Knowledge Sharing

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Distance Learning: Connecting Development Practitioners

Information communications technologies (ICTs) have helped to reduce geographical boundaries and connect people across different countries, cities and villages. The internet and mobile phone revolution have enabled millions of people to engage in a global dialogue. Cyber cafes are thriving businesses in the bustling cities of Calcutta, Dakar and Rio and the remoter parts of rural towns and villages such as Tanga, Mopti and Sally. The Global Development Learning Network (GDLN) is a World Bank-supported initiative that uses technology to promote development through learning. The goal of the GDLN is to connect development practitioners across the globe and enable them to interact with each other through a virtual platform provided through video-conferencing. There are several GDLN centers in operation in major capitals in Africa, Asia and Latin America that offer regular courses on development topics to a diverse range of stakeholders. In addition to training, the GDLN offers a cost-effective platform for development practitioners to share experiences, network and learn from each other to improve their impact on the ground.

The World Bank’s Indigenous Knowledge (IK) Program partnered with the GDLN to organize a pilot five day cross-regional distance learning course on Using Indigenous Knowledge for the Millennium Development Goals in March 2005. Over 100 participants attended the course through local GDLN centers in Uganda, Tanzania, Sri Lanka and India. These included policy-makers from health, agriculture and environment ministries, researchers and academia, engineers, NGOs, civil society and IK practitioners including farmers and healers. The primary objective of the multi-media course was to demonstrate to participants how to address development challenges through the application of Indigenous Knowledge. The course was designed to help clients incorporate IK into their programs/policies and promote South-South dialogue/cooperation among IK practitioners.

Content

A ten-part lecture series conducted by experts based in different parts of the world demonstrated the role and potential of IK in helping achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The course focused on instances where IK was applied to help increase food security and agricultural productivity,
reduce maternal mortality, treat the opportunistic diseases associated with HIV/AIDS and help conserve biodiversity. The lectures centered around providing development practitioners a ‘hands on’ guide on the use of IK in the development process. This was achieved through lectures by (i) IK experts and practitioners who shared their lessons of experience; and (ii) experts from the scientific community (US National Institute of Health) and UN agencies (WIPO) who addressed critical challenges related to the efficacy, validation, protection, documentation and conservation aspects of IK.

**Delivery approach**

The course consisted of presentations by experts including case studies, as well as interactive group and cross-regional discussions. These were facilitated through video-conference sessions by the GDLN centers. The training course was delivered through a series of presentations of IK case studies and subjects related to IK development and application, by selected resource persons with IK knowledge and experience from different countries. Each center had a local facilitator who was an IK expert and served as a resource person to guide the participants through the course, address their concerns, and help them develop individual action plans during offline sessions.

The on-line and off-line interactive group discussions as well as cross-regional discussions helped participants clarify and discuss IK-related issues and share experiences. Additionally, the course material provided through the World Bank Publication, "Indigenous Knowledge: Local Pathways to Global Development" proved useful to the participants. A special website was created for the participants that included the core presentations, project documents, case studies, debriefings and lessons learned during the course. The course materials were complemented by multi-media learning tools including video documentaries of real life IK applications, which facilitated the internalization of IK in development by participants. The outputs from the course have been developed into a DVD which serves as a stand-alone IK Toolkit1.

**Outcomes**

**Cross regional exchanges**

Participants engaged in conversations and discussions with 10 speakers from developed and developing countries. The presentations enabled them to understand the dynamics of IK systems and the processes through which IK can potentially help development practitioners achieve the MDGs. The cross-regional discussions enabled the two regions (Africa and Asia) to share experiences and learn from each other. For example, the Tanga AIDS Working Group, an NGO in Tanzania, revealed how traditional medicine can help treat the opportunistic infections related to HIV/AIDS. India responded by citing the example of a similar NGO that had used Neem based herbal remedies to treat over 3,000 patients of similar diseases.

The course enabled local IK practitioners (traditional birth attendants, healers and farmers) to talk to each other across countries and continents. Also, local healers were able to raise their concerns with international agencies such as WIPO and the US National Institute of Health (NIH) on an equal footing. The video conference sessions were supplemented with local translators to enable Swahili and Sinhalese speakers to learn more about how to address the dual challenges of scientific validation and intellectual property rights protection. In some cases, local IK practitioners challenged the wisdom of contemporary development paradigms. For instance, participants in Uganda and Sri Lanka felt that a project that set out to reduce maternal mortality had focused too heavily on information technology, without paying due attention to local maternal health practices.

The most productive part of the course was the cross-regional exchange among the participants which facilitated South-South cooperation and indigenous technology transfer on a virtual platform. The local facilitators in each country had helped identify like-minded professionals in the same fields. Often, sector-specific presentations sparked off intensive cross-regional discussions that enabled the participants to carefully dissect the subject and adapt the lessons of experience to their own specific context. In the field of agriculture for example, when a participant from India spoke of banana fertilizers he used in the fields, a participant from Uganda responded that he had also used the fertilizer; however, had not worked for him. He asked the Indian participant for details on the time, quantity, and application of this fertilizer to see

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1 Each DVD contains the course description, agenda, course materials, video conference sessions, participant action plans, facilitators reports, course evaluations, local media coverage and participant contact details.
if the scientific methodology used by the Indian participant could yield similar results in Uganda.

**Action plans**

At the end of the course, the participants developed an action plan outlining how they intended to incorporate IK and the relevant course materials: (i) into their own work programs; (ii) at the project level; (iii) at the policy level; (iv) through cross-regional exchanges and dialogue, and (v) through specific activities to promote South-South Cooperation. The most notable achievements to date as a result of the course include the following actions in the four countries:

- Ten national institutions have initiated work on documentation and incorporation of local farming practices into their programs.
- Seven universities have incorporated IK into teaching curriculums.
- Four Ministries of Health and Agriculture have promoted validation and protection of IK to support integration into national development projects and policies.
- Five World Bank projects have allocated resources to finance specific IK activities within projects.
- Sixty-five participants adapted lessons of experience from other countries into their own work programs.

**Lessons learned**

There are several lessons to be learnt from the pilot experience that can be used to improve the delivery of future courses.

- Follow-up courses could be directed towards IK in specific sectors and activities to allow for wider participation and deeper understanding of the sector or activity.
- In order for IK to penetrate in many areas through many players, some of the training modules could be presented in training programs not designed for IK per se. For example, the module on IK and health could be incorporated into a general training course on HIV/AIDS. The IK and agriculture modules could be incorporated into agricultural training courses. This could sensitize project teams and policy makers not currently dealing with IK, towards considering the incorporation of IK components into their thinking and implementation.
- The time for the course was limited. Future courses should be expanded to two weeks to cover all the required topics with shorter courses for specific topics.
- The entire course material should be made available in hard copy to each participant as not everyone has regular access to the internet.
- Presentations should include more photos, pictures as it helps to visualize the situation better. Some presentations were not visible during the VC sessions – there is need to develop a VC-friendly format for screening power-point presentations.
- The use of videos is an effective way to introduce a subject such as IK that focuses on intangible assets that are often difficult to visualize. Documentaries should be used to start off-line sessions.
- It is critical to recruit dynamic local facilitators who are experts on the course subject and familiar with local stakeholders who could be potential course participants.
- It may be necessary to provide local facilitators with advance training on how to recruit participants and deliver the course through off-line and video-conference sessions.
- It is also critical to provide the facilitators with autonomy to enable them to adapt their own teaching approaches to meet the specific and different needs of participants in each country.
- In geographically large countries like India, it may be necessary to have two different locations for the distance learning centers, which would enable participants to simultaneously attend from all over the country.

**Conclusion**

Distance learning provides a cost effective medium of instruction. The costs of running such courses amounts to about $30,000, with the potential of reaching a target group of 150-200 participants spread across four to five countries. Distance learning also provides a practical platform for a global development dialogue, enabling experts to make presentations from across the globe and stakeholders to share experiences and learn from local and cross regional exchanges.

The potential for using distance learning as a tool to help clients achieve the MDGs can be gauged through the impact of the pilot course on IK. Participants rated this novel form of doing business on a virtual platform as being extremely useful and have requested the organization of such courses
on a regular basis. The technology enabled participants to share experiences, but also imparted technical knowledge and challenged conventional development paradigms. Recognition of one’s efforts by peers through serious discussion also added to the popularity of the initiative.

**Participant feedback**

The 87 participants have urged their institutions to allocate budgetary resources to fund their participation in similar activities in the future. Some have managed to go even further. The Distance Learning Centre in Tanzania, for example, has incorporated indigenous knowledge into its core activities and schedule of courses. Similarly, in Sri Lanka a University Vice-Chancellor has agreed to establish a small video-conference center to promote distance learning courses on IK. Plans are also under way to organize a follow-up IK course to assist post-Tsunami rehabilitation efforts in Asia.

**National Institutes of Health, USA, Research Scientist - Dr. Gordon Cragg**

"I feel that the pilot distance learning course was a very effective way of optimizing interaction between knowledgeable groups and practitioners in the countries involved, and .. I felt that there is a real interest in learning from the experiences in different countries...your website (is) an invaluable link for anybody who has an interest in learning more about the value and applications of IK to health care."

**Karnataka Watershed Development Project, India, Coordinator - Prof. K. Pandurangaiah**

"It was the first time I have attended such a course at the international level. It has been a really good experience and helped the persons involved in extension work with different stakeholders. Indigenous Knowledge is a very appropriate subject for the MDGs."

**TAWG, Tanzania, Coordinator - Dr. Mtullu**

"The course was useful because many people were able to participate and share experience on one topic something which is not easy otherwise and would be very expensive. The course gave us exposure to learn from others experiences and establish new contacts. The course not only exposed our program to other countries but also to in-country participants."

This Findings article was written by Siddhartha Prakash, Consultant, World Bank Africa Region Knowledge and Learning Department. For more information and to obtain a copy of the course DVD, please email: sprakash@worldbank.org or Phone: 202-473 5863.