



Limitations of using documents and reports to share knowledge in Africa

Many well-intentioned organisations and people are being frustrated by the shortcomings of using case studies, most significant change stories and conference presentations in spreading success from one African community to another. Most reports produced by several consultants are not making a difference due to multiple reasons (known and unknown). On the other hand, more than 90% of knowledge in African communities has not been codified into documents. This knowledge can never be adequately shared through codified information but through contextual conversational processes.

To worsen matters, several institutions in Africa continue to confuse information with knowledge. Information officers are simply being rebranded knowledge officers. Characterising and storing information for easier searching through portals and websites is not knowledge management but information management. Most of the information in many organisations and government departments is not knowledge. Documents such as memos, minutes from meetings and technical reports fulfil transactional roles. They can only tell you what has been done but not what has been learned. Yet knowledge is about learning not informing. Where codified knowledge exists in documents, it is scattered in many organisations, projects and programmes. No resources are directed at pulling all these fragmented bits together into a body of useful knowledge. Resources continue to be wasted on tons of documents confused with value-added knowledge.

From documents to multiple interpretations

While African communities have learnt from each other for generations, the conventional way of trying to spread knowledge through case studies is not yielding sustainable results. There is an assumption that technical people can get into a community, work with local people, document their successes and share success stories with other communities, leading to adoption of best practices. This notion misses a thorough understanding of how communities learn from each other.



Almost all rural African communities rely on collective sense-making through very patient conversations, observations and learning by doing. Multiple interpretations that cannot be fully captured through documents are shared in ways that clarify differences between actions and outcomes. Knowledge exchange happens through rich data pulled from a variety of media to construct fresh meaning. Where documentation takes advantage of a few senses, community knowledge exchange processes exploit all human senses.

In the majority of African communities, you cannot just hope to get valuable knowledge through interviews and writing up responses. While successful farmers can give you explicit information, they will not be able to explain tacit knowledge gathered through actual implementation of activities. This practical wisdom is tied to context. There is a risk of missing the most important implementation nuances when you try to document. A field visit where visiting farmers see crops and livestock already doing well is not useful for the visitors if they are not immersed in the real process of producing such commodities.

With regard to incentives, conventional documentation processes give more credit to the documenters instead of implementers of knowledge such as farmers, traders and rural artisans. Consultants are rewarded for asking questions and producing reports while farmers and other informants are often not rewarded at all. Trying to use technical documents such as consultants' reports to convey the tacit knowledge of farmers, traders and local communities leads to a very flawed outcome. Irrespective of whatever method they use to gather information, consultants and experts will never gather and convey enough contextual issues that make a community successful. Instead of pouring all the money into consultants and researchers, development organisations and government departments should set aside resources for communities to share knowledge with each other through various back and forth adaptive processes.

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