

# Knowledge Management Practices and Challenges in International Networked NGOs: The Case of One World International

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**Abstract:** This paper is based on the outcomes of a study that explored the knowledge management practices and challenges in an international NGO network. The investigation constituted comparative case studies of two centres (one in Zambia and the other in the Netherlands) belonging to a single international network. An empirically grounded framework of knowledge management practices based on the taxonomy proposed by Holsapple and Joshi was utilised as the reference framework for the study. The framework provided guidelines to characterize factors that influence organizational knowledge management; knowledge manipulation activities (processes) and organizational knowledge resources. The results of the empirical study confirm that a variety of factors affect knowledge management behaviours in an organization. These factors include managerial and internal controls such as management styles and incentives for knowledge creation and sharing; resource influences; and environmental influences relating to an organization's culture and the needs of partner organizations. The study highlights important variation in diversity, gaps and perceptions in managing knowledge between centres in the network that are based in Europe and Africa. This is despite significant communality in knowledge management processes and infrastructures. The results further show that institutionalization of knowledge management practices within a network seem to enable or constrain knowledge management at centre and network level. Recommendations are proposed to improve knowledge management practices at local and international level and include enhanced technical and advisory services at international level; capacity building; creating greater awareness of knowledge management; decentralization of knowledge management processes; implementation of a knowledge management strategy at network level and improving relationships between centres.

The authors conclude that networked NGO's and specifically OWI could operate more efficiently and incrementally enhance service provision by leveraging their knowledge resources more effectively. It is in this light that knowledge management practices should be examined in NGOs and particularly networks with their complex structures and attendant reoccurring and unavoidable problems.

**Keywords:** non governmental organisations (NGOs), networks, development, knowledge management, Zambia, Netherlands

## 1. Introduction and background

Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are generally seen to be playing an increasingly important role in international development. The ongoing support given to NGO's by donors can be construed as evidence that they are considered to be more effective than state-owned organisations in implementing and sustaining developmental programmes. It has further been seen that NGOs and their operations have been influenced by the "New Policy Agenda" which according to Edwards and Hulme (1996) is characterized by two theories. The first implies that NGOs have been enabled by governments to be private providers because of their supposed cost-effectiveness and their ability to more effectively reach the masses than the public sector. The second suggests that since NGOs are vehicles for democratization they have a fundamental humanitarian role to fulfil which should counterbalance state power, protect human rights, open up communication channels and participation, and promote activism and pluralism.

The adoption of the "New Policy Agenda" has motivated NGOs to scale-up operations and this has given rise to NGOs in Europe and North America to expand their operations considerably and to incorporate both developed and developing countries in their programmes (Edwards & Hulme 2000). This has resulted in the establishment of NGO networks with branches all over the world. A further outcome has been that because NGOs are considered to be vehicles for "democratisation" they have become the preferred channel for service provision and government organisations have often been deliberately supplanted. This growth in recent years of developmental NGOs has, however, also meant increased competition for donor funding Ebrahim (2003) and the need for greater accountability and visibility not only at the local constituency level, but also internationally.

All these factors as well as external factors such as the fast changing environment and increased globalization have made the management of NGO operations very complex. This has forced NGOs to adopt new 'agendas' in order to survive (Mitlin, Hickey & Bebbington 2006) and they have, for example, been

implementing new and innovative ways to manage their operations. One such solution has been to employ knowledge management (KM) procedures and principles to try and ameliorate the situation. Such KM procedures are, because of the emphasis placed on information and knowledge sharing processes, particularly suited to enhancing the delivery of successful developmental programmes in a networked environment (Cummings, Heeks & Huysman 2003). KM processes further predicate greater participation by all staff, and the recognition of staff skills and capabilities in the decision-making process and NGO programme development (Sheehanm 1998).

Not all NGO's have however been equally successful at embracing knowledge management principles. There is often scepticism with regard to the effectiveness of knowledge management practices among NGOs. Knowledge sharing particularly at inter organisational level is often said to be hindered by "dynamics of power, opportunism, suspicion, and asymmetric learning strategies which can constitute processual barriers to collective knowledge development" (Larsson et al. 1998). It is further generally believed that the ineffectiveness of knowledge management practices among NGOs can be attributed to the adoption of the wrong knowledge management strategies for NGOs, particularly when they inappropriately copy KM strategies employed by profit-making organisations (Britten 1998).

All the factors discussed above prompted the authors to examine information and knowledge management practices at OneWorld International (OWI). OWI is an international NGO network currently comprising eleven centres that are distributed throughout Europe, Northern and Central America, Asia and Africa. It is a partner network that promotes social justice, human rights and sustainable development. The network's goal is to build a more just, global society through its partnership with local and international communities by providing access to information and connecting hundreds of organisations and tens of thousands of people around the world. OWI is driven by the people and organisations it supports. The network supports over 1600 civil society organisations and development and/or human rights based NGOs. It mainly utilises all types of communication media (typically ICTs) to implement development and human rights advocacy programmes. This study specifically studied two OWI centres, viz. OneWorld Africa (OWA) based in Zambia and OneWorld Netherlands (OneWorld.nl).

**2. Context and objectives of the study**

The purpose of the research project was to examine the role that knowledge management interventions play in an international networked NGO to achieve development objectives at a local and global level. The specific factors that were of interest to the study related to:

- the degree to which OWI centres practice knowledge management
- what external factors influence knowledge management policies and practices
- the major challenges that the centres and the network is facing in managing its knowledge.

The study was conducted utilising Holsapple and Joshi's (2004) knowledge management framework (presented in figure 1) as its conceptual model. The framework presents a cyclical three fold approach to knowledge management in organizations. In this context, the following aspects were studied: internal and external policies that may influence knowledge management practices in the targeted OWI centres; the various knowledge management processes that are in place to cultivate a learning environment; and finally the role of the various knowledge resources in the organisations.

<b>Factors influencing knowledge management</b>		<b>Knowledge activities</b>		<b>Knowledge resources</b>		
Managerial Influences	<b>govern</b>	Knowledge selection, acquisition, use, transfer, and internalisation	<b>create</b>	Intellectual capital	<b>achieve</b>	<b>organisation learning &amp; projection</b>
Resource Influences				Culture		
Environmental Influences				Infrastructure		

**Figure 1:** Holsapple and Joshi's knowledge management framework

**3. Methodology adopted**

The research design was based on a comparison of two OWI centres; viz. OWA and OneWorld.nl. The targeted study population was drawn from the employees at management level of the two centres. A

triangulated approach, using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, was adopted. Open ended questions were used during in-depth face to face and e-mail interviews to obtain insight into the various knowledge management issues pertaining to the conceptual model. This approach gave participants the opportunity to expand on their views regarding how knowledge was managed within the OWI network. A questionnaire containing attitude statements in a Likert scale format was further also distributed by e-mail to all respondents. The interviews and questionnaire were based on the conceptual model and consisted of the following eleven themes: Management and control systems; finances and resources; stakeholder relationships; internal knowledge processes; external knowledge processes; knowledge needs; communication processes; communication infrastructure; strategy and policy formulation; applying learning and developing organisational memory or intellectual capital.

## **4. Results of the study**

The results are derived from a synthesis of the information obtained from the interviews and the responses to the attitude statements (cf. Figures 2 & 3). The reporting framework is based on the knowledge management model adopted for the study.

### **4.1 Factors influencing knowledge management**

A number of factors such as the financial situation, emerging technologies, and the GEPSE (governmental, economic, political, social and education) climate can influence knowledge management practices in organisations. Our case studies revealed that the main factors that had an impact on knowledge management at OWI were financial or economic factors, partner's knowledge needs, awareness of knowledge sharing techniques, control and governance of knowledge management practices, and strategy formulation.

#### *4.1.1 Financial or economic factors*

While it was noted that both centres indicated that financial factors were impacting on their ability to scale up and scale out their programmes, OWA was clearly more affected by financial constraints (cf. Figures 2 and 3). This can largely be attributed to their greater dependency on outside donor funding. Financial restrictions at OWA appeared to have the greatest impact on their staffing situation. It was evident that they were forced to use more volunteer staff than OneWorld.nl and this meant a higher staff turnover which in turn meant that staff were not able to learn and reflect on past and future work. OneWorld.nl's better financial situation was due in part to fewer bureaucratic restrictions, and more direct access to donor funding than what was the case at OWA. It was further evident that they had better fiscal control systems and they were able to attract partners who were willing to pay for the services they appreciated. Another factor could be that OneWorld.nl were able to secure better support from policy makers and this can be attributed to government policies in the Netherlands that actively supports and promotes development goals at the local level.

#### *4.1.2 Partners' knowledge needs*

Although it was clear that both centres were aware of their partners' knowledge needs, the fulfilment of these needs was affected by financial constraints. Furthermore, both centres, particularly OneWorld.nl felt that they could improve on the application of existing knowledge. OWA's rating for satisfying knowledge needs was slightly lower than OneWorld.nl's (cf. Figures 2 & 3) and this can be attributed to the fact that their service delivery spanned a greater geographical area. This suggests that the geographical extent of a network could have a direct effect on knowledge management practices in an organisation.

#### *4.1.3 Knowledge sharing culture*

It was found that while knowledge sharing was relatively well established at local level, articulating local tacit knowledge into explicit concepts was not handled as well and this impacted negatively on knowledge sharing between centres. It further emerged that OneWorld.nl generally exhibited a more positive attitude towards knowledge sharing than OWA. This might be due to socio-political differences between the Netherlands and African countries. In the Netherlands values that are conducive to knowledge sharing and generation, such as cultural, political and educational factors, are highly esteemed. It is thus submitted that an organisation that operates in a culture that is receptive to knowledge sharing and knowledge generation would also be more receptive to knowledge management principles in general.

#### **4.1.4 Control and governance of knowledge management practices**

It was clear, that while OWI exerted good general management control measures (e.g. for staff and finances), there were no uniform control measures that applied to knowledge management practices across the network. As a result, each centre within the network performed knowledge management activities differently and individuals generally had different perceptions of the role of KM. This aspect was identified as a severe impediment to knowledge sharing within the network. A typical example relates to virtual communication where it was found that because of the lack of controls and standardisation, virtual team work, a supposed feature of OWI, was not operating at the required levels of effectiveness. It was further clear that at local level the control measures and policies reflected the environment and culture from where they emanated. The staff in the Netherlands was for instance more receptive to open sharing and 'criticism' than staff at OWA and this it is suggested relates to cultural differences between the two environments. It can thus be argued that the knowledge sharing culture within each of the OWI centres [and NGOs] replicated their societies and further that exposure to multiple cultures created a blend of influences.

#### **4.1.5 Strategy formulation**

The staff at OWA and OneWorld.nl generally provided different answers with regard to their understanding of the relationship between strategy formulation and knowledge management issues. OWA staff indicated that OWA's four main strategy areas automatically meant that the organisational strategy could be applied to the knowledge management processes within the organisation. OWA staff also felt that OWI and donors had considerable influence on their strategy and its implementation since it was intricately related to externally generated proposals. Although the OneWorld.nl, staff made no reference to a knowledge management strategy as such, they did indicate that "*in the end, it [knowledge management] is all related to our overall mission and goals.*" The OneWorld.nl team further indicated that they realised the importance of strategy formulation and reflection and indicated that more time should be given to these issues.

### **4.2 Knowledge manipulation activities (processes, collaboration and networking)**

The study further focused on obtaining information from the respondents on the means they use to identify, present and share knowledge within and outside their centres. This set of questions specifically set out to establish evidence of team work, collaboration and networking via intra and inter organisational means.

#### **4.2.1 Communication processes**

The centres generally follow a number of direct and indirect communication processes to share knowledge between and amongst individuals, internal and external structures. The direct methods of communication that were commonly used were: face to face dialogue, email discussions and the use of simple technology such as the telephone, SKYPE, yahoo messenger and chat technology.

There was however evidence that there is a need to better manage tacit knowledge communication. Most employees from the two OWI centres indicated that, despite having access to the appropriate technology, they were not skilled in converting tacit knowledge to information. The lack of skills to capture tacit knowledge in a standardized format reduces the efficacy of knowledge transfer and the ability to leverage tacit knowledge. Invaluable knowledge is then lost to the organisation when individuals with that 'know-how' leave the organisation. It was further found that processes were not generally in place to map knowledge flows, or to identify knowledge needs and resources. According to Weidner and Rahman (2000), mapping knowledge flows, needs and resources enables an organisation to determine what knowledge is needed by whom; what knowledge an organisation has in what format; where it is (in people, libraries, or system repositories); what knowledge is missing and the best ways to obtain it.

#### **4.2.2 Communication infrastructure**

According to Groff & Jones (2003) technology is an important factor to ensure that knowledge management procedures function effectively, particularly in a large and/or geographically dispersed network. It was therefore important to obtain the respondents' perceptions with regard to the use of technology. It was found that technology is more effectively integrated into the processes and tasks at OneWorld.nl than at OWA and as a consequence it was clear that the OWA employees were less comfortable with using the available technology than those at OneWorld.nl. This would suggest evidence of a 'digital divide' between the centres in Europe/North America and those in developing countries.

The OneWorld.nl respondents were, however, also critical of certain aspects of the technology infrastructure, particularly with reference to the unsophisticated, stand alone technology that was used and which created network communication problems. OWA respondents further noted that the technology was cumbersome to use and in their view too little attention was spent on the development of technologies that enhance internal work processes. It was further clear that although many of the respondents were using simple technology such as 'chat' for interpersonal communication, they would rather use more personal means of interaction and knowledge transfer. This is a universal problem and the reason why, according to Srinivas (2005), many organisations focus on creating connections which allow knowledge to be shared easily.

#### *4.2.3 External knowledge processes: collaboration and networking*

The respondents at both centres indicated the importance of obtaining external knowledge (cf. Figures 2 & 3) and indicated that this was mainly achieved by means of collaboration and networking, particularly with various stakeholders. However, this process is complex as both centres serve many stakeholders. The complexity of the situation was however felt more acutely at OWA where they were accountable to a more diverse range of stakeholders spread over a far wider geographic area than OneWorld.nl. It was however clear that, despite the complexities involved, both OWA and OneWorld.nl maintained good relationships with their various stakeholders (e.g. donors, partners, beneficiaries, and governments) (cf. Figures 2 & 3). It was seen that team work and networking was a common feature and work mode at the OWI centres. This was not an unexpected outcome and as Holmen (2002) has indicated an essential means of operation for a geographically dispersed NGO network if it wishes to maintain satisfactory performance levels and avoid disintegration.

### **4.3 Knowledge resources**

The aim of this section was to obtain information from individuals regarding how the knowledge management processes outlined above operated on the knowledge resources in the organisations. It was evident that the main areas of impact related to how intellectual capital and culture were embedded and valued in the knowledge management practices of the OWI network.

#### *4.3.1 Intellectual capital*

Intellectual capital is undisputedly one of the most important assets of any organization. The two centres, however, exhibited different views with regard to the manner in which their centres valued intellectual capital and knowledge creation.

In the instance of OneWorld.nl it was seen that employees were compensated for their contribution to the organisation's intellectual capital and it can be assumed that such compensation served as motivation for staff to contribute to the knowledge base. The literature generally indicates that firms that compensate knowledge workers for their input to the firm's intellectual capital are at a significant competitive advantage (Demarest 1997) and that financial rewards provide good incentives to encourage individuals, teams, etc. to contribute to the knowledge pool (Figallo & Rhine 2002).

OWA staff, in contrast, stated that their knowledge contributions were not in any way linked to monetary compensation or other rewards and it can thus be implied that staff motivation was driven by and linked to individual motivation rather than some reward system. OWA staff, were however being trained in 'Leadership' skills, a key means in which individuals are empowered to contribute to organizational learning, and according to Saint-Onge and Armstrong (2004), "leadership mobilises and determines the quality and rate of knowledge flow, providing a catalyst for staff to exercise their responsibilities, encourage self-initiation, trust, interdependence and partnering across an organisation".

The different motivational models and value systems for intellectual abilities, it is suggested, is the reason why OneWorld.nl staff gave higher scores for developing intellectual capital than the OWA staff (cf. Figures 2 & 3).

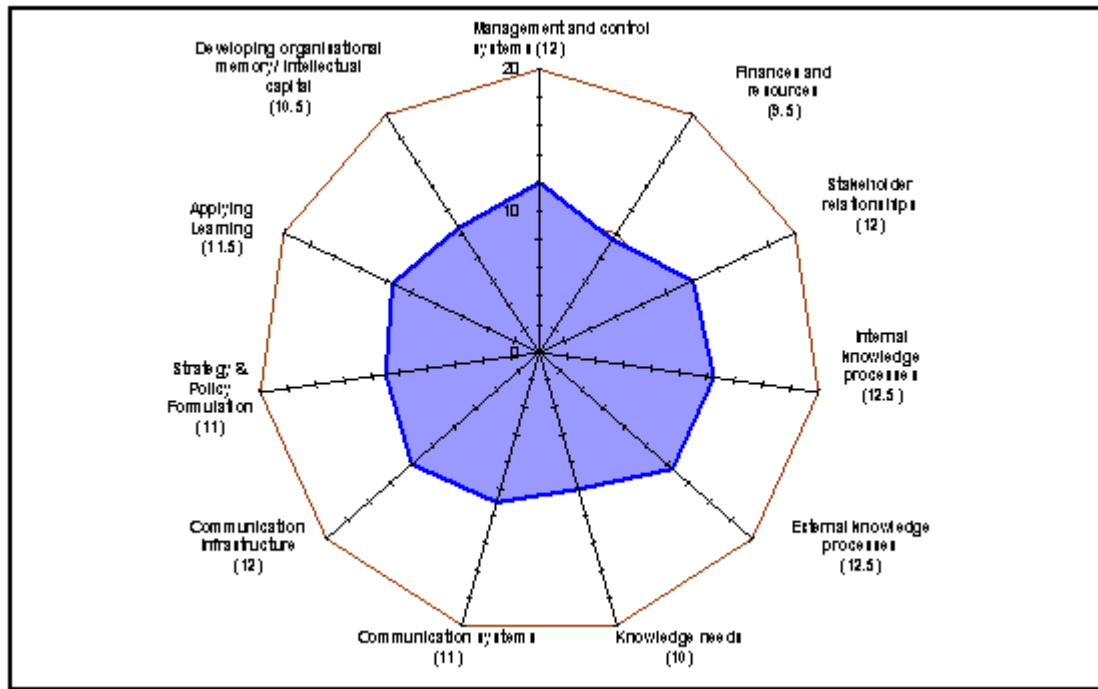


Figure 2: Summary of OWA's Attitude Statements

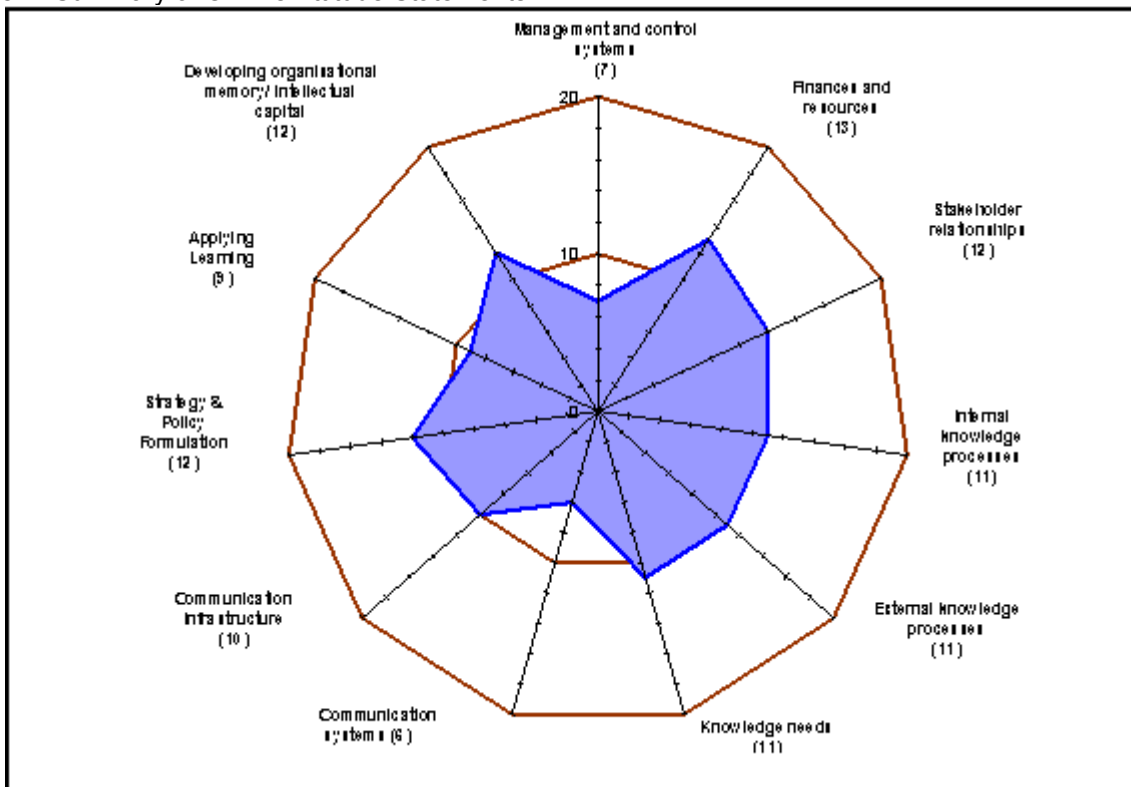


Figure 3: Summary of OneWorld.nl's attitude statements

#### 4.3.2 Culture

Since the employees at both centres indicated that an open and free knowledge sharing environment prevailed within their organisations, it is suggested that their organisational cultures can be regarded as valuable assets that enhance the creation of new organizational knowledge. However, despite OWA's open culture, there were certain social elements and human connections lacking that are essential to ensure that knowledge acquisitions and sharing is fully harnessed. For example, a major behavioural obstacle relates to the rigid and 'rushed' manner in which business processes are carried out by OWA staff. Such an overly organised environment leaves very little time for reflection and according to Laporta (2002) this is not an

unusual situation within the NGO environment and one of the main inhibitors that contribute to the lack of learning among NGOs.

## **5. Recommendations emanating from the study**

The various issues that surfaced during the study have prompted the authors to put forward the following recommendations that they think could further strengthen the knowledge management practices both at individual centre level and within the overall OWI network.

### **5.1 Implement a knowledge management framework and strategy**

In general terms it is suggested that the network should implement a network-wide policy document that would serve as a framework for knowledge management in the network. Such a framework should outline the vision, aims and objectives for knowledge management at both the general network level and at centre level. A more directed and focussed approach to knowledge management would be achieved, knowledge sharing throughout the network would be facilitated and structures that are currently impeding knowledge sharing and knowledge creation could be streamlined. OWI should further institute a knowledge management strategy that would cover critical components to empower employees in human resource areas (e.g. training and learning); to create incentives to promote a knowledge sharing culture; to identify processes to embed knowledge (e.g. mapping knowledge flows, identifying best practices and promoting innovation); and to effectively utilise technology (e.g. for collaboration and knowledge sharing purposes). A strategy will ensure that the basic knowledge transfer processes are co-ordinated in a coherent way.

### **5.2 Implement a knowledge management structure**

OWI should also recognise the complexities of operating knowledge management programmes in a decentralized network environment. One solution would be to implement a more rigorous knowledge management framework that could serve as a platform to facilitate knowledge sharing at both local and international levels. The authors further propose that high quality, multidisciplinary experts be trained or hired at local level to enhance the various knowledge management functions, particularly networking between centres. It is further recommended that to achieve a more unified approach to knowledge management, a network manager be employed at OWI to coordinate and facilitate the knowledge management duties of the local experts. This person should be tasked to institute an awareness campaign among all stakeholders to ensure that the network has a uniform vision of the role of knowledge management and further create awareness among employees of the value of knowledge sharing and the benefits that it creates for an organisation. It is further recommended that a knowledge management council consisting of various staff representatives with diverse skills be constituted to drive the knowledge management processes. This is to avoid knowledge management being relegated to being, for example, purely 'a technology' or 'human resource' affair. Such a council would draw expertise from key stakeholder groups; technology representatives; human resources; board and top management representation; partner representation; and, not least of all, knowledge management expertise.

### **5.3 Map information and knowledge flows**

The diversity of the network suggests that it should have an ongoing programme to identify knowledge and information gaps; bottlenecks in the flow of knowledge; information about present and future knowledge required; and the formats and location where information may be found within the network. The function of knowledge auditing and mapping should therefore be introduced into the network. The auditing and mapping process should be extended to include the creation of a network-wide 'best practice' database containing lessons learned from the various centres. It was evident that OneWorld.nl and OWA could have benefited from the lessons learned within each centre and which are currently 'hidden' from each other.

### **5.4 Capacity enhancing activities**

Congruent with the previous point is the necessity to implement capacity enhancing activities where centres that are better endowed (e.g. for example those in North America & Europe) share 'best practices' and expertise with those that are relatively disadvantaged (e.g. certain African centres). For instance, OWI should consider staff exchange programmes as a means of sharing best practice. Such programmes could be mutually beneficial as NGOs operating in disadvantaged areas (e.g. OWA) could learn technical skills and media knowledge, while NGOs from the developed world (e.g. OneWorld.nl) could obtain first hand knowledge about development issues.

Skills building and knowledge development should also be directed at board members and donors so that they can appreciate the meaning and importance of effective governance and its contribution to NGO accountability. For example board members should be encouraged to attend strategic meetings and they should be included in strategic planning and capacity building interventions.

### **5.5 Investigate technology functionality and use**

OWI should take advantage of the array of technologies that are constantly emerging to enhance knowledge management processes. They should implement critical assessment strategies to evaluate new technologies to establish whether they are suitable and able to facilitate knowledge management activities or whether they require adaptation to suit local requirements.

### **5.6 Strengthen the finance base of the centres**

Due to the complexity of financial challenges, OWI centres should consider adopting creative financing strategies. For example, centres should investigate the viability of consortium funding, endowments, partnerships with the corporate sector, and more effectively using infrastructures such as office buildings to save on overhead costs. They should create a position of “grants compliance officer” for the network and/or the centres to assist with financial reporting and resource acquisition. This would free managers and project staff from burdensome financial responsibilities. They would then be able to focus on roles they are better equipped to fill and in the process costs could further be reduced.

### **5.7 Strengthen relationships between the various NGOs in the network**

If the differences that occur between the various NGOs, particularly between those that operate in Europe and North America and those in other less developed countries are to be respected, a more open and transparent debate needs to take place among them. The purpose of such interaction would be to **strengthen relationships**, promote debate, improve practice, and to seek common grounds with others engaged in the same activities.

### **5.8 Review institutional and management structures**

The OWI network should review all institutional and management structures to ensure that impediments to reinforce knowledge building are removed. Human resource management should be strengthened by encouraging staff members to assume ownership of knowledge sharing efforts, be involved with the development and quality control of the knowledge base; and to ensure that knowledge sharing enhances organizational objectives incentives should be put in place to encourage knowledge creation and sharing. The network should strengthen staff and board contributions through active and relevant recruitment. The learning processes should be strengthened by including alternative but interesting and non-bureaucratic methods of enhancing knowledge sharing in a more free, open and trustworthy environment. More face to face interaction should be encouraged among all OWI staff. This will enhance the transfer of tacit knowledge among employees and will therefore assist the centres to grow and better utilise organizational memory.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

It is hoped that the preceding recommendations could serve as a guide to achieving more effective knowledge creation and sharing within the OWI network. It is suggested that by adopting a more rigorous and standardised knowledge management framework OWI would be empowered to implement better knowledge management practices and be equipped to participate as a knowledge-intensive member of the global economy. Networked NGO's and specifically OWI could operate more efficiently and incrementally enhance service provision if they are given the tools to more effectively leveraging knowledge (both at an individual and organisational level). It is in this light that knowledge management practices should be examined in NGOs, particularly networks with their complex structures and often reoccurring and unavoidable problems.

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