Effective learning from evaluation is linked to the delivery of sustainable development results/outcomes.

In this op-ed, Peter van Rooij contributes to the 2020 Evaluation Week discussions with some of his thoughts on knowledge management and the importance of considering knowledge needs as a starting point. These are meant as an informal conversation starter, rather than an attempt to lay down a rigid thesis.
Introduction

Sustainable development results are three simple words that encompass different dimensions of science and practice and cover important topics, both separately and combined. While this article does not attempt to cover these dimensions (if ever one article could do overall justice), I ask the reader to keep them in mind and bear with me as I attempt to highlight a crucial but often overlooked aspect of sustainable development: How to deal with knowledge. The good ‘news’ (though it is not new) is that substantial knowledge is already ‘out there’, allowing us to focus more and more on capturing and sharing the learning.

There is a beginning to everything, including results. However, ‘the’ beginning often has different starting points. This is one of the key points of this article. It will not come as any surprise that an article on knowledge management (KM) calls for more and better use of existing knowledge. While progress has been made in this regard, from the private to the non-profit sector, further progress can and should be realized, including in a development cooperation context. What is perhaps not new, but certainly not usually part of a comprehensive approach to KM in development, is the starting point of better understanding the knowledge needs.

To begin with, what does the literature say? This is already a classic KM question, pre-empting the content of this article (spoiler alert). If a key point is to start with a better understanding of what knowledge we need, this pertains to this article as well: be clear what we want to achieve on the basis of our ‘needs’.

Let us start with a typical definition of KM: “[it] refers to a deliberate and consistent effort to improve the utilization, transfer and creation of knowledge in organizations”. Such definition does not consider knowledge needs to begin with and in my view, it should.

So what does the literature say about knowledge questions, or more specifically knowledge needs? To state there is a complete overview of this would be incorrect. Therefore, some key notions may be more practical. According to the African Journal of Business Management, for instance, drivers of KM can “mainly be categorized into six important weighing factors: organizational culture, organizational framework, personnel, information technology, knowledge strategy, and ‘innovation’.” Where are the knowledge needs featured in this?

A KM Process, as described by Tutorials Point, distinguishes six steps starting with collecting. Once again, where is the point on knowledge needs, by who and how they are determined? In short, KM seems to ‘skip’ a step in the theory and practice of managing and sharing experience and expertise.

Let this be the starting point for four key knowledge questions.

Question 1: The Beginning

KM does not take place in a void. Let us take the example of a project, though
the principles can be applied to other contexts if not all. In many instances, we have learned to better understand the context, needs of counterparts or beneficiaries, and the importance of some kind of consultation phase, as part of the design of a project. What is less often addressed, if at all, is the implication in terms of the knowledge needs for making a project successful, including the knowledge needs of beneficiaries. Admittedly, this can easily be seen as an academic question, and it is in part. However, we aim to clarify knowledge needs when we state desired outcomes, outputs to be produced and inputs to be identified. I have yet to see a knowledge needs approach that specifies what knowledge is needed to make a project meets its objectives. And yet, isn’t this central to realizing development?

The next sub-question would be to what extent this is possible? What level of detail is needed? And when this would make sense?

Question 2: We, Ourselves and I

Once there is a framework understanding of knowledge needs, we have a direction and can address the following three questions that are all interrelated and dependent on one another – 1) what knowledge do we need but actually already know? 2) What knowledge do we need that we can find elsewhere? And 3) what knowledge do we need that needs to be generated. From the starting point of knowing the knowledge needs, the first follow-up is to assess what knowledge (that is needed) is already availed by ourselves, the entity driving the development engagement. This is yet another example of ‘easier said than done’. Asking oneself what knowledge, experience and expertise an organization has on youth employment for example, is not easy to answer. Does an organization know what it knows? And even when you know relevant knowledge exists, is it known where such knowledge can be retrieved? Furthermore, knowing that relevant
knowledge exists and even its location may not solve the challenge of accessing it. For example, it could concern a hard copy of a document that is stored somewhere in an office elsewhere. And I have not even mentioned the user-friendliness of the available knowledge.

**Question 3: It Is Not Me, It Is Them!**

Question 3 derives from the second question: what is the knowledge that is needed and that we ourselves do not have but can find elsewhere? It is simply the difference between what is needed and what ‘we’ do not avail of ourselves. Starting from clear needs once again, this is about identifying existing, relevant knowledge elsewhere. It is about reaching out to other organizations and persons. This has the additional benefit of identifying and investing in partnerships and synergies. While partnerships as such are not the focus of attention in this article, more and better cooperation allows for something that is still missing in terms of impact: scaling up. Being familiar with the situation of having had 250 projects in one country over five years on a single topic, I wonder about scale, in addition to efficiencies, cooperation and, once again, knowledge cooperation.

Other organizations (and persons) could in turn benefit from more and better access to ‘our’ knowledge. Such engagement may also pertain to the sharing of knowledge needs, resulting in a better understanding of knowledge needs for others. Of course, such engagement can also include sharing our relevant experience and expertise with others, truly win-win.

Knowledge challenges in one organization may also be reflected in others. If the question of ‘knowing’ what one knows, and where and how easily relevant knowledge is accessible comes up in one organization, this may likely be the case elsewhere too, albeit that there are organizations that have their ‘knowledge act’ better together, and some less so.

**Question 4: Research Validated!**

Question 4 finally addresses the knowledge gap: what is the knowledge that we need, but neither we nor others avail, i.e. what knowledge needs to be generated. There is no guarantee that all required knowledge can be mobilized, through existing and future sources. There may simply be knowledge needs that cannot be met at a certain point in time and in a certain context. The latter, the knowledge residue in a way, is important for a number of reasons. This includes identifying knowledge needs as well as prioritizing them. In addition, this could also include a focus on better understanding the time and context of the constraints to generating or at least retrieving knowledge that by itself may be of value.

Crucially, knowledge generation, including through research and (project) pilots, needs to be justified. This justification, among others, centers on the core question of knowledge needs and what already exists, i.e. the gap.

How much research is conducted on the basis of unclear knowledge needs, assuming there is a need for something? Prioritization of knowledge needs comes into play as well. How often do we assume knowledge does not exist whereas as a matter of fact it does? This is one frequent observation over an almost 30 year career in development: the wheel gets reinvented time and time again, with serious repercussions, including time and other resources wasted and not necessarily coming up to the ‘quality’ of already existing knowledge, thus posing an additional cost to development. Some people, including consultants, can make a career out of this, so perhaps we should look at some of the countervailing benefits of reinventing the wheel, especially if the wheel gets adapted to different contexts and evolves, literally.

This relates to the point of context, including time. Knowledge needs
are specific. Copy-and-paste is not the recipe, neither in question 2 nor 3. Inspire-and-adapt is a better approach to knowledge generation.

So What?

“So what?” you may say. Four questions on KM, brought together as an integrated concept. Is this a new insight and complementing theory of KM? Think of it more as a ‘nice theory on knowledge management’, hopefully pushing the frontier of applied KM somewhat further.

How practical is the above though? This is a good question that deserves more attention. The full answer cannot be provided in this brief context. What is clear is that both theoretically and in practice, follow-up is required to the ‘four questions for KM’ concept. The latter by testing the theory and the former by further deepening the concept academically.

Let’s look at the framework of the four key KM questions critically. One point of concern may be the rather theoretical nature of the concept. To what extent can you identify the knowledge needs of say a project in detail, upfront? This is an important question, however; we need to look at our current approaches to the management of our knowledge needs through time and work cycles. To what extent have we tried? What are the implications for not doing so? If there is one lesson that we are learning in program design, it is the usefulness of an identification as well as appropriation phase from the onset, part of which that could continue upon actual start of a project. We know this is a valuable time for better understanding and we are increasingly devoting time and other resources as an investment in impact and sustainability. There is at least a parallel in terms of identifying knowledge needs. Perhaps these two could be combined and mutually reinforced.

John Naisbitt is credited for the quote, ‘we are drowning in information but starved for knowledge.’ So true. KM is not about the quantity of information or even the quality. While these dimensions are important, it is also about the relevance of information. The risk with all the attention to KM and numerous other initiatives is that we could substitute information with KM: we are drowning in KM but we are starving for relevant knowledge.

So let’s turn to the context of this article: effective learning from evaluation. How is this relevant for the four KM questions? Is this just stating the obvious or does this merit some reflection and unpacking? Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are key to the success of project implementation, including efficiencies. M&E processes are very relevant for the four KM questions and their application. The starting point of evaluation is similar to understanding the knowledge needs. Understanding this will help both effective evaluation and the added value beyond. Evaluation does not happen in a vacuum either; there are both internal and external dimensions to contend. And finally, evaluation can identify knowledge gaps as well as fill some. How we deal with the results of evaluation, including how we ensure the learning, has a number of similarities with the four KM questions.

Endnotes

