

## The culture of a knowledge fair: lessons from an international organization

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This article provides a case study on organizing a knowledge fair in an intercultural environment and the challenges that it presented. These challenges included issues ranging from languages to organizational structure and culture. In addition to these aspects, which are described below, there is the additional complexity of the multifaceted nature of the topic chosen for the fair: the informal economy. The informal economy comprises 'all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements' (ILO 2002, p. 1). It takes a variety of forms around the world. Different countries have varying perceptions of the informal economy, depending on their national context.

In addressing the specific problems that countries confront, staff of the International Labour Organization (ILO) are involved in different networks linked to various professions and organizational structures. How can ILO staff be brought into contact with each other? And how to do this within the cultural constraints of the tripartite nature of the organization, the organizational culture, language needs, and cultural expectations and sensitivities?

To address these challenges, the ILO organized a Knowledge Fair on Decent Work and the Informal Economy<sup>1</sup> from 8-15 June 2005 in Geneva, as part of a project on knowledge sharing around the informal economy and poverty reduction. The Fair was a major side event to the 92<sup>nd</sup> session of the annual International Labour Conference, a gathering that brings around 3800 delegates and staff together over three weeks each June.

As the first of its kind in the ILO, the Knowledge Fair offered many lessons, some of which resulted from its intercultural nature. In several respects, the Fair experience illustrated cultural issues that can affect knowledge sharing in the development context.

### **The focus of the Knowledge Fair: decent work and the informal economy**

In the context of poverty reduction and decent work, the ILO has been increasingly engaged in work on the informal economy. However, like other organizations, the ILO displays some of the obstacles to learning related to structure, working culture and barriers identified more generally (Carlsson and Wohlegemuth 2000). ILO staff around the globe tackle issues relating to informality from quite different entry points and

perspectives, without necessarily making the connections between them to support the most coherent approaches possible. Practical ILO initiatives or research may be labelled 'job creation in microenterprises', 'expanding representation for workers', 'building community-based health care systems' or yet something else, while in fact they are addressing similar issues that pivot around informal arrangements.

Moreover, although the ILO is widely recognized as having dealt with the informal sector/informal economy since identifying it in 1972, today its expertise on the matter does not always have a high profile among academia and the development community. Thus there is a need for greater dissemination of its accumulated knowledge to the external world, and for building stronger alliances and partnerships within and outside the institution (ILO, 2005a).

### **What did the Knowledge Fair entail?**

An eye-catching full-colour poster advertised the Fair, which was also promoted on the ILO website and in the daily Conference bulletin. The Fair's main feature was a large, double-sized panel exhibition that presented examples of good practice in relation to the informal economy from a wide variety of projects. Projects were grouped onto four panels under these headings: the policy environment, expanding markets and jobs, extending representation, and improving working conditions. These themes were echoed in large posters that featured other examples from projects addressing the informal economy. The graphics, which received universal acclaim, came from the ILO's photo bank – itself a knowledge sharing resource. A print guide in English, French and Spanish contained detailed explanations and contact information for each project included in the exhibit.

Additional examples of work on the informal economy were reported in three issues of a newspaper that was published during the week of the Fair in three languages. Its simple format, on two sides of an A3 sheet, fit well with the Fair's theme. A multi-media presentation and pull-up banners explained the 'model of change' for the informal economy.<sup>2</sup> Tutorials on using the ILO Informal Economy Resource Database, which captures over 500 publicly available studies, tools and other reference material, occurred at fixed times throughout the Fair.<sup>3</sup> In a video corner, visitors could watch videos coming from various projects.

A book fair showcased ILO publications most relevant to the topic, which bore special Knowledge Fair bookmarks. Three lunchtime discussion panels involved ILO constituents, staff and academics. There was a small display of handicrafts and other objects produced in the context of two of the projects on the informal economy in Africa and Asia. And, in exchange for responding to a feedback questionnaire on the Fair, participants were promised a CD ROM featuring its highlights.

The Knowledge Fair was essentially a broad-based information-sharing exercise. Once information has been gathered, it can be analysed and evaluated. The captured knowledge

from the Fair became what UN Population Fund (UNFPA) has called a ‘knowledge asset’, namely a living repository of collective know-how, as well as a means of publicizing the Informal Economy Resource Database. This knowledge asset reflected the breadth of ILO action on the informal economy and is physically represented by the two large, two-sided S-shaped panels that formed the main exhibit of the Fair. Designed to be portable, the exhibit is being sent to development events where the informal economy is a focus of interest, thus permitting the ILO to amortize its investment in the Fair. The Knowledge Fair exhibit has already travelled to the Dominican Republic as part of a meeting of directors of training centres and Ministries of labour and education from Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as to Germany for a meeting on globalization, the workplace and health.

### **Why was this format chosen?**

Why was a knowledge fair chosen? Earlier attempts at knowledge sharing among staff involved in work relating to the informal economy had produced modest results. Other events had taken place, but had involved a rather limited number of people. A virtual forum was in place, but was facing the typical challenges of such media (see, for example, Hardon 2005). ILO constituents’ awareness of ILO work on the topic was variable. And although the Resource Database was coming up first on a Google search on ‘informal economy’, few ILO staff or constituents seemed to be aware of it. As the ILO tends to be ‘event-focused’, it was thought that an event of this size, involving such a large audience, could provide the right environment.

Since the annual International Labour Conference follows a standard formula that leaves delegates relatively little free time, we needed something novel that would attract their attention. As the first of its kind, the Knowledge Fair succeeded in doing this, and a web presence and CD-ROM have permitted others to be reached after the event. We built a feedback mechanism into the Fair, thus permitting some measurement of impact that could inform future action and be reported on for managerial purposes. Funding for the Knowledge Fair came from the UK Department for International Development with contribution, chiefly in staff time, from the regular budget of the ILO.

In the exhibit itself, we decided to focus only on positive examples. While much can be learned from mistakes, people – especially self-styled experts - are reluctant to admit them. Thus the focus on showcasing good practice was an incentive to draw them into the process. There was also hope of a frank exchange of remaining challenges, which is simply a less threatening way to describe unsolved problems or failures. However, aside from our engaging a person to document the process and conducting an internal after-action review, this did not occur. All the same, our idea of including a more self-critical element in such an event may be useful to others.

### **Box 1: A few lessons from a Knowledge Fair**

Clarify *why* you are staging a Knowledge Fair and *what messages* should be transmitted;  
Identify the *target audience(s)* and tailor the knowledge fair to it/them;  
*Market the event* appropriately to the target audience;  
*Get commitment from key stakeholders and involve them in appropriate ways* at the planning stage and in execution;  
Take into account the *cultural aspects* for the audience(s) identified;  
*Analyze the formal/informal mood* you wish to and can achieve with the audience(s);  
*Decide if you want a multilingual event*; if so, address budgetary implications, and allow extra preparation time and schedule parallel events;  
*Publicize* the event before, during and after (using high impact graphics);  
Do not underestimate the *time and resources* required;  
Provide a *feedback* mechanism for fair participants;  
Identify in advance *how to measure impact* in relation to the audience(s) identified;  
and  
*Capture the process* – its ups and downs could help others later.

## **The culture of the tripartite setting**

While the ILO is a Specialized Agency that is part of the United Nations family, it has a unique feature: tripartism. This means that representatives of employers and of workers are involved, alongside government, in the governance of the institution – in its annual conference, in its Governing Body, and in implementing a wide range of activities. The different perspectives of the representatives of governments from diverse countries, of employers and of workers are accommodated through what the ILO calls social dialogue, a form of consensus-oriented participation.

In practical terms, an initiative that is opposed by any of these three groups is unlikely to go far. The involvement of non-State actors in the ILO's work means that this work can reverberate through employers' and workers' organizations (primarily trade unions) to reach wide audiences within the ILO's 178 member States. It also implies that initiatives taken by the Secretariat must remain relevant to the expressed needs of all three groups.

In June 2002, following consultations and lengthy debate, the tripartite delegates to the International Labour Conference adopted conclusions on Decent Work and the Informal Economy. These conclusions represented an official consensus on a set of issues on which the perspectives of the three groups vary to a lesser or a greater extent. They concurred easily in calling for the ILO to have a highly visible programme, linked to other relevant areas of its work, to address the needs of those in the informal economy, to collect and disseminate information and to deepen understanding. In short, the conclusions were an invitation to engage in greater knowledge sharing on the informal economy and its relationship to decent work.

Thus, plans were made to have the Knowledge Fair become a ‘side event’ at the June 2005 session of the annual International Labour Conference. The Conference is a formal, multi-forum event which is held outside ILO headquarters, spread over a number of rooms in the Palais des Nations at the United Nations European Headquarters.

The officers of the Governing Body normally provide final clearance for side events less than two months before the opening of the Conference. This final validation step introduced a substantial element of risk. When the officers reviewed the proposed programme for the June Fair in mid-April, some nervousness was expressed about planned panel discussions that were intended to provide a framework for free-flowing debate. The inclusion of representatives of the employer and worker groups helped to allay their apprehensions. In the end, the panels involved lively, productive discussions that attracted audiences of respectable size. This was particularly gratifying because during the Conference there are many competing demands on delegates’ time.

In organizing something completely new, the Secretariat was not sure of the reactions of all the tripartite partners in regard to various activities, and therefore self-censored some of the bolder ideas in order to avoid serious objections from ILO constituents. The choice of a tripartite forum for the Fair had both opened up channels of communication and presented some constraints. In relation to strengthening the interaction between academia and ILO constituents on informal economy issues in the context of poverty reduction, for instance, we consider the Fair as having launched what could be greater and more in-depth interaction in the future. The Fair in itself probably fell short of generating new knowledge. It did, however, go a long way to sharing existing knowledge.

## **The culture of the organization**

Making the Fair happen within the institution proved easier said than done. While the ILO is aware of the importance of knowledge sharing, the organizational culture is not yet fully conducive to it. Overall, incentives or disincentives in relation to resource allocation or performance appraisal for knowledge sharing are still lacking. Competition between units for funding can lead to ignoring others’ achievements and reinforcing a ‘silo culture’ in various parts of the organization. Familiarity with knowledge sharing techniques is uneven, and different professional backgrounds of officials from over 110 different nations can make communication difficult. In addition, officials who feel over-stretched in their jobs will not tend to make the effort to share information and lessons learned if they do not see an immediate benefit.

However, financial support received from the Government of the UK for work to encourage greater ILO involvement in poverty reduction provided a basis for creating the needed incentive in this case. Initial reactions to the idea of the Fair from the Officers of the Governing Body and staff worldwide was quite positive. Work proceeded with an internal consultative group and a small number of core staff to organize the event.

We designed the knowledge sharing in a way that offered staff the chance to showcase their own work on the informal economy. The first opportunity was through inclusion of their work in the Informal Economy Resource Database. The second was as part of an integrated presentation in the travelling exhibition developed for the Knowledge Fair. Examples of work with ILO constituents were given special encouragement. At the time, we did not realize what a powerful incentive the Fair exhibit would be. The response to the call for submissions of good practice for inclusion in the Fair was three times greater than expected. We added the newspaper to be able to capture late submissions and work in progress that did not yet have results to report. This also provided us with another means of communication for the Fair itself.

## **The culture of multiple languages**

The literature on knowledge sharing was originally dominated by English but has been gradually spreading to other languages. The International Labour Conference uses English, French and Spanish for all documents. Interpretation involves those three languages plus Arabic, Chinese, German and Russian. In practice, the day-to-day technical work of the ILO Secretariat in Geneva is primarily in English, followed by French and then Spanish. Conversations in the corridors at headquarters and offices in the field reflect many additional languages.

To get knowledge sharing out of its English-speaking ghetto, we considered it an absolute necessity to have all of ILO's three working languages included in the Fair. Yet multilingualism imposes major constraints for a knowledge fair of this type. First of all, the cost implications of translation and interpretation are huge. Secondly, reliance on live interpretation dictates the physical space in which events can take place. The rooms used for panel discussions are formal, with speakers on a dias at the front, opposite the audience, and fixed interpretation equipment. Communication through interpretation itself makes interaction slow and lacking in spontaneity. The open gallery that housed the Fair exhibit was used for some activities with portable microphones, however only one language could be used at a time. Thirdly, staff serving as on-site exhibit guides were not necessarily fluent in all the languages in use at the Conference. To mitigate this limitation, extensive documentation for the exhibit was available to visitors in English, French and Spanish, and staff rotated.

The exhibit itself was prepared with text in the language that had been submitted by the sponsoring project; in most cases this was English, with a few in Spanish and only one in French. While this had the advantage of authenticity, it probably detracted somewhat from the coherence of the otherwise striking display. The option of having text in all three languages had been rejected because it would have meant reducing the font to an unreadable size and losing all graphic impact.

However, the dominance of English reinforced the message that this is the leading language for ILO business, with marginalization of the others. Several audience feedback

comments called for a similar exhibit to be mounted in Spanish. So while the exhibit was inclusive by bringing together a wide range of initiatives, the ‘linguistic subtext’ worked in the other direction, since speakers of French, Spanish and other languages could have felt marginalized by a display that was primarily in English.

## **Expectations, formality and cultural sensitivities**

The ILO staff and constituents attending the event had had little or no experience with a knowledge fair. We heard later from some that using the term ‘fair’ had created expectations of an event featuring entertainers, food and product stalls, and balloons – in short, a festival atmosphere. In fact we had harboured some ideas like offering free refreshments, advertising events through skits, pantomime and jugglers, having artisans at work next to the exhibit, and the like. But the formal nature of the main event to which the fair was attached, the International Labour Conference, made us decide that these gestures would not have been well received. While a person wearing a ‘sandwich board’ and a colourful wig would have attracted participants’ attention, we felt that this might be seen as trivializing the issues addressed by the Fair.

We also explored offering coffee and cookies, but encountered opposition from the catering service that ran the paying coffee bar at the Conference venue. The cost barrier had also eliminated the idea of flying in musicians and artisans from the informal economy who are linked to ILO field projects. However, these ideas were captured for sharing since they could be used on a local basis in other events of this nature.

Part of the exhibit featured a ‘before’ and ‘after’ display of urban waste (presented in a wheelbarrow) that had been transformed into useful and colourful items such as bags, hats and papier-mâché animal figurines. This display was linked to an exhibit panel that explained the project in which the transformation work is carried out. This ‘live’ exhibit provoked widely divergent reactions. Some saw it as testimony to human creativity and ingenuity. A 12 year old visitor to the Fair said that she finally understood what the ILO in fact does. Others, however, felt that it was demeaning to have a wheelbarrow full of crumpled newspapers, plastic bags and beverage cans included in an exhibit sponsored by an international organization. Interestingly, objection to dealing with waste had also been seen by the field-based project itself: the Tanzanian women who had taken up the actual trash collection work were uneasy about it until they saw it as a source of better incomes and improved lives for their families.

In preparing the large display that featured photographs as well as some text, care was taken to avoid images that delegates from more conservative cultural backgrounds could have found offensive. An initial proposal to use a photograph snapped in a clinic that showed a bare-breasted woman, for instance, was quickly discarded. On the other hand, the delegates took in stride a graphic demonstration of the toolkit used to sensitize operators and workers in the informal economy about condom use to prevent HIV/AIDS in the world of work.

## Reflections on the experience

Our experience was different from other knowledge fairs that we had either visited or researched in preparation for our own fair. There were several main differences.

- Each institution has its own culture which was reflected in what it organized.
- Our fair was multilingual; others were conducted only in English.
- In the other knowledge fairs we looked at, those who participated were responsible for their own exhibit space or presentation. In our case, we put out a call for submissions of good practice and we produced all aspects of the Fair – the exhibition, presentations and all events. Of course this added complexity and made it much more resource-intensive at our end. However, we were able to decide what was presented and how it was presented, assuring that it fit in with the cultural sensitivities and concerns of the tripartite constituents (representatives of workers, employers, governments). It also permitted grouping exhibits around coherent themes that reflected the content of the 2002 Conference conclusions on decent work and the informal economy, and highlighting the gender dimension.
- An important difference involved the resources available. The fairs we had visited or reviewed could draw on much greater resources than our modest budget permitted. The need to find a cost-effective option forced us to make the most of what we had. We thus chose an exhibit design that would be as portable and easy to assemble as possible. From the beginning, we viewed the Fair as a short-term investment from which some returns would be expected (in our case, reaching a larger audience), and not as a mere expenditure for a one-shot activity. Its recent mobility has vindicated that decision.

Any organization opting for this kind of event will need to address the same cultural issues: language, cultural sensitivities and – most importantly - the values and objectives that the organization wishes to transmit through this medium. It is worth reflecting on these early in the process, as they can have important consequences for the organization of the event.

The organizational culture in a development organization like the ILO logically differs from a typical corporate context. While the outcomes in the latter could be easily translated into benefits or losses, the outcomes in a development agency tend to be more long-term and difficult to quantify with precision. At the corporate level, managers tend to make frequent use of knowledge sharing techniques because they are perfectly aware of their potential for ensuring success. Their capacity for knowledge sharing is a quality sought after in their recruitment.

In the case of a development agency like the ILO, awareness of the power of knowledge sharing is growing, but its practice is yet to become a reflex embedded in day-to-day

practice. Several externally funded knowledge sharing projects are working together within the institution to spread the techniques and appreciation of how knowledge sharing can support more effective technical work. The Knowledge Fair provided further sensitization of ILO staff and constituents to what knowledge sharing has to offer. The idea is being picked up by other departments within the organization. Since June 2005, a knowledge fair was organized in Vietnam, and another headquarters' department is planning to present one at next year's International Labour Conference, patterned after the Informal Economy Knowledge Fair. The more experience the organization gains with knowledge sharing, the more likely that it will eventually be reflected more deeply in its human resources policy and budgeting process.

It is thus encouraging that the Programme and Budget of the institution for 2006-2007 includes this statement:

*The ILO will also undertake strategies to support knowledge management and knowledge sharing. The experience and knowledge held by the ILO are organizational assets which should be safeguarded and used to inform future activities and service constituents. .... [Knowledge sharing] will also promote closer partnerships within the ILO and, through knowledge networks, outside of the ILO. (ILO 2005a, p. 99).*

The experience gained with the Knowledge Fair on Decent Work and the Informal Economy could contribute to this crucial process of organizational change not just for the ILO, but for other intergovernmental organizations as well.

#### **Box 2: Main conclusions**

Activities were influenced by the *culture of the organization's constituents* as well as their *cultural sensitivities*; this resulted in advantages and constraints;  
The *formality of the venue* had an impact on the activities that were included;  
Using the fair as a knowledge sharing technique overcame the organizational 'silo culture';  
The *multilingual nature* of the fair presented extra complexities, challenges and additional cost;  
The use of the word 'fair' to describe the event created *expectations* about the nature of the event;  
Different cultures *perceived* parts of the exhibit differently; and  
The *values* of the organization and the *messages* it wished to transmit had an impact on how the event was organized.

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### **Abstract**

This article provides a case study on organizing a knowledge fair in an intercultural environment and the challenges that this presented. The ILO organized a Knowledge Fair on Decent Work and the Informal Economy from 8-15 June 2005 in Geneva, as part of a project on knowledge sharing around the informal economy and poverty reduction. In addition to the multifaceted nature of the topic chosen for the fair, additional challenges included the political nature of the organization's constituents, the cultural sensitivities of constituents and staff, the organizational culture and the limited knowledge-sharing environment, the multilingual requirement, and values, expectations and perceptions. The article contains recommendations for anyone wishing to organize a similar type of knowledge-sharing event.

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<sup>1</sup> A virtual version of the knowledge fair can be seen at:  
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/knowledgefair/index.htm>

<sup>2</sup> For a description of this model, see:

[http://www.ilo.org/dyn/infoecon/iebrowse.page?p\\_lang=en&p\\_ieresource\\_id=796](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/infoecon/iebrowse.page?p_lang=en&p_ieresource_id=796)

<sup>3</sup> The database can be accessed at: <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/infoecon/iebrowse.home>