

EDITORIAL

Facilitating multi-stakeholder processes: balancing internal dynamics and institutional politics

This issue of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* focuses on the connection between the knowledge function in knowledge management for development (KM4D) and the facilitation function within multi stakeholder processes (MSPs). Both functions are key functions in innovation processes. Within KM4D, the emphasis is on knowledge sharing and learning, both at organisational level as well as within networks at systems level. MSP addresses systemic learning in society, involving various actors and addressing institutional functions that need to be improved.

A previous Special Issue of this journal (Volume 7, Number 1) published in May 2011, *Beyond the conventional boundaries of knowledge management: navigating the emergent pathways of learning and innovation for international development*, emphasised the importance of having well-established linkages and information flows between different public and private actors, and of broad-based stakeholder collaborations (Klerkx et al, 2001). This Special Issue is based on a growing recognition within the development sector that complex problems cannot be solved by one single actor. This recognition has resulted in a growing practice in development projects and programmes in which different actors try to find new ways of collaborating.

The Call for Papers for this Special Issue with the theme of facilitating of MSPs has been like opening Pandora's Box. The diversity of proposed contributions considered by the editors was immense. We have taken this as an indication of the wide range of collaborative practice in international development. The field of MSPs covers specific forms such as innovation platforms, learning alliances, multi-stakeholder initiatives (such as commodity roundtables), cross-sector partnerships, interactive policy making, and innovation labs. Although all these terms refer to specific actor sets, collaborative mechanisms and incentives, the principles used for designing and operationalizing these processes are not very different.

MSP platforms: issue-focus versus solution-focused

This Special Issue explores the relationship between KM4D and facilitating MSPs. The contributions share practical cases in which a combination of different actors address common problems or critical issues, requiring new types of knowledge and practice. A number of articles provide examples of multi-stakeholder *platforms* (Cadilhon, van Paassen and colleagues, Warner and Thomas, Mwaikambo and colleagues) that have been organised to provide a common forum to work as a network on a particular challenge. Multi-stakeholder and innovation platforms are a specific instrument to structure stakeholder gathering and strengthen communication processes that would result into new practices, standards and

knowledge. Here, different types of knowledge management tools play an instrumental role (see, for example, Mwaikambo and colleagues).

We have observed that these platforms sometimes have a ‘pre-defined solution’ agenda, such as platforms for organising agricultural producers in using fertiliser. Other platforms have a more open ‘issue focussed’ agenda in which actors address a problem or issue without clear solutions at the start. The latter type often eventually result in institutional reform, such as new types of market arrangements allowing small producers to enter the market or new ways of organising research. There may also be an ideological or political dimension to issue driven versus solution driven approaches to the creation of innovation and learning platforms. Powerful actors may drive a specific solution agenda, for instance when fertilisers are promoted for export crops by government and business involved in fertilisers.

Unpacking facilitation: role, position and competences

Another set of articles in this Special Issue analyse the facilitation role that is needed to get MSPs working, such as the article on learning by Gordijn and Helder. One set of skills is needed to assure effective group processes, including guiding group processes through different phases and allowing the emergence of a strong group. Before a group is able to produce new types of knowledge, an individual facilitator will need to enhance interaction and encourage, balance and structure communication. He or she needs to enhance learning and stimulate creative innovation. Representatives of different stakeholder groups have different mindsets and stakes which may include the seeds of conflict. Conflict mediation is thus another competence that a facilitator needs as explained by Brouwer and colleagues). A flexible attitude and process skills are both needed in the navigation of the dynamics of innovation platforms, also skills that a facilitator or broker should master (Swaans and colleagues). As Sips and colleagues demonstrate, facilitators should also monitor issues of representativeness which may change over the course of the process. In short, the facilitator will need to enhance ownership, self-monitoring and open communication. Most cases show that this is not a neutral role: each facilitator brings in his or her own mindset and values. With regard to the importance of neutrality of the facilitator, there is no consensus as some authors require it and others question the feasibility of neutrality (see, for example, Swaans and colleagues). Facilitating MSPs has more to it than facilitating meetings and group processes. As a result, Swaans and colleagues refer to facilitators of innovation platforms as innovation brokers.

Functions of MSPs

We have also observed the dynamics of facilitation and related institutional issues. Facilitation seems to have been the focus of attention of most authors to the detriment of the perhaps less tangible institutional issues. The latter frame the facilitation experiences upon which the authors in this Special Issue are reflecting. The function of MSPs as a governance mechanism does not always emerge clearly and the power dimension is addressed explicitly in only a few papers (see, for example, Brouwer and colleagues). This is probably also a new working area for many practitioners. Authors make reference to the different types of

knowledge, such as endogenous knowledge and ‘modern’ knowledge, and discuss these in relation to learning and practice.

To propose a general definition for MSPs is beyond the scope of this Special Issue. Yet it can be helpful to frame MSPs by distinguishing what they try to accomplish. To do this, we have adapted the typology proposed by Steve Waddell (2011). Here, six different functions of MSPs or networks are given that illustrate the wealth of diversity in this domain (see Table 1). Innovation platforms, for example, may predominantly be driven by the function of ‘learning, research and capacity development’, while civil society initiatives for collaboration may be predominantly driven by the function of ‘advocating’. An MSP can fulfil several functions, or could start with one particular function and over time develop to another function. However, these functions do not develop as linear processes but develop more organically over time.

Table 1: Different functions and their contribution to multi-stakeholder processes

Main function	Contribution in the process
Shared visioning	Creating events and interactions that generate shared understanding and vision
System organizing	Bringing together an emerging system of diverse stakeholders to generate coherence in strategies
Learning, research, capacity development	Developing and disseminating new knowledge and tools with research, piloting new approaches, and training
Measuring/certifying	Developing indices, assessments, and/or certification processes
Financing	Combining forces to aggregate their impact and create a more efficient funding vehicle than any actor could do on its own
Advocating	Mobilizing voice and increasing pressure upon specific stakeholders who are blocking (actively or inactively) change

Source: Adapted from Waddell 2011

Most of the experiences documented in this Special Issue are connected to the function of ‘learning, research, and capacity development’ as their prime focus or *raison d’être*. This is perhaps not surprising given the nature of the KM4D field and its closely related KM4Dev community. But it is interesting to see that these experiences do not confine themselves to learning, research and capacity development but are often simultaneously pursuing other goals, such as shared visioning, system organizing and financing. The facilitating or brokering role, regardless of who is undertaking this role, is identified in most articles as being of critical importance to achieve the goal which the coalition of actors is setting for itself.

Overview of the different contributions in this Special Issue

In the first paper in this Special Issue, Brouwer and colleagues consider how Dutch development non-governmental organisation (NGOs) developed a common learning agenda to assist their partners in dealing more effectively with power differences in MSPs. This reflects the fact that many NGOs face difficulty in exerting influence in cooperative settings

with more powerful stakeholders, such as governments and private sector. The learning programme was not designed to be an initiative to facilitate MSPs but rather as an initiative to learn how to deal strategically with power differences in MSPs. Five main insights emerged which led to the formulation of seven methodological conclusions on how to analyse and handle power. This provides a range of tested power analysis tools and cases.

In their paper 'Reflective learning for meaningful change', Gordijn and Helder argue that MSPs often overlook the facilitation of reflective learning. Reflective learning is seen as a crucial ingredient to understanding the rich experiences of an MSP, drawing out lessons that relate to a given context and strengthening group dynamics and learning. This paper specifically addresses the issue of capacity development, namely the development of the skills of facilitators to improve practice, and argues that such skills can be learned. The authors consider that reflective learning requires careful facilitation, balancing the knowledge and experiences of all actors, accepting that gaps exist to create space for change, and playing with thoughts and feelings. The authors provide practical suggestions to bring about reflective learning.

The multi-stakeholder process introduced in Millar and colleagues' paper, 'Evaluation as a multi-stakeholder process: the Programme for Capacity and Theory Building for Universities and Research Centres in Endogenous Development (CAPTURED) in Bolivia, Ghana and India' is an evaluation process. This paper is linked to concepts of third generation knowledge management which emphasise the value of interactive learning between various groups in the multi-stakeholder arena. The authors argue that a learning-focused evaluation, such as that conducted in the three CAPTURED countries, necessitates facilitation skills to bring the best out of the mixed methods process, particularly when the objective of the project is to validate and integrate endogenous values in education and research, a sensitive and complex agenda. The CAPTURED experience shows how respect for each other's values, the preparation and holding of a reflection space and the use of appropriate evaluation methods for a given context requires careful facilitation.

In 'Collaborative learning and stakeholder engagement: lessons and implications of the revitalization of the Continuing Professional Development policy for health workers in Nigeria', Mwaikambo and colleagues present the lessons of a multi-stakeholder project aimed to revitalize Nigeria's Continuous Professional Development (CPD) policy for medical laboratory scientists. The paper assesses the extent to which the project partners feel that the project objectives have been met as a result of participating in a variety of stakeholder engagement techniques throughout the planning and implementation of project activities. A mixed method evaluation concluded that developing e-learning courses for CPD credits made the policy more accessible to scientists. In addition, the evaluation concluded that third generation knowledge management principles improved stakeholder collaboration and joint adoption and implementation of the policy and e-learning courses.

In 'Choice-making in facilitation of agricultural innovation platforms in different contexts: experiences from Ghana, Benin, and Mali', van Paassen and colleagues focus on platforms. The authors claim that it is essential to have 'delicate mediation and dynamic agenda-setting to create trust, relationships, and momentum for mutually-supportive team action.' Multi-stakeholder platforms, such as the value chain-focused platforms mentioned in this article, require careful attention to platform purpose and design criteria, and good situation analyses

and actor analyses. Beyond the role of the platform facilitators, platform members also need to be able to represent institutions, deliver on activities and communicate well. The needs of platforms differ along the chain from local to national level with shifting emphasis from fact-finding to mediation and negotiation. The article suggest that focusing on platform formation (rules of conduct, commitment etc.), positioning the facilitator, establishing rules of cooperation and ensuring regular communication, facilitate fact-finding and, ultimately, innovation.

Next, Sips and colleagues consider the issue of community participation in complex technological projects with high risk in Belgium. They describe how a platform approach was successful in engaging local citizens in a landfill mining project in which landfill waste is going to be used for energy production. This approach made it possible to take health, safety and prosperity concerns into account. One risk of the platform approach may be that involved citizens become incorporated into the project to such an extent that they start to disconnect from the other citizens they should be representing. Although this paper falls outside of the geographical focus of this journal, the Guest Editors of the Special Issue decided to accept it because they considered that it provides an interesting approach of relevance to developing countries.

In ‘Dealing with critical challenges in African innovation platforms: lessons for facilitation’, Swaans and colleagues describe how the dynamic nature of innovation processes, and the differences in interest, capacity and power among the actors involved, makes the role of facilitation or innovation brokering particularly challenging. The authors argue that the key to success in facilitating innovation platforms is very much linked to the attitude, skills and capacities of the innovation broker. The authors describe the different functions performed by innovation brokers in innovation platforms, one of them being facilitation, and the flexible attitude and process skills this demands. Using examples from Africa, the paper describes seven key challenges of facilitating innovation platforms: the dynamic and evolving nature of platforms; power dynamics; gender equity; external versus internal facilitation; sustainability of the process; issues of scale; and monitoring and evaluation. Issues and implications for facilitation of innovation platforms are discussed, based on examples from Africa and in relation to current theories.

In their article ‘Water management, fact-finding and facilitation in multi-stakeholder platforms in North Afghanistan’, Warner and Thomas stress the necessity of embedding the facilitation process in the local reality and of putting due attention to technically trained (or life-experienced) facilitators. In the European Union-Funded Panj Amu River Basin Programme, the external facilitators of multi-stakeholder platforms aimed to regulate water sector reform aspects in the region but they did not understand the importance of staging the process. In contrast, the water allocation committees set up in a year of drought showed remarkable flexibility, resilience and relevance. This paper further shows that in some contexts such as allocation of water, multi-stakeholder processes may not be the most appropriate solution, no matter how strong the facilitating function is performed.

In a case study, Walters describes how the Dutch development organisation, ICCO, has mainstreamed MSP thinking in the so-called ‘the programmatic approach.’ The programmatic approach is used to facilitate and implement multi-stakeholder processes for systemic change. The author argues that sense-making of complex multi-stakeholder systems

is necessary to determine interventions. One of the main methods applied during the change trajectory has been the Four Quadrants of Change Framework (Wilber, 1998). Staff has been trained in their competences to apply the programmatic approach. The biggest change in the mindset of staff and the organization was to change from a relations management perspective, where the administration of the ‘account’ was very important, to a more cooperative mindset. While acknowledging results, the paper also shows, however, that the systemic nature of the introduction of the MSP in ICCO has been undertaken without a good understanding of all of the institutional consequences.

In the interview ‘From project-based to institutionalised multi-stakeholder learning in the water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector’, da Silva Wells interviews Magara. The interview focuses on the challenge of catalysing the shift from facilitating learning to institutional embedding of learning. In relation to multi-stakeholder learning platforms, da Silva Wells and Magara emphasize the importance of multi-level flow of information between platforms at different levels. This paper relates to both capacity development for facilitation as well as the question of how MSPs can be used to work across scales.

The short story from Cadilhon presents a case in which facilitation allowed the multiple stakeholders within local community innovation platforms in Ghana and Burkina Faso to share experiences and knowledge in value chain management and analysis. This paper considers the pros and cons of internal versus external facilitation. It also addresses the question of how to deal with conflicts of interest between parties, and considers how facilitation encounters power play between different interest groups and involves active engagement to address the power imbalances. The main lesson from this story is that when facilitation by the support organization effectively supports learning processes by the stakeholders, it helps bring about recognition that commitment and communication are essential to help smallholders benefit from value chains and the subsequent engagement of all stakeholders in a continuous learning process.

These are but eleven contributions to an increasingly far reaching and deepening reservoir of experiences with MSPs. We hope that some of the good practices, ideas and also difficulties highlighted in this special issue will inform future MSPs and that a future issue of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* can revisit this topic to provide further insights as to how change and innovation can be harnessed by MSPs.

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