# NGO Knowledge Management Challenges and Investment Priorities: a Sectoral Case Study

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## INTRODUCTION

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are an important and growing 'third' sector. They possess certain distinguishing characteristics which must be considered when seeking to apply management research. While the idea of knowledge management has currency, there is a need to operationalised and embed key concepts in these organisations. A particular issue for NGOs is securing donor funding, typically requiring a good track-record of service delivery. These factors have made it difficult for NGOs to identify how well they are progressing with knowledge management initiatives as well as providing some support for each other on common problems. This research reports on a workshop facilitated by the authors that brought 25 representatives from 8 NGOs together to discuss knowledge management in their organisations, focusing on themes around key challenges and areas for investment identified.

## BACKGROUND

Non-Governmental Organisation is a term used to define a wide range of organisations (Steinberg, 2011). NGOs, as defined by Dennehy et al., (2013:221) are, "*a sub-sector of the civil society which consists of other non-NGO formations including social movements, welfare organisations, secular organisations and faith-based organisations*''. They have also been defined as "peopled organisations [that] are both not part of state structures, are not primarily motivated by commercial considerations or profit maximisation, are largely self-governing and rely on voluntary contributions to a significant degree" (Hulme (2001:130). The non-profit or, as it is also termed, the "third" sector, can be used for everything not fitting into the other categories of state and market.

As such NGOs are different from the private and government sectors possessing different objectives and motivations (Stankiewicz & Seiler 2013). Key characteristics of this sector are that participation being voluntary in nature, with motivations being value-based and/or an independence from more institutionalized power structures present in the other sectors (Corry, 2010). They have, over recent decades, significantly increased in number (Abouassi et al. 2016), the sector continuing to grow (Harrison, 2007). Thus, they are becoming increasingly globally importantly (Schwartz and Gibb 1999; Teegen et al.2004). While increasingly important, that NGOs are based on different objectives with value-based motivations mean that they may seek to implement knowledge management differently. While most knowledge management research tends to focus on the private sector where there is a profit motive this is not the case for NGOs. Though there is little research on NGO knowledge management practices it is

important to identify how staff are motivated and whether this affects their perceptions of what the aspects of knowledge management to prioritise.

To deliver on development projects involves not only in tangible objectives such as reduction of poverty and increased standards of living but also results in intangible outputs such as capacity building and the empowerment of members of communities through training and education (Aga et al. 2016; Golini et al. 2015; Khang & Meo, 2008).  To enable this delivery NGOS need to be skilled at obtaining both financial and human (volunteers and members) resources (Stankiewicz & Seiler 2013).  They are an intermediary between donors and beneficiaries (Stankiewicz & Seiler 2013).  They face a managerial duality with a concentration in inputs i.e. getting funding from donors and outputs i.e. delivering services and other supports to communities (Stankiewicz & Seiler 2013). NGOs may 'vacillate' between being accountable on multiple fronts to multiple stakeholders such as their clients and the communities that they serve, their donors and their own vision (Naval 1996; Raval et al. 2012).  For service businesses clients' outline what is required and pay for the service provided.  In the case of NGOs funds come from multiple donors, each with varying requirements, and subsequent reporting requirements, though the service is delivered by the NGO to another beneficiary entity to which they are also accountable.    The knowledge of what took place during the service delivery phase must thus be delivered in different ways to different stakeholders.

Developing income streams is important for organizational sustainability (Stankiewicz & Seiler 2013).  NGOs are dependent on international donors to fund their activities (Antaov et al 2010) drawing on a variety of source (Froelich 1999) such as governments, philanthropists and self-generated by the NGO (Stankiewicz & Seiler 2013).   An ongoing concern for NGOs is the sustainability of funding (Antaov et al. 2010).  Financial resources are seen as the most fundamental resource as they facilitate other resources such as staff and equipment (Antalov et al. 2010).  Funding from political sources may vary as governments change (Froelich 1999).  This is important as the source of income affects the organisations level of independence (Stankiewicz & Seiler 2013).  NGOs may interpret their activities and actions as they consider both the constraints and expectations imposed on them by donor (Raval et al. 2012).  NGOs may need to modify their plans and actions to avoid losing donor funding (Raval et al. 2012). Donors may impose their preferred standards of action on NGOs to which they donate money (Froelich 1999; Stankiewicz & Seiler 2013).  Seeking funding from donors may involve what Froelich (1999) terms 'digressive efforts and peripheral activities' which move NGOs away from the core activities around their mission.  A risk for NGO's is 'strategic drift' whereby over time there is a loss of alignment between the strategic plans of the NGO and their activities on the ground. (Ansoff, 2007; Harris et al. 2009). The adoption of new agendas and approaches by NGOs in order to survive has also been necessitated by both environments, which change rapidly, and technological advancement (Mitlin, Hickey & Bebbington, 2006). In seeking donor funding it is difficult for the NGO, and the sector, to publicly outline any problems and failures that took place. This makes it difficult for members of an NGO to benchmark their programmes and identify how

well they are managing knowledge.  It is also possible that NGOs may lose focus on their core knowledge as they move to peripheral activities to attract donor funding.


NGOs are perceived as being 'untainted' by partisan politics (Steinberg, 2011).  However, donors are not as willing to provide funding on a 'no strings attached' basis and are requiring increased accountability over how funds are spent and the performance achieved in delivering on programmes (Antalov et al 2010).  How NGOs allocate resources has become increasingly transparent (Wallace et al. 1997).  This transparency has been a result of the effect of 'official' donors (Boli 2006; Tvedt 2006).  It is also important that they are able to demonstrate the value that they provide (Smillie, 1999; Lindenberg and Bryant, 2001; Lewis, 2007).  As with other non-profit organisation, demonstrating effective results and collaboration and competition with for-profit actors has resulted in a more functionalist approach to management than was previously the case (Ryan, 2002).  As indicated earlier, the work carried out by NGOs is not merely an economic and techno-scientific concern but a "moral-ethical concern", especially where the such work signifies the idea(l)s of social action and social good (Cicmil and O'Laocha, 2016:547).  Therefore, moves for  "managerialist, technocratic and instrumental" approaches (Ika and Hodgson, 2014) raises problems regarding how issues like success and failure, accountability, risk sharing and agency are understood (Cicmil and O'Laocha, 2014).  A key question is then is how real rather than reported value and success are understood (Lannon et al. 2016).   As a consequence of increasingly transparent reporting to donors, from which the NGO will hope to secure future funding such reports tend to concentrate on the positive aspects of a project or programme and not include challenges and failures, even then these provided valuable learning opportunities for the NGO.

It is typical for NGO's to hire what Raval et al (2012) call 'para-professional' staff and volunteers to work on their programmes to use resources efficiently and also as a way of overcoming skills deficits.  Some international NGOs provide some employees with 'global mobility', albeit with fewer supports than for-profit companies (Claus et al. 2015).  International workers or 'assignees' for NGOs may provide access and draw upon their wider support network while working in a particular country (Claus et al. 2015). Employee attrition rates were found to be higher in volunteer programmes (Bhattacharyya et al, 2001).  Employees are accountable both to the NGO and to the local communities in which they work (Marie-Renée et al. 2014).  NGO employees were found to be motivated by non-monetary factors such as being able to link their work to a higher purpose, having learning opportunities, getting formal recognition and from being embedded in a particular community as these increased the employees sense of value and self-worth (Bhattacharyya et al. 2001).  This need to be motivated by the values and goals of the NGO are also important as staff have little likelihood of accumulating personal wealth and face a lack of security of tenure when working for some NGOs (Benz, 2005).  The use of volunteer staff and the high rates of staff turnover in NGOs mean that there is continual loss of tacit knowledge gained during projects.  It also emphasises the need for training and socialisation of new staff regarding both technical knowledge and knowledge relating to the cultural values of the organisation.  It may also mean that less emphasis is placed on providing time for staff to reflect and learn.

Much work has taken place in the  transfer of organisational and managerial concepts from the for-profit  to the non-profit realm (Beck et al., 2008; Tucker and Parker, 2013), providing evidence that NGOs  are changing to become more "business-like" (Maier et al., 2016) and to improve NGO performance (Carlos Pinho et al., 2014).   However it is important to consider the context into which for-profit concepts are adapted given the interests and primary aims of NGOs (Myers and Sacks, 2003) as there is a danger of importing for-profit 'quick-fix' management techniques that may not be appropriate (Lewis, 2007).

It has recently been argued by a report on knowledge sharing and development in the Digital Age by the Institute of Development Studies that knowledge is going to be the new inequality: the question that then arises is where knowledge fits within the Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs), which needs to be addressed by the development sector (Gregson et al. 2015).  In the general knowledge management literature (Debowski, 2006:113) argues that "*One of the biggest challenges facing a knowledge-intensive workplace is to gain employee commitment to knowledge sharing or knowledge use''.* This issue is also present in in the NGO literature as, when considering organizational learning in NGOs, the unmet need most identified by Britton (2005) was the creation of spaces for learning.  On a related point, as has been argued by Matturi (2016:109) "*The majority of knowledge in NGOs is experiential knowledge, belonging to individual employees. Harnessing experiential knowledge for organisational learning purposes is instrumental to the survival of NGOs. Numerous organisational factors such as organisational structure, size, capability maturity, and workforce can either enhance or impede organisational learning*''.  Not only does this emphasise the importance of tacit knowledge but such issues also raise questions about whose knowledge is valued in NGOs and if certain types of knowledge are privileged over the tacit local knowledge held at the operational level held at country or project level.

As "results and evidence are becoming unassailable orthodoxies" (Hayman et al., 2016:2) in all sectors information and knowledge flows tend to be predominantly upwards to headquarters.  This conflicts with how some NGOs operate.  Some use a partnership approach, working with local NGOs, combining local and global knowledge to effect change: this allows them to combine their strengths and capabilities (Brehm, 2001).  The rationale for this being to answer to the donor-driven paradigm where development and aid was linked to stringent conditions and unidirectional decision-making (Contu and Girei, 2014). Unidirectional decision making is a consequence of NGOs reliance on institutional donors and governments to provide evidence of how their activities have had an impact in communities as well as providing positive results (Hayman et al. 2016).   This pushes them to prioritise upwards information flows over organizational learning.  It also emphasizes policy-related learning over field-based learning (Hovland, 2003) and this can lead NGOs to making difficult investment choices.  Particularly when field-based information and policy-related information do not necessarily suggest the same strategic conclusions (Suzuki, 1998).  At the more operational level interventions require the presence and application of context-relevant knowledge, (Powell, 2006; Ferguson et al., 2010; Ferguson, 2016) as well as supplementing this with knowledge from related contexts, (Van Der

Velden, 2002). There is a need to have available knowledge from multiple sources and at multiple levels. NGOs need to "strengthen the diversity of knowledge by preserving its many 'faces and voices' instead of invalidating knowledge by stripping it of its gender, class, and ethnicity in order to create information for all" (Van Der Velden, 2002:33). While horizontal and upward knowledge sharing my be of value to an NGO the focus on upward knowledge sharing, often as reporting, to headquarters and ultimately to donors may mitigate against other forms of sharing.

Overall knowledge management in NGOs has the potential to be different from the 'for-profit' sector for a number of reasons. While providing a service to a beneficiary, the entity receiving the service is not that entity that pays for the service resulting in multiple accountabilities. Knowledge sharing tends to focus on specific reports and evaluations of programmes and projects. Therefore, it can be harder to invest in knowledge management initiatives which using funds dedicated to one project where the subsequent value will be realised later, potentially on projects funded by other donors. Additionally, knowledge tends to be shared upwards and highlight the positive achievements while not addressing knowledge and learning from failures. While tacit and local knowledge may be of value, other forms of knowledge may be privileged. Use of volunteers and high staff turnover may also make organisational learning difficult.

This paper seeks to examine the following research questions:

(1) At a sectoral level what challenges are faced by Irish Non-Governmental Organisations?

(2) Where do Irish Non-Governmental Organisations plan to invest in order to improve knowledge management?

## METHODOLOGY

This paper reports one one aspect of a wider 2 year study funded by the Irish Research Council to examine knowledge management practices within a particular NGO. The need for sectoral perspective on knowledge management was raised during interviews with NGO staff as well as during informal conversations at the (Irish) development studies conference. Those involved in knowledge management found it hard to benchmark their efforts given the propensity for NGOs to produce positive reports to satisfy donors. In order to gain the views of the NGO sector the three research questions, outlined in the previous section were developed. The authors identified, with help from the NGO with which they were studying, a number of NGOs across the sector, both large and small. A workshop, held in June 2016, was facilitated by the authors. There were a total of 25 participants, representing 8 different NGOs as well as 2 representatives based in other universities who worked with NGOs. The authors as well as external and international experts presented different views and potential frameworks on knowledge management in the NGO sector with question and answer sessions after each presentation to give participants to opportunity to clarify their understanding.

Then, in order to address the research questions, participants were then broken into four groups. One group comprised of senior and top management team members of 4 NGOs, the further 3 groups comprised more middle and operational staff. Where an NGO sent multiple participants, groups were allocated to ensure a spread of members across all groups. Each group was asked to discuss, and give examples, of a number of knowledge management challenges they encountered in their organisation and outline areas in which they planned to invest in the future. As well as getting participants to write their main points on pre-prepared forms each group also had its own rapporteur to record discussions and provide more detailed notes on the points made by group members to provide additional context and detail. The authors used these records to conduct a thematic analysis. This analysis subsequently presented to the NGO executive leadership team and at a sector feedback session where the findings were discussed and validated by those working in the sector.

**FINDINGS**

An analysis of the workshop data identified a number of key sectoral challenges.

1. **Engaging with local perspectives**

At the operational/ field level, people were more willing to share what they had learnt if they believed that this knowledge would have an influence. There was a sense from participants that, currently, there was not sufficient emphasis on local knowledge re-use. As one participant said, "*Research and learning is at the global level, and [there is] no bottom-up feeding of knowledge ... we need to create capillary action to draw [it] up*."

At a strategic level, where country strategies need to be shaped on the basis of contextual analysis, some people felt there was insufficient engagement with local perspectives, exemplified by the comment "*even if a country does a strong contextual analysis, the global/institutional analysis overrides it*".

2. **Cultural differences**

The failure to make context-specific insights available and accessible to others is often linked to cultural differences about how knowledge is shared, and the prioritisation of 'reportable' knowledge to meet donor or organisational needs. Some of the consequences put forward related to the number of repeated mistakes; a lack of appropriate feedback from communities and country offices, and inadequate learning opportunities.

3. **Lack of connectivity**

It emerged that required knowledge frequently existed in other parts of the organisation or within partner networks without programme staff being aware of its location. Connecting people to facilitate peer learning and the co-creation of new knowledge was seen as important; pithily descried by one participant as requiring and emphasis on "*connections rather than collections*". Participants advanced the view that peer learning was often trusted more than knowledge

provided by headquarters while the latter took precedence because of time, budget and other constraints.

4. **Creating spaces to increase knowledge sharing**

Workshop participants expressed the view that even when knowledge *is* captured, INGOs are poor at dissemination. Contents stored in repositories is not accessed or used appropriately. In many cases it is content, rather than platform, related. Information and knowledge overload were highlighted, as was a tendency to produce and disseminate content in formats not easily digested by recipients.

5. **Too much emphasis on codified knowledge**

Most INGO knowledge was described as tacit with the processes by which people accessed explicit knowledge include a tacit element. Despite this, participants' organisations were seen as too focused on codifying knowledge than on connecting people, what participant referred to as "social learning". Consequently, there was a tendency for codification to focus on know-what rather than know-how or know-why. With activities that were routinely documented, there was often a failure to capture an understanding of how or why actions are taken, emphasising reporting over learning.

6. **Employee turnover**

Employee turnover of voluntary staff is another important factor. Consequently, significant amounts of tacit knowledge, the "*stock of knowledge that you carry with you that can't be transferred to someone else*", as a participant defined it, is routinely being lost by organisations. Thus, while the knowledge may remain within the sector, the relocation of its owner may not find it easy to apply knowledge in their new organisational context. Institutional knowledge was seen as particularly context-specific. Tacit knowledge loss can negatively affect securing institutional funding.

7. **The need for adaptability**

Another theme was that knowledge management should facilitate adaptive programming. This emphasised the design and implementation of development support through processes of learning by doing, and continually testing and adapting programme approaches and delivery. It involved organisations exploring ways to design more flexible programmes that emphasise outcomes over outputs while dealing with the practical challenges associated with implementation, monitoring and reporting.

In addition to investment in technology-based systems for knowledge sharing, the workshop also identified two key areas for investment among the NGOs present.

1. **Reflective Spaces**

Many of the group discussions on existing gaps and required investment required to strengthen programmes revolved around a lack of reflection and reflective spaces. While current monitoring and evaluation prompted employees to reflect and learn in certain ways, there is a sense that INGOs do not always provide the spaces needed for proper reflection and learning. This relates to the pressure to deliver; as one group participant put it, "*it does come back to prioritising … if we think we are too busy then we will never have time for reflection*".

Reflection needs to take place where new knowledge is generated but in many instances there wasn't a culture of teaching people how to be reflective. As one participant noted, knowledge is valued "but not the space to create knowledge and learning".One NGO spoke of the value of dedicating a percentage of time rather than budget to training and development. Allocating a fixed percentage of days per month to sharing in a "safe" learning space means that people are more likely to share the "rich stuff" that would otherwise not be visible or shared. A number of other initiatives and tactics that work well were also identified. These included ICT-based learning platforms within thematic areas; having knowledge champions,webinars; handbooks; and publications containing case studies and insights by NGO staff and their partners.

## 2. Networking

The value of networking, identified by the various groups, included personal learning networks, as well as the importance of connecting individuals across programmes, countries and thematic areas. While generally accepted that development requires knowledge networking among agencies, beneficiaries and decision makers it is equally important to recognise that by mapping the networks that already exist, and by continuing to develop and extend those networks, opportunities for knowledge sharing have the potential to emerge. As one workshop participant noted, "*in our sector there is a lot of networking. You'd hope that there is a facility to capture that*".

Several other specific areas where investment could strengthen programmes were also identified. These included peer learning; enhanced learning and knowledge sharing from field visits; learning events; staff expertise databases; regional and global technical meetings; building capacity of research partners in the global South; analysis of how knowledge sharing can be incorporated into performance appraisal and management; and trialling approaches to knowledge management with a view to learning and adaptation.


## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Some of the identified NGO key challenges are similar to the for-profit sector such as: emphasis on codified knowledge and a need for adaptability. There was also a focus on codifying knowledge into reports. A difference was that these reports, being also used for external donors did not include examples of failures, even when the organisation had learnt from them. There was a need to collect such information for internal analysis, rather than relying on the information required by donors.

Some challenges, such as engaging with local perspectives, dealing with cultural differences, a lack of connectivity and the loss of tacit knowledge due to employee turnover, are not only interconnected but exacerbated in the NGO context as firms work with volunteer staff, local communities and often with intermittent no connected information systems. There was a need to recognize and value local knowledge, rather than the knowledge currently privileged by headquarters and donors. There was also a need to develop and use reflective spaces as a way of not only developing knowledge but also socializing and training new, and revolving, staff. In addition, NGOs need to consider alternative forms of knowledge codification rather than relying on written reports produced at the end of each project or programme.

Another implication is the need for external analysis that focuses at the organizational rather that at the programme level when it comes to knowledge management. Given their sources of funding NGOs prioritise keeping the proportion of administration costs (at both headquarters and in-country offices) to total funding at a minimum. A consequence of this is that it is difficult to justify investing in some knowledge management activities and networking without evidence of their value. Even when value was present, the current focus on analyzing the return on programmes individually meant that leveraging knowledge across programmes was difficult to justify to individual programme donors. One way of legitimizing the value of these areas was through activities such as the workshop reported in this paper.

Therefore, while there were indeed similarities identified between NGOs and the for-profit sector there were also difference in context that affected how NGOs approached managing knowledge. As a result of this workshop further research was undertaken within the NGO. This focused on the development of reflective spaces and an examination of the alternative ways in which knowledge could be codified locally as well as mechanisms for making locally codified knowledge shareable within other countries. This involved field visits to three African countries in which the NGO operated to identify pilot projects and knowledge champions.

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