

From Communities of Practice to Communities of Resistance: Civil society and cognitive justice

MAJA VAN DER
VELDEN

ABSTRACT *Maja van der Velden looks at how knowledge and power are played out in development literature and practice examining the role of knowledge, public goods and the new information communications technology (ICT) in managing and sharing knowledge. She discusses the World Bank's knowledge-for-development paradigm arguing that the paradigm of knowledge management on which it is based will lead to a grave loss of knowledge. She concludes that civil society can further its social justice and developments objectives by protecting knowers and their physical and cultural environments and by facilitating the dialogues of different knowledge.*

KEYWORDS *knowledge; civil society; cognitive justice; global public goods; World Bank; ICTs*

The problem of knowledge – the manner in which it is embedded in systems of thought that have monopolized our capacity to comprehend the world, narrowed our options of resistance, assaulted the dignity of particular histories and cultures, demeaned the faculties of the imagination, and compromised the futures of people around the world – will haunt us in the twenty-first century (Lal, 2002).

Introduction

English is not my first language. When I first heard the phrase 'knowledge management for development', I wondered how it would translate into other languages. I immediately stumbled on one of the problems related to the concept: other languages have a variety of terms that are conflated to just one term in 'knowledge' in English. The act of translation, it seemed, reduced the array of ways of thinking about human understanding to a narrow, possibly simplistic, formula.

This impression was reinforced by literature survey of knowledge management in the development sector (van der Velden, 2002a, 2002b; King and McGrath, 2003). In a critical examination of knowledge management, Wilson, (2002) concludes that knowledge management is about the management of information and work practices. Wilson's argument points to the intuitive assumption that knowledge is what an individual knows. When we express our knowledge, our messages contain information. That information can become another individual's knowledge through a process of interpretation,

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comprehension and learning in an individual's mind. This implies that what we know cannot be managed, but that we can try to manage the vast amounts of information available to us.

Most development literature on knowledge uses the terms knowledge and information interchangeably. Instead we look here at how knowledge is understood as relative, representing the powers and interests of a certain group. Knowledge is expressed in the act of knowing and thus involves a knower. By contrast, most development literature treats knowledge as an object that can be expressed and represented independently from the knower. This knowledge is undone from its context and ideology, its 'embodiedness' and 'situatedness', and presented as neutral and universally good.

World Bank Knowledge

The World Bank published its 1998/1999 *World Development Report (WDR)* under the title 'Knowledge for Development'. The opening paragraph sets the tone for the rest of the document:

Knowledge is like light. Weightless and intangible, it can easily travel the world, enlightening the lives of people everywhere (World Bank, 1999: 1).

Other key statements are:

Poor countries – and poor people – differ from rich ones not only because they have less capital but because they have less knowledge (World Bank, 1999: 1).

And:

knowledge is development (World Bank, 1999: 19).

The Report builds on organizational management theory and practice from the corporate sector. Knowledge management (KM) is proposed as a solution to the loss of knowledge – when workers were 'downsized' they took their knowledge with them – and as a way to sustain the decentralization of companies. KM had to solve three key issues: how to keep knowledge in the organization, how to create more knowledge, and how to make knowledge more productive.

The World Bank adopted KM in 1996 and focused initially on mapping its own knowledge and expertise. That same year James Wolfensohn, the Bank's President, announced that the World Bank would become the 'knowledge bank'. It is not surprising that the World Bank, with its agenda-setting role, soon after initiated the knowledge-for-development paradigm. The Bank's knowledge tools and techniques have been exported via the Bank's Knowledge for Development Programme (K4D), the Knowledge Intern Programme (KIP), offering undergraduate and graduate students hands-on knowledge management skills, the Global Knowledge Network and the (global) Development Gateway.¹ The latter is a good example of corporate sector ICT-based KM that found its way in the development sector. The Gateway is designed on the model of the corporate web-based portal. Modelled after 'communities of practice' (see Wenger, et al., 2002), a popular concept in KM, both the Gateway and the World Bank's web portals facilitate online communities around the many development topics.

Neutered knowledge

As with previous trends in development and development language, international development agencies have shown themselves adept at appropriating the latest politically correct concepts (Torres, 2001). Several international development organizations, including the World Bank, have recently chosen to replace the corporate sector-oriented term *knowledge management* with the more politically correct term *knowledge sharing*. This term invokes the sense of a fair and open process in which equally competent and empowered participants can access, share and use the knowledge they need.

Development organizations now feel compelled to incorporate the term in their development discourse, replacing terms such as data, information, capacity building and learning. Organisations position themselves in the knowledge sharing community with their KM policy paper and discuss their positions as a knowledge centre.

While much of this work has been well-intentioned, the growing consensus on the use of the

term knowledge has developed in the absence of attention to the epistemic and conceptual questions posed by the resort to knowledge as the basis for development (Johnstone, 2002): What is knowledge? Who decides what is knowledge? Whose knowledge matters? By whom and for what will that knowledge be used? These questions are not being asked by those working to advance the knowledge-for-development consensus.

This lack of definition of knowledge permits the new consensus to assert – unchallenged – a common understanding of the concept of knowledge. Thus, it becomes possible to transfer knowledge from where it is available to where it is needed. This knowledge can also be measured. In this often unexpressed definition knowledge is defined as a commodity with informational characteristics. The Human Development Index (UNDP, 2001) measures people's access to knowledge in terms of public spending on education and adult literacy. Measuring knowledge in terms of formal education or literacy seems to indicate that non-literate and non-educated people do not possess knowledge of value for development (Lal, 2002).

The result is a neutered, harmless version of knowledge, a commodity that is perceived as objective – non-ideological, neutral – and credible, located in networks, communities of practice, documents and databases. Knowledge in this definition is most decidedly not creative, diverse and grounded in people and communities.

This version of knowledge terms such as local and global knowledge replace older terms such as indigenous knowledge and western/scientific knowledge, obscuring previous understandings about the content of local and indigenous knowledge, confusing knowledge with information and data, and blurring categories of human cognition or understanding that are, to date, different in their origins, significance and use. New categories are created on the basis of KM, but with little reference to the actual location of that knowledge (in the knower, in time, in place). For example, in a KM for development training manual (Inclen, 2002), local knowledge is described as information about a local situation, such as epidemiological information and indigenous knowledge. Local knowledge, in this case, has been redefined along

fundamentally western/scientific standards, merging a western/scientific approach to knowledge into a category that aspires to include situated or indigenous knowledge. As Parker, 2000 argues local knowledge now often refers to local creation of centres of expertise based on western models of knowledge production.

The second important assumption underlying the knowledge-for-development paradigm is that of knowledge as a public good. Public goods – such as clean air, a lighthouse and street signs – are deemed non-excludable and can be consumed over and over. Public goods are a public sector concern because the characteristics of public goods are a disincentive for private sector investment. The *WDR* analyses the power and reach of public good knowledge in terms of impact. It describes for example a direct relationship between the spread of knowledge and infant mortality (World Bank, 1999: 17) and economic growth (*ibid*: 18) in developing economies.

The same theoretical basis assumes that governments and civil society can provide or make available what poor people are lacking. Thus, active intervention is needed to facilitate the sharing of public good knowledge. One such intervention is the selection of good-quality development knowledge, a justification for the services offered by the Development Gateway. Joseph Stiglitz (2000), in his capacity as chief economist of the World Bank, wrote:

In particular, the Knowledge Bank is in a good position to 'scan globally' to identify good practices, and then it can play a brokerage role to facilitate a horizontal learning process between the developing countries facing certain problems and the countries with successful practices. It can perform another role: certifying the quality of the messengers and messages; in a noisy world, with many alternative theories vying for centre stage, there needs to be some ways of sorting through the cacophony, establishing credibility.

Stiglitz' refers to 'credibility' which implies the selected development knowledge is non-ideological knowledge uncontested. As an example of such non-ideological global knowledge, the *WDR* asserts that millions of people 'live in the dark' because they do not *know* how to prevent or cure

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diarrhoea. The problem with this analogy for the knowledge-for-development paradigm is that in many cases people do know how to prevent or cure diarrhoea, but are often prevented from applying that knowledge.

The new development paradigm argues a linear correlation between knowledge and development and reinforces the idea of development as a rational, linear process with a known or predefined outcome: a change in people's knowledge will lead to a change in people's practices. Thus when people, who drink water infested with guinea worm, are provided access to knowledge about clean water, they are expected to change their practices.⁴

Thus unlike the economic definitions of public good, knowledge is entirely excludable: so-called credible development knowledge excludes knowledge that fails to fit the dominant discourse and prevents that knowledge from being used, even by those who possess that knowledge.

Loss of knowledge

The focus on development knowledge as a global public good will transform international development cooperation into the facilitation of knowledge for development. Knowledge will be treated as any other development commodity such as vaccines or water pumps that are transferred, managed and shared in order to create the desired outcomes. The impact of these processes will force us to consider the loss of knowledge diversity: the process in which the knowledge(s) that does not fit the development paradigm is invalidated or made invisible. In the context of the proposed management and production of development knowledge, three processes can be identified.

Instrumentalization

Nustad and Sending (2000) discuss how development policy-makers understand and select knowledge on its capacity to provide solutions. They define social and economic problems according to the tools of intervention available to them. Knowledge that does not fit the tools will be ignored. Nustad and Sending argue that this is the

main problem of development and the cause of many failed development projects.

For example, Azara Issah knows that safe drinking water is not accessible because it is unaffordable. But this knowledge is not of a purely technical or instrumental nature. It is political. Within the knowledge-for-development paradigm, it is a better fit to define the health problems of her community as the result of diarrhoea, not as the result of the privatization of water. In the context of the objective development knowledge about the treatment of the effects of drinking contaminated water, Azara Issah's knowledge is invalidated.

Institutionalization

Related to the instrumentalization of knowledge is the institutionalization of knowledge in processes of converging intellectual and political interests. Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe institutionalization as being based on the control of human conduct through defining patterns of conduct. Goldman (2001) describes such a pattern in his study of the process of knowledge production in the context of a hydroelectric dam project in Laos. He found that research findings, information and knowledge that were in conflict with the larger plans and goals of the institutions were suppressed or dismissed as unscientific. In this case the 'pattern of conduct' included three important practices for knowledge production: (1) the use of ('northern') professionals or experts; (2) information gathering tools such as 'rapid rural appraisal' (RRA) and 'environmental impact assessment' (EIA); and (3) restrictive 'terms of reference' (TOR). These knowledge production practices have become institutionalized by the development sector, extending the level of invalidation and loss of knowledge, and are widely used by the national governments, research institutes, large NGOs and think tanks in the South.⁵

Standardization

Knowledge management, the Internet and ICTs in general are presented as making more knowledge accessible and even producing knowledge. That

knowledge is lost in the processes of the mediation, fragmentation, standardization and digitalization of knowledge through ICTs is less visible and not widely discussed in the development sector. The focus on sharing knowledge in development practice has led to the increased use of ICT. Eriksen (2001), however, shows how information technology standardizes knowledge and makes people accustomed to a fast, fragmented world, possibly leading to a fundamental change in our understanding of knowledge.

After the separation between knowers and knowledge, the standardization of knowledge through ICT is the logical next step. In this phase it is the 'explicit knowledge' – the knowledge the knowers know they know and which they can express – that can be managed. The social and cultural knowledge, in which this explicit knowledge is embedded, becomes marginalized, when this knowledge is digitalized and shared via ICTs. The increasing role of ICTs in 'knowledge sharing' reinforces the idea of transfer – from darkness to light, from no knowledge or 'incomplete' knowledge to 'objective' and 'credible' knowledge. Learning thus becomes substituting 'old' knowledge with 'new' knowledge instead of a process of reflexive interpretation and integration of new information that *may* lead to the desired development outcome (Chataway and Wield, 2000).

Civil society and cognitive justice

Civil society is pressured in different ways by the knowledge-for-development paradigm. Sharing is in principle a good thing and many civil society organizations (CSOs) are well positioned to facilitate local–global communications and information sharing. What is new is that knowledge has become a development commodity. In the new development paradigm, local CSOs, in particular think tanks, research and development NGOs, play an important role in the blending of local and global development knowledge. Often depending on foreign funding, they are increasingly producing policy-oriented development knowledge instead of community-oriented knowledge based on the diversity of knowledge.

CSOs have mainly dealt with knowledge hegemony and knowledge loss in the dichotomy of indigenous-western/scientific knowledge. Civil society challenges to the dominant knowledge system called for an inclusive system based on the diversity of knowledge, acknowledging, among others, the race, class, culture, gender and place of the knowers. The knowledge-for-development paradigm builds forth on the same dichotomy but now using the more ambiguous terms of local and global knowledge. ICT-based knowledge solutions strengthen the dichotomy even further. For example, the Development Gateway has two knowledge topics: indigenous knowledge (local knowledge) and knowledge economy (global knowledge).

Decolonization and democratization of knowledge

The problem of knowledge is not only the dominance of the western/scientific knowledge but also its power to prevent the 'flourishing' of other knowledges (Lal, 2002). Thus the solution to this problem does not lie in overcoming the dichotomy between indigenous or local and western/scientific or global knowledge (Agrawal, 1995), but in a focus on the knowers and their environments in which knowledge is situated.

Visvanathan (quoted in Kraak, 1999) proposes cognitive justice as the framework in which the decolonization and democratization of knowledge could take place. He states the principles for cognitive justice as follows:

- All forms of knowledge are valid and should co-exist in a dialogic relationship to each other.
- Cognitive justice implies the strengthening of the 'voice' of the defeated and marginalized.
- Traditional knowledges and technologies should not be 'museumized'.
- Every citizen is a scientist. Each layperson is an expert.
- Science should help the common man/woman.
- All competing sciences should be brought together into a positive heuristic for dialogue.

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Knowledge is inherently tied to the epistemic community – the group or society that establishes the rules or methods for the making of knowledge (Visvanathan, 2001; Van Dijk, 2002). What is perceived as true or truth differs from one epistemic community to the other. Van Dijk and Visvanathan therefore prefer a relativistic approach, based on concrete knowers and epistemic communities, in and among whom knowledge is being shared and used.⁶

Understanding knowledge not simply as cognition makes clear that knowledge sharing (and learning) is more than knowledge transfer – bringing knowledge from where it is available to where it is needed. Sharing takes place within a dialogue of knowledges in which knowers exchange experiences, values and ideas. Cognitive justice gives meaning to the relationships between the different knowledges and knowledge systems as it acknowledges the plurality of knowledge. It implies a conscious and active protection of knowledges, i.e. preventing the invalidation or loss of knowledge within a knowledge system as well as the invalidation or loss of its systems and categories.

Conclusion

[B]y resisting we will refine, by subverting we will redirect and by protecting we will create (Partington quoted in Sivanandan, 1996).

The knowledge paradigm inherent in the new knowledge for development theories originates in theories of economic growth and development which are founded on principles of scarcity and dependency. This paradigm categorizes poor people and their issues in terms of solutions that provide what people lack and it invalidates what they have. Hence the focus on accessing, transferring and communicating knowledge, with knowledge more and more situated in information and data stored in computers and documents. This development paradigm denies poor people their knowledge, often one of their few resources, and fails to see them as agents.

Cognitive justice provides an ethical framework for a knowledge paradigm that advances a decen-

tralized, non-hierarchical, locally controlled approach to social justice and development, providing tools and techniques that are directly relevant to people's daily struggles for survival and inclusion. In these struggles one can see the emergence of 'communities of resistance' (Sivanandan, 1996),⁷ organizations and social movements challenging the top-down development approach with its knowledge sharing in centralized portals and communities of practice (see also Escobar, 2003).

Civil society can further its social justice and development objectives by protecting knowers and their physical and cultural environments, by facilitating the dialogues of knowledges in which knowers share information and create knowledge, and by providing and using appropriate and locally controlled tools for communication and information exchange.

ICTs have become an important civil society tool for communication, networking and information exchange. ICTs can strengthen self-organization (Escobar, 2003) by facilitating connectedness and spaces for cooperation, dialogues and learning. But tools for justice can become tools of oppression when the technology obscures the human and social nature of communication and when control and ownership hinders democratic participation. Only when people take charge of the technology, its 'spaces of vulnerability' (Smith, 1996) will become visible, and people can transform technology into powerful tools for social justice, democracy and empowerment.

In the age of 'knowledge societies', 'knowledge economies' and 'knowledge-based aid', civil society organizations should take control of their tools and techniques and critically assess the effects of their policies and practices on the cognitive rights of the people and communities they represent or support. As Shiva (1993; 1997) has shown, practice must actively and consciously cultivate diversity and self-organization. Giving 'voice' to knowers, or being 'tolerant' of alternative knowledge, is not enough. Cognitive justice requires resisting the hegemony of the dominant knowledge system in the struggle for survival, peace and social justice.

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Notes

- 1 See www.globalknowledge.org and www.developmentgateway.org. International organizations and research institutes around the world are inspired by or have modelled their KM activities after the 'Knowledge Bank' (see also King, and McGrath, 2003). For example, UNDP has established a distributed system for explicit and tacit knowledge sharing – the Sub-regional Resource Facilities (SURFs) that is similar to the World Bank's internal Communities of Practice or thematic groups. Overall, KM's introduction to the development sector has been top-down, from the corporate sector in the 'north', via the World Bank and international development agencies, to development organizations in the 'south'. Bellanet is one of those organizations that play an important role in promoting KM and facilitating the exchange of KM for development experiences via its international workshops and mailing lists (see www.bellanet.org/km/). It is also interesting to look at the KM pedigree in individual organizations. For example, Tearfund, a British development NGO, mentions the US Army and BP/Amoco as its models.
- 2 Particularly in (neo-)evolutionary economic theory. See for example Stehr (2002) for a discussion of the economic role of knowledge.
- 3 This example also makes clear that the decision of what is a public good and what is a private good is a political one. In Ghana water used to be a common public good, but is now privatized under pressure from the IMF and World Bank.
- 4 Abildgaard (1997) describes the failure of a clean water system in a village in Ghana, even though the system was built with high-level community participation. She found that the villagers' understanding of guinea worms was different from that of the 'western/scientific' explanation. Thus, providing scientific causal knowledge did not change the practices of the villagers.
- 5 'Best practice', a popular KM tool, strengthens the institutionalization of development knowledge. Best practice refers to an organization's most effective approach to a problem. Through ICT, best practices are widely shared within the development community.
- 6 Jensen (2000) calls in this context also for a cultural relativism, based on *culture-as-knowledge*. In development, culture is generally understood as an obstacle to development, not as knowledge. If people with new knowledge are not behaving as expected, it is their culture that obstructs change. Culture is not perceived as a position from which one sees, knows, act, but as *culture-as-tradition*.
- 7 'Communities of resistance' is the title of a publication by Sivanandan. (1990), and discusses the black struggles and inner-city uprisings in the UK.

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