

*IKM Working Paper No. 6*  
*Summary*

***Learning from promoting and using participation: the case of international development organizations in Kenya***

*An enormous amount of knowledge exists within International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) which, if managed well and shared extensively, may actively contribute towards the poverty reduction agenda. The unfortunate discovery is that this knowledge is inaccessible to most people and is stored in formats that are not user-friendly.*

Many good/best practices by international development organizations go unnoticed and have not led to either action or learning within these organizations. There is little learning and sharing of the vast knowledge and experiences from one organization to another and also by other development actors. Important and emerging programmatic themes such as social protection, governance/human rights, microfinance, HIV/AIDs, etc., are not well linked or grounded in the concept of citizen participation. Grassroots development practitioners implement programs without any conceptual or theoretical underpinnings. This shows the absence of critical learning which prevents best practices and emerging innovations (in processes, tools and methodologies) from being implemented. This study therefore sets out to bridge several critical knowledge and information gaps in the development field.

Most international development organizations operating in the global south have, for many years, implemented or promoted projects and programmes using the participatory methodologies that aim to learn from poor people and to ensure the sustainability of development interventions. Not only have they embraced participatory development approaches but they have fully integrated them into their organizations to ensure that the target communities become involved in decision-making and implementing activities for maximum effect. In this process a lot of knowledge is generated. Unfortunately, that is where the journey stops because the way in which this knowledge is stored and made accessible, both inside and outside the organization, actually hampers learning.

This paper was commissioned by IKM Emergent to examine what happens to information derived from the participatory methodologies that are used to plan, implement and evaluate projects, which more and more development organizations are employing these days. The paper is offered to the development community in Kenya and elsewhere not as an end in itself but as a means to an end. It is intended as a contribution to a continuing process of thinking about how we can do development work better: that is, making sure that the time, effort and money invested in development work has the best possible impact on the lives of those whom it is meant to help.

The overall aim of the study is to revitalize participatory learning and change for international development organizations in Kenya. In the recent past, opportunities for development workers in Kenya to meet and share knowledge to strengthen their interventions and program design have been very rare. There is a tendency to concentrate on implementing development programmes that are completely disconnected from participatory learning. This study was therefore a unique intervention; one that tried to rekindle the urgency and sustainability of entrenching participatory learning and sharing within the programmes of international development agencies in Kenya.

The study was done at a time when Kenya was going through political changes which necessitated the active involvement of development agencies, both local and international. The post-election violence that rocked the country in the earlier part of the year 2008, and led to the internal



displacement of thousands of people and the eventual establishment of a coalition government, made this study critical in informing the development efforts of international organizations in particular. There have been major socio-economic disruptions and realignments. Some parts of the country need total reconstruction and the concept of participation has never been more relevant than it is now. Knowledge generated through this study is therefore useful to organizations as they seek to make their interventions more relevant to the needs of their target groups and also in ensuring sustainability by scaling up best practices within and across international development organizations.

The initial objectives of the research carried out for this study were twofold. Namely, (1) to find out how far participatory development lessons are being applied (or not) by the international organizations by examining and documenting evidence of such applications; and (2) to compile learning through case studies of good practice on how learning from participation has changed, or changes, international development organizations. To this end, the following research questions form the core of this study: (1) Which participatory development lessons has the international NGO generated/identified from its work? (2) What is the nature of the knowledge products produced by the international NGO? And (3) What is the international NGO doing to ensure the wider use of its knowledge products?

The study begins with a literature review to establish the status of both published and grey literature on participation and how far this is being applied by international development organizations in Kenya. It involved desk research to review key documents (reports, strategy papers) and websites. This helped to give a picture of the current practice of storing and sharing participation information in international development organizations and whether (and how) they publicize the results of participatory processes internally. Key informant interviews with leaders of international NGOs were then used to capture cases of best practice in documenting, storing, retrieving and disseminating participation knowledge and lessons using a Semi-Structured Interview (SSI) guide. An example of the SSI guide is provided at the end of the paper in an annex. The study highlighted gaps in information and knowledge management within international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and produced valuable lessons that will be useful to researchers, scholars and practitioners of participation. It reveals, albeit only to some extent, the status of learning among the international development organizations which, for a long time, has been shrouded in mystery. Lastly, the findings of the study were shared in a workshop, which added further insights to the report and agreed that the findings were a true reflection of the insufficient learning from promoting and using participation by INGOs.

It was discovered that there is a general tendency for INGOs *not* to document learning owing to various work cultures and institutional challenges. The organizations prioritize the implementation of planned activities at the expense of reflection, learning and action; even though the latter would massively improve the quality of implementation. There is, however, a small group of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) that have developed innovations to ensure that they learn and promote learning among their staff to enhance their programming focus and effectiveness. Some have set up sharing and learning platforms and have created incentives for documenting learning cases and publishing them in international journals. Alternative documentation would in this case ensure that the lessons are fed back and benefit local communities. Other organizations have adopted different approaches to learning and are able to change their strategies based on lessons learnt during implementation. Overall, there is a great wealth of knowledge among INGOs that goes untapped due to poor information and knowledge management practices as well as a range of disincentives to document learning. The findings indicate the need for INGOs to rethink knowledge management i.e. generation, retrieval and sharing. This will ensure that knowledge created at any level is made available to the relevant stakeholders to enhance development effectiveness and thereby promote practical synergies between knowledge management and learning; and by so doing become learning organizations.

To sum up: the institutionalization of organizational learning and change would ensure that lessons learnt are fed into subsequent project implementation on a continuous basis and hence increase the impact of the development process in the target communities.

*About this IKM Summary*

This *IKM Summary* provides an overview of the following *IKM Working Paper*

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