The knowledge management for Handicap International

Technical Resources Division
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"None of us is as smart as all of us"

Introduction - Our vision of successful knowledge management

Handicap International is a learning organisation. Each of its employees is helped to acquire or consolidate the competencies required by his or her job description, as well as institutional concepts and tools and those specific to his or her sector of activity. Everyone knows where to find the information he or she needs to keep up-to-date with developments in his/her field of expertise among the different resources available, and regularly attends training designed to optimise knowledge appropriation.

Furthermore, everyone helps enrich the “institutional knowledge base” by contributing individual expertise developed in specific contexts, by taking part in innovations, research and evaluations or by identifying best practice developed on the projects.

Handicap International’s leading-edge expertise in actions focused on supporting vulnerable populations is recognised and taken up by our key peers.
Key stages in the knowledge management process

A. Identifying the skills developed

Project skills

- Obtaining a full overview of knowledge developed in the field

Because of the diversity of the contexts and situations in which we work, there is not much standardising of our technical operational practices which gives field teams considerable opportunity to propose “innovative” approaches or launch “pilot” projects.

As a result, one of the biggest challenges for Technical Resource Division (DRT) teams and hence, by extension, for the technical teams of Mines Division (DAM) and Emergency Response Division (DAU), is obtaining a full overview of all the initiatives that could enrich Handicap International’s knowledge base.

Therefore, in liaison with Operations, the plan is to organise an annual information-exchange campaign with the programmes to improve visibility of activities planned in the fields of:

1. Research
2. Knowledge capitalisation on best practice and/or innovation
3. Training curriculum development
4. Evaluation (Impact, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit).

This exercise will establish a dialogue that will help us determine work priorities, promote synergies between actions and also contribute towards the appropriation of the knowledge formalised.

- Communicating on technical development priorities

In addition to this bottom-up process, the field teams must also be kept informed of the areas of development and improvement that the DRT has identified as priority.

Sector skills

Handicap International’s staff must of course stay abreast of external developments and be capable of identifying those likely to affect their sector. It is Knowledge Management Unit’s role to facilitate this sector-based monitoring and provide a framework that will optimise the collaborative and global aspect of this exercise. This monitoring also provides an opportunity to pool different resources which can then be used to develop a resource centre specialised in disability issues.
Individual skills

Although not necessarily related to his or her post and work on a particular project, each person has tacit knowledge gained through his or her own experience. This knowledge, developed and enriched through individual experience, must also be captured and used to enrich institutional knowledge. Knowledge Management Unit can help identify the periods and the key people to help them build an account of their experience.

B. Formalising knowledge

Promoting the use of a range of media

In our occidental culture, writing is the most common and probably the most practical method of formalising knowledge. But other methods should be developed according to people’s aptitudes and the different forms of expression of the various interlocutors.

Here are some examples:

- Facilitating the writing stage with interviews or other forms of group expression
- Using simple video recordings
- Using mind maps or other types of diagram.

Providing a methodological framework for formalising knowledge

The type of medium is one consideration, but methodological rigour is also important when formalising knowledge to guarantee the objectivity of the point of view expressed and a thorough and comprehensive approach to the subject discussed.

Offering ways to formalise field experience

The main idea behind the creation of satellite publications is to facilitate the formalisation of field experience, whether best practice, studies or - more rarely - operational methodology. These satellite publications are either field initiatives or commissioned by technical advisers. Their purpose is to formalise skills that are worth sharing and replicating on other of Handicap International’s programmes. As they are produced by the project’s field staff, the quality of the layout, translation and printing of documents can vary significantly from one publication to another.

However, they all have one point in common: they are always validated by the technical adviser with the relevant scientific authority.

Handicap International has organised its publications into collections according to the nature of the workings.
With regard to the formalisation of field experience, there are three main types of production organised into three of our collections:

1. Capitalising on field experiences and/or themes: Lessons Learned collection
2. Publishing research or a study: Research and Studies collection
3. Reviewing a given subject and summarising the different points of view: “Wide Angle” collection.

C. Enriching knowledge through exchange

Promoting the replication and enrichment of experiences...

Taken individually, each experience is constrained by the contextual framework in which it occurs. Conclusions drawn from an experience on a single programme are therefore not sufficient to define generic intervention principles for the Federation as a whole. An experience first needs to be replicated in other contexts. This principle of replication provides an opportunity to correct and enrich practices and avoid reproducing the same mistakes.

...by creating communities of practice

This principle is not often put into practice. On the rare occasions that previous workings are referred to, this is usually the result of an individual, non-formalised initiative (which can lead to replicating errors) rather than part of a specific methodological approach.

The phase of enriching experiences must involve discussions and comparisons with external contributions and draw on explicit know-how from the projects and tacit know-how from individuals. To provide a forum for these exchanges, communities of practice should be developed to help bring about iterative improvements in our practices.

...by organising and facilitating international seminars

Participating in a practice-sharing seminar is a unique opportunity for Handicap International’s staff and partners to compare their different operational realities and share their operating methods and tools.

...by promoting exchanges and debate

Occasions for discussing and sharing on a theme are also an opportunity to learn about related concepts and tools. Whenever possible, each new publication should be presented to and discussed with the main users and prescribers.
D. Formalising stabilised skills

To avoid constantly “reinventing the wheel”, it is important for head office to give clear guidance on a number of crucial aspects. In particular, Handicap International’s positioning and intervention framework with regard to its thematic priorities should be clearly defined so as to strengthen the coherency of projects.

Similarly, methods that have demonstrated their added-value should be promoted to encourage their replication in the field.

This is the objective of the organisation’s professional technical publications, in particular the “Policy papers”, “Guidance notes and “Practical guides”. These publications are intended for a wide public and so must be of the appropriate quality. Therefore they are systematically copy-edited to verify their coherency with other themes and proofread to check the syntax. They are carefully laid out using a standardised graphic charter and systematically translated into English or French before being disseminated internally and externally (subject to certain restrictions depending on the content).

E. Disseminating skills: everywhere for everyone

Because of the extreme diversity of our projects and programmes and the geographical distance between them, information needs to be organised in a way that makes it quickly and rapidly accessible to everyone.

The setting up and running of internet platforms such as “SkillWeb”, “HISEMINARS” or “Source” enables us to promote dynamic information management:

- By ensuring the **accessibility of the information** for all the users, and its availability in English and French at least.

- By organising the **information according to its nature and purpose** to help users find what they are looking for.

Thus, all our productions are organised into six main collections, each with a very specific editorial line as these collections are intended to demonstrate and promote Handicap International’s know-how and technical expertise:

1. To define and circumscribe the operational framework of Handicap International’s sectors and/or domains of intervention: **Policy papers** collection
2. To define and circumscribe the general framework and operational priorities of cross-sector themes or “young” sectors**: **Guidance notes** collection
3. To specify the methods and tools to be used in implementing an approach: **Practical Guides** collection
4. To formalising/capitalise on field experiences and/or themes: **Lessons learned** collection,
5. To publish research or a study: **Research and Studies** collection,
6. To review a given subject by summarising the different points of view: **“Wide Angle”** collection.
The first three collections are intended mainly for disseminating consolidated know-how (professional publications), whereas the other three collections are more for formalising field skills or contents still under construction (satellite publications).

- **By using different medias formats** to ensure it is adapted to the users' constraints and specific needs (full or summarised versions, electronic formats and videos, self-training modules, etc.), and by ensuring its accessibility,

- **By systematically and regularly reminding staff of the different formats** available (via communication channels such as InfoTech, Skill latest, K memo, Source’s Key Lists, publication catalogues, video catalogues, etc.);

- **By creating purpose-designed “resource kits” or “tool boxes”** on a given theme, training area or project.

F. Fostering appropriation by all

The ultimate objective of knowledge management is the appropriation of new knowledge by the end users. This essential aspect of the process is also the most difficult to implement. Although the diagram shows appropriation to be the logical end result, this objective must be taken into account from the outset and at every stage of a project. Knowledge Management Unit’s mission is to create the optimal conditions for the best possible appropriation of knowledge, taking into account the target users, the nature of the skills and using a variety of approaches.

Supporting training development

- By proposing training for trainers, in particular for profiles such as technical adviser and technical coordinator with a knowledge transfer responsibility
- By building training pathways and offering “training kits” adapted to the desired levels of competence,
- By developing new ways of training, adapted to our constraints (tutor-supported distance training, self-training).

Creating the right conditions for debate and exchanges

- By regularly and systematically running sharing and exchange sessions at head office (REACT, Talk&Breakfast) that can also be easily organised in the field,
- By enabling field staff to access these exchanges (presentation video),
- By suggesting a less “top down” training approach
- By putting on-line communities of practice in place.
Highlighting links between themes

- By more clearly identifying those themes that are relevant to all the Technical Coordination Units and incorporating them as work objectives for each Technical Coordination Unit. The place of users on our projects is one such theme and will be worked on with AN Luxembourg during the drafting of its next framework agreement.

Demonstrating operational added-value

- By encouraging the replication of “intervention models” that have proved their relevance and effectiveness,
- By systematically clarifying the role expected of operations staff (desk project officers, Desk, field programme directors) in the implementation of these models of intervention.

The organisation of the main stages in knowledge management is shown in the diagram below.
Organisation of the main stages in knowledge management
Actors in knowledge management

A. Main recipients and relays of shared skills

The priority public is Handicap International’s operations staff, i.e. the staff in charge of writing, monitoring, planning or evaluating projects. After all, these are the people who receive the knowledge, use/implement it and then transform it back into knowledge.

Project managers are the main suppliers of skills, as well as the main recipients of the collective knowledge to be appropriated.

Technical and operational coordinators act as relays and are essential prescribers of a knowledge management approach in the field. Broadly speaking, their role with regard to knowledge management is two-fold:

1. Assisting with the dissemination of the Federation's explicit knowledge among the field teams and helping these teams to appropriate this knowledge,
2. Passing up any explicit and tacit knowledge developed by the field teams that could enrich the Federation’s institutional knowledge base.

Because of their links to project activity, technical coordinators also have an important role to play in identifying the knowledge to be formalised on their programmes.

The desk and project officers have insight into the needs of the field teams that they can pass on to the DRT. They also play an important role in identifying the cross-sector themes (technical or operational) that it would be useful to formalise and share.

B. The main producers of formalised knowledge

In the field, knowledge is mainly developed by the project teams. It then has to be identified and formalised so that it can be shared. The main actors in this formalisation process are:

- **Heads of Technical Domains and Units**: They identify the themes and then decide on the priorities between themselves. They define the main thematic areas to be worked on over the medium-term, in line with federal strategy.

- **Technical advisers** (DRT, DAM and DAU): They are the main producers of formalised knowledge. Within their sector, they convey the philosophy and define the working methods to be developed on the projects. Knowledge Management Unit usually works with a technical adviser, either in tandem with the field or by providing the technical adviser with direct support in a specific work area.

- **Project managers**: Knowledge Management Unit can also help project managers to formalise skills on condition that a technical adviser has already confirmed their technical relevance and defined the methodology.
This cross-sector approach to knowledge management has a **dual purpose**: 

1. To pool resources  
2. To generate a coherent and integrated approach to the different aspects of knowledge management in order to make knowledge more accessible and easier to appropriate by the end users.

**C. Knowledge Management Unit team**

Knowledge Management Unit is part of Technical Resources Division (DRT). The scope of its action is thus mainly confined to the technical dimensions of programmes in accordance with the DRT’s master plan. However, it can also work on subjects related to emergency response and mine action.

Obviously, interactions exist and are sought with the operational implementation of programmes or advocacy action.
The workings of Knowledge Management Unit

A. Makeup of the team

The team is made up of 8 people whose attributions reflect the main areas of knowledge management.

- **Aude Brus**: coordination of technical studies and scientific research
- **Dorothy Boggs**: coordination of the Source project, support to research projects in the United Kingdom
- **Catherine Clavel**: in charge of capturing individual skills and organising and running the knowledge-sharing forums at head office
- **Stéphanie Deygas**: publishing coordinator who assists technical advisers with the drafting and publication process in keeping with a defined editorial framework (editorial charter, graphic charter, validation system, etc.)
- **Anne-Marie Fombon**: coordination of the internal internet platform (SkillWeb), dedicated to technical resources: administering, alimenting, coordinating and developing the site
- **Sylvain Rouaud (Michael Guy)**: coordination of the knowledge capitalisation of “explicit” (project) experience
- **Julie De Lamarzelle**: coordination of the development of technical training at head office and on the programmes
- **Pierre Gallien**: Team supervision and coordination.

B. Knowledge Management Unit’s missions

Promoting a knowledge management policy

Knowledge Management Unit is an activity hub (like Impact, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit) and not a Technical Coordination Unit. It does not offer technical expertise in support of action for our beneficiaries; it supports our technical experts in adopting a knowledge management approach.

Consequently, even if project managers are the main target of know-how strengthening, Knowledge Management Unit rarely works with them directly without a technical adviser.

Although Knowledge Management Unit does not have scientific authority over the approaches and techniques implemented by the Technical Coordination Units, it asserts its own know-how and imposes its own action framework to promote a knowledge management policy.
Defining frameworks and processes

Each of the Unit's activities (research, monitoring, knowledge capitalisation, writing and publishing, dissemination and training) uses specific techniques which, to be effective and promote overall coherency within the organisation, must be applied to all projects. Knowledge Management Unit is therefore responsible for defining the operating framework, methods and tools for these activities. A framework has already been formalised for some of these activities in the form of practical guides (guidelines on writing and knowledge capitalisation) or guidance notes (research), whereas others are still in the production stage.

Supporting the implementation of approaches

The role of the Knowledge Management Unit is also to explain and facilitate the implementation of approaches with the different technical resource staff, starting with the technical advisers and Heads of Technical Coordination Units, but also including other operational interlocutors (project officers, desk officers), according to their needs.

If the project is identified properly and early enough with a technical adviser and/or head of Technical Coordination Unit, then Knowledge Management Unit can also help the project officers or technical coordinators to develop good knowledge management practice on their programme.

Ensuring cross-sector exchanges within the Unit and between Technical Coordination Units

Because of its cross-sector approach, Knowledge Management Unit has a complete overview of the workings and initiatives underway in each Technical Coordination Unit. Therefore, its responsibilities include facilitating exchanges within the Unit and between the Technical Coordination Units with a view to improving coherency.
Future challenges and priorities for action

As well as pursuing and consolidating the advances made over the last few years, Knowledge Management Unit intends to focus on three main areas:

A. Appropriation and impact

Considerable efforts have been made over the last few years to structure and formalise the organisation’s different technical frameworks and methodological approaches. We now need to ensure that these efforts are having the desired impact.

Training will play a crucial role here, but will not be enough to ensure knowledge appropriation on its own. The determining factors are much broader and call for a global policy involving concerted efforts on the part of different actors at different levels.

Therefore, differentiated knowledge appropriation strategies need to be defined that take into account:

- the diversity of the target public
- the nature of the skills to be transmitted
- the key moments at which these skills are used in the project cycle
- Etc.

In concrete terms, in order to achieve this objective we must put individual appropriation plans in place for every technical production, developed with the person behind the project. In other words, the work of the Knowledge Management Unit team will continue long after the publications or training module has been produced.

The extent to which this objective is achieved should be measured by the changes seen in the target public’s practices. This measurement can be made by the people concerned (self-assessment of their practices), but should also involve their managers.

B. Towards a more proactive approach to knowledge management

For the moment, the link between the needs expressed in the field and Technical Coordination Units’ vision is not well-enough articulated to allow a more proactive approach to defining the areas in which to work.

To optimise our resources, we need to create more synergy between the federal vision held at head office and the issues of concern to the field.

To this end, an exchange with the programmes needs to be organised at the start of each year to identify their knowledge capitalisation, innovation, research and publication projects.

In addition to this bottom-up approach, work must be carried out with each Technical Coordination Unit to map expertise and identify the gaps to be filled.
C. Supporting diversity while ensuring coherency

The diversity of the approaches implemented on our programmes is a real asset that forms part of Handicap International’s identity and must be cultivated.

However, this abundance of ideas must not become an obstacle to our development by perpetually questioning knowledge and advances that have already been established. In the same way, the diversity of opinions must not undermine the global coherency that Handicap International seeks to promote both outside and inside the organisation.

To achieve this objective of supporting diversity while ensuring coherency it is important to be able to trace “filiations” between projects and promote the replication of those that have proven their added-value.

At the project development stage, while the needs analysis takes contextual factors into account, we should also be able to draw on tried and tested experiences in our response proposals.
Conclusion – Knowledge management is a joint effort

Everyone holds knowledge. Knowledge Management Unit’s role is to help this knowledge to emerge by creating tools and methodologies that will allow it to be shared and appropriated by the teams...

Neither the technical advisers nor the fields waited for a Knowledge Management Unit to be set up. They were already implementing knowledge management by any other name! However, all these projects were carried out in isolation. Today, the idea is to group what until now have been dispersed initiatives into a more global project of knowledge sharing and appropriation.

“The real challenge is not to invent but to implement”
(The International Partnership for Innovative Health Delivery – IPIHD)
This guidance note presents the vision of knowledge management for Handicap International.

It defines the associated processes and clarifies:
• the key stages of the process;
• key stakeholders;
• working methods of the Knowledge Management Unit;
• future challenges and priorities of action.