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Organisation
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Organización
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para la Educación,
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
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联合国教育、
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UNESCO and Knowledge Sharing (1)

UNESCO and Knowledge Sharing

For over 60 years, UNESCO has had a mandate to “maintain, increase and diffuse knowledge” (Constitution, Art 1. 2 (c)). In response to the challenges of globalisation and the Information Society, it advocates a vision of “Knowledge Societies”. But what do we mean by “knowledge” at UNESCO and what links are there between the Organization’s knowledge sharing programmes and its knowledge management (KM)?

Knowledge is defined in a recent report by the UN Joint Inspection Unit on KM (see box on page 2) as follows: “Knowledge is [the universe of] what is known. Knowledge acquisition involves complex cognitive processes: perception, learning, communication, association, and reasoning.”

Stressing that UN organizations often confuse information and knowledge, the report argues for a clear differentiation between data, information and knowledge, the latter being “built on data and information, and created within the individual or the organisational unit”.

A Decade of Developments

While UNESCO has been pursuing its mandate to “maintain, increase and diffuse knowledge” since 1946, knowledge management has only been an established discipline since the mid-1990s. The World Bank launched its “knowledge bank” strategy in 1996, in order to enhance organisational capacity through the provision and sharing of KM tools and practices for development. Its Development Gateway initiative aims to promote knowledge sharing and information related to all aspects of development. Over the same period, knowledge activities have increasingly become based on collaborative practices. The “Ivory Tower” and solitary thinker of yesterday is a long way from “Internet 2”, virtual communities of practice, networks and other forms of collaborative initiative.

Towards Knowledge Societies

UNESCO’s concept of knowledge societies (see *UNESCO World Report: Towards Knowledge Societies* [Paris: UNESCO; 2005]), has a development-oriented and pluralistic perspective that

captures the complexity and dynamics of globalization processes. Recognizing that new technologies offer remarkable possibilities for advancing development, its focuses on freedom of expression, universal access to information, education for all and cultural diversity.

A Set of Case Studies

How is the new thinking about knowledge and knowledge sharing over the past decade affecting UNESCO and its programmes? The UN Joint Inspection Unit recommendation for a **common** definition of Knowledge Management throughout the UN system and for **common** guidelines for all the Agencies’ KM strategies makes good sense. But what unique or specific characteristics does knowledge have at UNESCO? The question is particularly significant in the context of UN reform. Also,

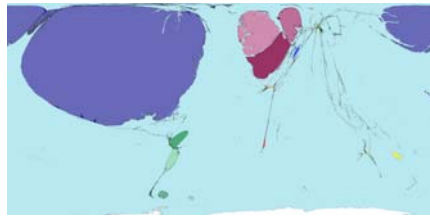
how can UNESCO’s experience in pursuing its “knowledge” mandate inform its knowledge management practices?

To begin to answer such questions, the “60 minutes” sessions in

February 2008 will ask concretely, at the level of specific programmes, what is meant by “knowledge”, who the knowledge is shared with, both internally and externally, what the knowledge requirements of these users are and how the knowledge is shared with them, using what tools.

Making the link with Knowledge Management, these sessions will also seek to establish which KM problems are encountered and what KM practices are used by programme managers, such as updating knowledge and eliminating outdated or irrelevant knowledge.

The case studies examined in the sessions include programmes managed at Headquarters and examples from the Institutes.



Royalty inflows - source Worldmapper

Extracts from the Joint Inspection Unit Report, “Knowledge Management in the United Nations System”

- *There is little understanding of what “knowledge” is in the context of the United Nations system. Knowledge Management (KM) is perceived differently by different organizations....*
- *The effective utilization of a primary United Nations system asset — its knowledge — is critical to meeting the objectives of the different system organizations.*
- *Knowledge management can be defined as the systematic processes, or range of practices, used by organizations to identify, capture, store, create, update, represent, and distribute knowledge for use, awareness and learning across the organization.*
- *Changing people’s behaviour, or the development of an appropriate organizational culture which facilitates and encourages the sharing of knowledge, is considered by the UN organizations surveyed in this review to be one of the...most important factors supporting the implementation of KM.*

Read the Report: http://www.unjiu.org/data/reports/2007/en2007_06.pdf

A “Knowledge” Framework

UNESCO offers a range of services to its Member States, from “upstream” normative activities to “downstream” projects, based on expertise in its areas of competence: education, the sciences, culture, communication and information

In its Medium-Term Strategy, UNESCO identifies five established **functions**:

- i) laboratory of ideas, including foresight;
- ii) standard-setter;
- iii) clearing house;
- iv) capacity-builder in Member States in UNESCO’s fields of competence;
- v) catalyst for international cooperation.

While all five functions clearly involve knowledge, three of the five in particular emerge as being essentially knowledge-driven and knowledge-focused: the laboratory of ideas, clearinghouse and capacity-building functions. The next three sessions of “60 minutes” meetings and the related fact sheets, will be taking these three functions as frameworks within which knowledge issues will be explored.

What about the Technology?

The case studies have been chosen to cover a wide range of activities, some of which are entirely dependent on new information and communication technologies (ICTs) and others which began well before the arrival of ICTs and which have been merely facilitated rather than transformed by their advent.

It is one of the paradoxes of KM that, even as its emergence and rapid development have been spurred by the widespread use of ICTs, it is repeatedly stressed that the technology is only a

minor part of Knowledge Management. Knowledge Management is, rather, an organizational process that seeks synergistic combination of data and information processing capacity, and the creative and innovative capacity of human beings. New technology can never be fully efficient without changing, re-thinking and re-engineering the processes: the way people work, their habits and working culture.

At UNESCO, the new Enterprise Portal Platform (EPP) – coming soon – will offer new collaboration tools that will support decision-making, the sharing of best practice and knowledge transfer. They include:-

- Real-time tools for ad hoc communications
- Team-oriented tools that add permanence and structure to ad hoc communications
- Coordination functionality that varies from agenda management, issue tracking and dynamic discussion groups to more complex project support

The introduction of these new tools will, according to Knowledge Management theory, change the way UNESCO’s “knowledge workers” work.

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Links:

“60 Minutes” meetings
<http://intranet.unesco.org/60minutes>
Infosheet/Unesdoc :
www.unesco.org/en/60minutes