive elements, group dynamics and careful elaboration of the agendas made sure the participants not only considered those activities useful, but also fun.

After putting the magnifying glass on KNOW-HOW3000, it appears that quantitative indicators of connectedness can give a good estimate on the conditions under which knowledge generation and sharing *have the potential* to take place – they can be considered *enabling* factors. But the *decisive* factors which determine to what degree of effectiveness knowledge management actually *does* take place are obviously qualitative.

Demands: What can practitioners expect from research on knowledge networks?

Some current research on knowledge networks focuses on social network analysis. Although limited in explaining how knowledge generation and sharing works and why, these instruments offer useful tools to characterize knowledge networks: The concepts of *centrality, betweenness* and *hubs*[11] are very useful in describing how networks are structured (e.g. from genuine "star" to rather decentralized relationships) and how structures evolve over time. The concrete example of KNOW-HOW3000 took shape as almost a genuine star, where HORIZONT3000, the organization that maintained relationships with all other members of the network, had a high degree of centrality at the very beginning. But already during the first two years of existence, once brought into contact with each other, some members of the network undertook knowledge exchange activities independently from HORIZONT3000, that way decentralizing the initial structure of KNOW-HOW3000.

Sometimes, organizations have the power to influence, if not even shape, to a certain degree, the networks they work in. In the concrete example of KNOW-HOW3000, HORIZONT3000 took the initiative of stimulating a series of dynamics which, later on, took on their own momentum. Social network analysis can help to understand under which conditions it would be recommended for actors in the network to take on a more active role, and when it is better to leave the initiative to others.

In a future where the leading public donors in development cooperation are committed to increase their support to knowledge management for the benefit of sustainable development[12], (e.g. the European Commission, intends to supply, from 2014 on, specific funding for KM initiatives in development cooperation), it is very likely that many NGDOs will initiate further KM activities. One challenge might be to stimulate an *enabling environment* for KM initiatives with a certain degree of *compatibility* rather than mere mushrooming of a multiplicity of initiatives on similar topics, creating separate terminology and procedures, thus ending up in multiple redundancies. In this process, social network analysis can provide useful recommendations for big actors, which have the power to influence the conditions for the emergence and evolution of knowledge networks, to increase effectiveness and reduce vulnerabilities of those networks.

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[11] For a good introduction to these concepts, see: Andreia Meireles and Leonor Cardoso: "Knowledge sharing and use of shared knowledge: a study of their critical factors in the business network of the central region of Portugal" (Paper prepared for the Expert Group Meeting on Knowledge Networking and Network Governance, 18 September 2012, Vienna International Center)

[12] See, for example, the Busan Partnership For Effective Development Co-Operation Fourth High Level Forum On Aid Effectiveness, Busan, Republic of Korea, 29 November-1 December 2011 –

http://www.aideffectiveness.org/busanhlf4/images/stories/hlf4/OUTCOME_DOCUMENT_-_FINAL_EN.pdf