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Educational, Scientific and
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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

Организация
Объединенных Наций по
вопросам образования,
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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

UNESCO and Knowledge Sharing (3): The Clearing House Function

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UNESCO and Knowledge Sharing (3): The Clearing House Function

The second in this four-part series examines two case studies – one of the longest-standing and one of the newest knowledge sharing initiatives of the Organization – to explore key concepts and issues connected with UNESCO's role as a clearing house

Case Study: The General and Regional Histories

The first of the UNESCO History projects dates back to 1952. These are some of UNESCO's knowledge sharing activities with the longest continuity – 56 years for the History of Humanity and 35 years for the General History of Africa. This extensive experience offers unique insights into the achievements and the challenges of undertakings of such complexity and scope, and into UNESCO's approach to its knowledge role over the decades.

What Knowledge? History is a knowledge that offers the epistemological advantage of increasing our understanding of the evolution of other kinds of knowledge. The History collections are based on interdisciplinary, collaborative production of historical works, reflecting multiple viewpoints, confronting differing perspectives, elaborated over lengthy periods. This approach to knowledge production corresponds closely to the approach to the knowledge needs (see below), in that both exemplified the effort of fostering better understanding. This inclusive approach, the search for consensus and the resulting protracted duration of the knowledge production led to problems of obsolescence, as new research invalidated or threw fresh light onto the knowledge so painstakingly gathered. Updating the works did not mean speeding up the process: the first edition of the History of Humanity took 16 years, but the revised second edition took 40 years.

What Knowledge Needs Does It Meet? The needs are those set out in UNESCO's Constitution: the Histories aimed to provide a basis for greater mutual understanding between peoples, to identify the roots of misunderstandings and conflicts, and so to "construct the defences of peace". They sought to "disarm history" by highlighting our common heritage and different cultures' contributions to human progress. They also sought to "decolonise history" by bringing forward the perspectives of experts from the formerly colonised regions and challenging the dominant versions of events given by external experts. While such goals reflected specific preoccupations of the times, they have also proved to have enduring relevance, not least with the renewed concern to foster cultural dialogue.

Who Are The Users? The complete versions of the Histories, each between five and nine volumes of up to 1,000 pages, were aimed at teachers, students, historians and researchers. From the start, it was also foreseen to adapt the material in order to make the knowledge accessible to the general public and to school children.

How is the Knowledge Shared? The Histories are a well-appreciated source of information in the academic context (teaching, study and research). But although from the outset, abridged and illustrated versions were planned for the general public, it has proved much harder to make a publishing success of these versions and to reach readers in developing countries with affordable publications. Similarly, difficulties arose in implementing plans to re-use the material in curriculum development, within the framework of school text book reforms. While the original knowledge production can be considered as an achievement, the rest of the knowledge cycle – dissemination, updating, popularisation and transformation into educational materials - still presents a challenge to UNESCO today. New information and communication technologies offer unprecedented opportunities to develop fresh strategies to maximise the potential of this monumental intellectual heritage and share the knowledge as fully and effectively as it deserves to be shared. The new concern to foster cultural dialogue gives a new impetus for sharing this knowledge.

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Case Study: MOST Policy Research Tool

The MOST Programme (Management of Social Transformations) transfers relevant social science research findings and data to decision-makers and other stakeholders. The new Policy Research Tool is piloting the provision of online access to policy-relevant comparative information, enabling users to obtain customized replies to trans-disciplinary questions by drawing on select content from original documents.

What Knowledge? The content covers a wide range of areas related to social transformations, with material originating from various UNESCO Sectors and units (SHS, HED, MAB, etc.) and partner UN agencies (WHO, UNU, etc.) The tool distils "evidence" information from the material, on contexts and issues, policies and programmes, research results, recommendations, and operational aspects of policy implementation; this is complemented by abstracts and bibliographies and also documented with indicators and news.

Who Are The Users? The service is primarily targeted towards policy-makers (decision-making actors and technical teams in national and local governments) and IGO actors. It is also relevant to civil society, NGO, advocacy actors and researchers, and may be of interest to students and to society at large.

What Knowledge Needs Does It Meet? For policy research, there is a lack of accessible international, interdisciplinary, comparative knowledge with transferable implementation models. The tool uses a "translation" mechanism to transform "research reports" into "policy briefs". The gaps and redundancies in knowledge availability in this area are identified, thus providing paths for adaptability over time.

How is the Knowledge Shared? Knowledge sharing is through online, free and multilingual access. Users can search and retrieve material according to dedicated thematic policy-analysis frames. They can recombine material through extraction and compilation. A high level of comparisons between countries and experiences is provided.

Knowledge Sharing within UNESCO: MAB (Man and the Biosphere Programme) is currently reinforcing the use of biosphere reserves and their networks as learning sites for sustainable development. MAB is in the process of selecting five sites in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves to test the comparative policy analysis framework developed by MOST. The aim is to spearhead the integration of environmental and development issues into policy making. Data from three selected biosphere reserves will be analysed to study their governance arrangements for implementing sustainable development. This will shed light on different governance approaches, including the emergence of 'bridging' institutions in implementing sustainable development.

Issues:

Impact assessment: MOST is waiting for the next web usage statistics to be published next March 2008 for assessing the impact at launching; the outreach on the other hand is to be assessed through the number and the type of actors buying in the tool.

Question: How to foster spontaneous feedback from users?

Multilingualism: The tool interface is currently in English, French and Spanish and will be expanded to Arabic, Chinese and Russian; the content however is currently in both English and French but is not translated, as MOST does not have funds for content translation.

Question: What outsourcing modalities for content translation?

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Links : <http://www.unesco.org/shs/most/tool/>