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Problematizing 'Knowledge-for-Development'

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that measures designed to improve the availability and accessibility of information as a key strategy to facilitate development have become ends in themselves, de-linked from their potential to have an impact on Southern knowledge systems that may lead to improved development outcomes. The production and dissemination of ever-greater volumes of information in response to concerns about the uneven availability of information, particularly for individuals and intermediaries based in the global South, are unable to address the persistent problem of the fragmentation of knowledge systems that result from knowledge for development (K4D) initiatives, in which information and knowledge are treated as isolated entities. The article presents the findings of a study into the K4D practices of a network of women/gender information intermediaries. It reveals that attempts to strengthen Southern knowledge systems are forestalled by efforts that merely improve the supply of information rather than engaging with knowledge processes in their entirety, thus limiting their potential to promote improved development outcomes. Proxy measures of success are used that fail to challenge the typically neoliberal underpinnings of the dominant knowledge infrastructure. The author concludes that, if knowledge-based development interventions are to be made more effective, K4D stakeholders need to find ways to engage not just with the supply but with the demand for information as part of broader efforts to strengthen entire knowledge systems in ways that take account of concerns around hegemony.

this paper in their panel at the annual RGS-IBG Conference in 2010 entitled 'Dissemination in the Age of "Impact": Implications for the Politics of Research in the Global South', and for their positive feedback.

INTRODUCTION

In its World Development Report of 1998 entitled *Knowledge for Development*, the World Bank promoted the idea that a lack of information and knowledge was one of the key barriers to development in the global South. This belief has become entrenched in development practice, evidenced, for example, by commitments on the part of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) to spend £300 million of their £1 billion research budget for the period 2008–2013 on supporting research communications, particularly in Southern contexts (DFID, 2008).

From the time of its publication, the World Bank's knowledge paradigm has sustained heavy criticism for its emphasis on market-driven, technical knowledge transfers from the 'developed' North to the 'under-developed' South as a panacea for failing markets and the promotion of development (see Das, 2009). Taking account of such criticisms, but drawing inspiration from the World Bank's articulation of the potential for knowledge-based development interventions to promote more positive development outcomes, development stakeholders have encouraged the proliferation of dedicated knowledge and/or information services for development based in the North as well as the South. New technologies, including the Internet, have facilitated the delivery of information and these initiatives often receive financial and in-kind support from bilateral and multilateral donors in order to make a range of information available free of charge to Northern and Southern-based recipients with the aim of promoting development and empowerment. In addition, there has been a growth in Northern and Southern organizational websites that showcase research and activities linked to development.

One key aim of these information services is to address the concerns raised in the literature (see for example Kleine and Unwin, 2009; Samoff and Stromquist, 2001) and indeed in practice, relating to the costs associated with accessing data, and other problems of accessibility, resulting from the market-driven emphasis in the original model of knowledge for development (K4D). What has remained unproblematized is the belief that it is necessary to produce, collate and disseminate ever greater volumes of information to tackle these problems. Indeed, there persists in both discourse and practice an assumption that knowledge gaps are a major barrier to development and empowerment and that such gaps can be filled

by disseminating information, in a range of formats, to individuals and NGOs, notably in the global South, where the need for information and knowledge is perceived to be the greatest and the paucity most severe. The expectation is that such individuals or NGOs will either use the information themselves or act as intermediaries or brokers for this information, with the result that information and knowledge will 'trickle down' (see Goetz and Sandler, 2007) to where it is needed. Improving the supply of information to Southern-based intermediaries in particular is presumed to be an important element of knowledge brokering targeted at strengthening Southern knowledge systems by increasing the store of accessible information to contribute to more rational, or better, decision making that should, ultimately, lead to improved development outcomes.

In the larger study on which this article is based (Narayanaswamy, 2010), I identified a number of concerns with this assumption, but here I will focus on the practical limitations of this model amplified by a case study of one information network and the practice of producing and disseminating increased volumes of information free of charge via the Internet and by sending printed information in the post to recipients, including individuals and organizations located in the global South. These organizations claim to be information intermediaries or brokers for a range of stakeholders engaged in development processes in their geographic location, including policy makers, other NGOs and the so-called 'grassroots'. The article will begin by reflecting briefly on the nature of knowledge systems; this will be followed by an overview of the original World Bank knowledge paradigm and its critics, locating the historical basis for a renewed emphasis on information and knowledge as key drivers of growth and development, and the resultant proliferation of information intermediaries or knowledge brokers as a particularized form of development intervention. It will then define and problematize the role of those organizations that attempt to bridge perceived information gaps through information-based initiatives to promote specific development outcomes. The analysis will present the key case study organizations — a network of women/gender NGOs acting as intermediaries — as well as the methodology used for this part of the study. The case study findings will then be used to respond to key questions related to the uptake of information amongst Southern users and the extent to which intermediaries are able to use information to meet the information needs of the poor and strengthen Southern knowledge systems. The article will conclude by drawing out the implications of these findings for the work of intermediaries in knowledge-based development practice.

THEORIZING KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Interrogating mainstream K4D paradigms and the problematic nature of the assumptions that underpin them necessitates some insight into the nature of knowledge and knowledge systems. Haywood (1995: 3) supports the notion of a transformative process linking data to information and knowledge, suggesting that: 'the transformation of data into information is thus a process of reception, recognition and conversion … accurate conversion of data to information can only take place when we are able to add value to it from stores of information that we have access to'. The knowledge that derives from information is in turn dependent upon a transformative process occurring during the communication of information itself. As Hart and Kim (2001: 35–6) put it: 'information, by itself, does not constitute knowledge ... One must possess some cognitive filtering and structuring mechanism to sort out what is relevant information from among what is not and to incorporate the new information productively into the old synthesis'. All of these insights converge in the belief that knowledge is not an entity but rather that knowledge creation is a process that is experiential and situated. Knowledge creation is also an interpretive process that, given limitations such as context or language, should not be assumed to be automatic.

By contrast, many stakeholders engaged in K4D initiatives, as we will see, tend to focus on improving the supply of information without putting in place — or tapping into already existing — mechanisms to facilitate the conversion of information into knowledge. This focus effectively fragments the knowledge process, where information and knowledge are not conceptually distinct and instead are treated as tradable entities or commodities which either have a utility outside of, or may be readily adapted to, diverse contexts. Indeed, information intermediaries or knowledge brokers, as the subsequent analysis attests, remain unable to address concerns regarding the fragmentation of knowledge processes that tends to underpin K4D initiatives.

UNPACKING THE WORLD BANK KNOWLEDGE PARADIGM AND ITS CRITICS

Although firmly rooted in the historical architecture of development itself, K4D emerged as a high profile and specialized form of development assistance with the release of the World Bank's World Development Report for 1998/9 (World Bank, 1998) entitled *Knowledge for Development*. This paradigm assumes the desirability of, and indeed need for, knowledge transfers from the richer 'developed' North to an 'undeveloped' or 'developing' poorer South in order to facilitate economic and social development. Global inequality is understood in this context in relation to access to 'knowledge', where the North is perceived to be endowed with intellectual and technical resources and the South is portrayed as suffering a paucity of knowledge, lacking the capacity to either absorb existing knowledge or create new knowledge to promote its own development. In this respect, K4D reinforces a market-oriented model that prioritizes the relationship between knowledge acquisition and economic growth whilst promoting Northern-based knowledge and ideas in relation to the style and content of education and training. The favoured mode of delivery of information promoted by the Bank's K4D strategy is new ICTs, which offer the means to disseminate information widely, efficiently and potentially more equitably than other methods.

In response to the Bank's report, and reflecting historical beliefs that a 'lack of information has been an obstacle to development planning' (Davies, 1994: 3), other bilateral and donor organizations established their own K4D initiatives with the aim of addressing inadequate and/or 'imperfect' information within developing countries. Bilateral and multilateral donors 'embraced the idea of becoming "knowledge agencies"' (King and McGrath, 2004: 130) and became key drivers of this agenda in relation to their own partners and constituencies. Innumerable organizational commitments have been made at multiple levels to improve access to information and promote knowledge as a form of development aid (see for example CIDA, 2008; DFID, 2008; Juma and Yee-Cheong, 2005; Pedersen, 2009). This in turn reinforces the pervasiveness of a belief in an information gap and the need to address it if markets are to be functional, marginalized groups are to be empowered and economic growth and development are to be achieved. In short, K4D has become a kind of orthodoxy, where the need to produce and disseminate more and more information to underpin markets and social capital, delivered either through education or training, is accepted without question.

There are three main critiques of World Bank-inspired K4D initiatives that have been rehearsed in the literature. The first critique is that there is an overarching concern around a perceived Northern hegemony in the production, control and dissemination of information

(see for example Mawdsley et al., 2002; Mehta, 1999) including broader concerns around the hegemony of the English language in development practice (Lins Ribeiro, 1998; Mawdsley et al., 2002). These critiques argue that information and knowledge of value do not only originate in the North, but must also be understood to be rooted in, as well as emerging from, the diverse realities of life in, and the languages of, the global South (Kleine and Unwin, 2009; Mehta, 1999; Powell, 2006). Related concerns around the ways in which knowledge and power are mutually constituted are also important here (Foucault, 1977: 27), leading critically to considerations of the significant power imbalances in the production, dissemination and consumption of development knowledge that reflect broader, more complex inequalities in society (McEwan, 2001: 103) that may not necessarily be addressed simply by improved information provision.

Second, information and knowledge are not simply value-neutral commodities to be bought and sold to promote economic development from the information-rich industrial North (King and McGrath, 2004). Increasing the quantity of (technical) information in circulation, as the World Bank model proposes, does nothing to tackle the profound inequalities that the poor experience in accessing increased volumes of information (Mehta, 1999, 2001). There are also concerns about the emphasis on scientific and technical knowledge; it is not purely science or technology information/education that delivers innovation and/or growth. Just as importantly, information deficits may exist in areas not directly related to markets or growth, such as empowerment or well-being, that may nonetheless have wider consequences for the functionality of markets and for development itself. Moreover, people may have their own knowledge that has no suitable outlet for improving their lives. Information, and the knowledge that derives from it, may encompass a vast array of different social, political and cultural information and knowledge, whether this emanates from the North or the global South.[1]

Third, there is an over-reliance on ICTs in the K4D agenda. Many scholars have argued that whilst ICTs may in theory have the power to reach all the corners of the earth, in reality barriers persist to their capacity to be truly global. Physical barriers include, for example, a lack of ICT infrastructure (Heeks, 2002). Normative barriers also persist in the pedagogies of

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[1] See for example Mehta (1999, 2001) on the WDR; Foucault (1977) on knowledge/power; Escobar (1995) on inequalities in development; Powell (2006) on multiple global knowledges.

computer-based learning and information retrieval (Castells, 2000; Norris, 2001; Warschauer, 2003), and the ways in which these barriers both reflect and exacerbate inequalities (Hafkin and Huyer, 2006).

The element of the World Bank K4D model that remains unproblematized, however, relates to assumptions and stereotypes that persist in K4D practice. Most notably, there is the presumption that poor information and weak knowledge systems prevail in the global South. Even for critics of this model, few question whether a knowledge gap exists, with most focusing attention on whether the World Bank's proposed measures and approaches to address knowledge deficits are likely to achieve the aim of disseminating a diversity of information widely enough.

This critical oversight might be understood as being rooted in historical traditions linking scientific knowledge to 'progress' that underpinned the post-World War II 'western/northern' consensus that linked modernization, knowledge and development.[2] The World Bank's K4D initiative draws on this historical consensus with its promotion, since the 1990s, of the importance of the 'knowledge economy' in development (King and McGrath, 2004: 34; Radhakrishnan, 2007: 147). Knowledge came to be viewed as the new engine of economic growth and addressing knowledge gaps became crucial if development was to be achieved. Given all of this, the World Development Report 1998/99 represented a moment in the evolution of development practice in terms of identifying a decisive point at which knowledge-based development became an identifiable or stand-alone intervention. The articulation and affirmation of this knowledge gap was coupled with the steadily falling costs of new ICTs and the resultant capacity to produce and disseminate vast amounts of information quickly and cheaply. This has resulted in an accelerated proliferation of dedicated knowledge and/or information services for development, based in the North as well as the South, that attempt to address Southern knowledge deficits while at the same time maintaining some scepticism of the original World Bank K4D model, based primarily on the types of critiques outlined above. As the number of information intermediaries has multiplied, their success in highlighting a lack of information as a key problem for marginalized people, particularly women, in developing contexts has increased. The 'lack of

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[2] For an overview of this historical trajectory see Abrahamsen (2000); Escobar (1995); Hart and Kim (2001); Kleine and Unwin (2009); and Melkote and Steeves (2001).

access to information' problem has thus generated increased attention and with it increased funding, which has resulted in an explosion in the K4D industry. It is on the basis of its core assumptions and its vastly increased capacity to produce and disseminate information to a large, diverse and global audience that K4D stakes its transformative claims.

KNOWLEDGE INTERMEDIARIES

At the simplest level, the notion of a knowledge intermediary describes an individual or organization charged with passing on information to those who lack that information, because they lack either the means or the opportunity to acquire it. At any one time, some organizations and individuals will have information and others will not and, provided that sharing such information will bring benefits to one or both parties, any initiative to facilitate such sharing could be considered to be worthwhile. What is more in doubt is the assumption that underpins some K4D practices, undertaken by intermediaries, that assumes that the provision of information alone may act as a key driver of change.

Michaels (2009) offers reflections on the role of knowledge-brokering to promote better uptake of scientific information in relation to environmental policy processes, that are instructive here. She draws on a range of existing literature to suggest that '[k]nowledge brokers act as intermediaries between researchers, who produce knowledge, and policy makers who are prospective consumers of that knowledge … [it is] one means to lessen the information deficit of users that may result from particular information needs not being fulfilled or that potentially useful information exists that users do not know about' (Michaels, 2009: 996). She proposes a typology of six knowledge-brokering strategies of increasing intensity and engagement (ibid.: 997): informing, consulting, matchmaking, engaging, collaborating and building adaptive capacity. She argues that these six strategies are not mutually exclusive and as levels of engagement increase, one strategy subsumes the previous one. In the context of K4D, where, for instance, expertise may be sought to package information that is then compiled in collaboration with other intermediaries, including grassroots NGOs and perhaps even policy makers, in order to influence the discourse in a community of practice or to make a case across government departments, I would argue that degrees of engagement may not be understood in the progressively linear way outlined by Michaels. Indeed, in K4D, various elements of informing, consulting, matchmaking,

engagement, collaboration and capacity building often happen concurrently but in an uneven and an often ad-hoc manner amongst a diverse range of stakeholder groups.

Irrespective of whether the trajectory of engagement is linear or otherwise, where this typology is useful is in identifying the key strategies undertaken by different information or knowledge intermediaries. The K4D practices under scrutiny here align most readily with Michaels' 'inform' and 'consult' knowledge-brokering strategies. In the case of 'inform' strategies, she argues that:

> *Implicit* in this approach is that the recipient immediately grasps the significance of what is being presented and may well accept the information on face value. The *expectation* is that the broker packages the necessary information in a form, such as a fact sheet, that the recipient of it will be able to understand the content, evaluate what actions are required as a result of that understanding, such as no action or finding out more, and then decide whether or not to take those actions. (ibid.: 997–8; emphasis added)

In relation to consulting, Michaels (ibid.: 998) suggests that this requires more engagement, where the broker 'may be the individual charged with locating one or more individuals with salient expertise'. It is useful to add here that intermediaries may themselves be called upon to be the experts or consultants, particularly where organizations are looking for expertise or support with their own K4D initiatives (whether or not these are ICT-based).

Michaels' work brings together a range of existing literature on defining and understanding knowledge-brokering between science and policy, and has recently informed attempts to articulate and define a place for the contribution of information intermediaries beyond science to development practice more broadly. One such network, the I-K-Mediary Network,[3] convened originally by the knowledge services based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, UK, defines itself as: 'an emerging global network of organisations that play a knowledge and information intermediary role in development. It brings together organisations that facilitate access to and use of research by providing portals, gateways, resource centres and related services' (Kunaratnam, 2011: 3).

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[3] www.ikmediarynetwork.org

These information intermediaries, increasingly referred to by the shorthand 'infomediaries', are perceived as pivotal to improving the uptake of development research, evidenced by the growing emphasis being placed by donors on supporting their work. DFID, in addition to providing core funding for the knowledge services based at IDS, has also extended the funding for the 'Research Into Use' (RIU) programme, which does not directly support researchers or the constituents of development programmes, but rather focuses efforts on linking up with 'those who articulate the demand for information on behalf of the poor and those who repackage information to meet that demand (known as "infomediaries"). RIU will strongly encourage new partnerships with such users' (RIU, 2007: 3). RIU is by no means alone; this intermediary landscape that uses 'portals, gateways, resource centres and related services' is populated by a wide range of interventions designed to provide information services for development stakeholders based in both the North and the South. Examples include

- DFID's R4D website (www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/), which showcases DFID-funded research on development;

- Eldis (www.eldis.org), part of the knowledge services at the IDS, based in the UK; this is an online, free, searchable database of development research that also hosts open access spaces and blogs for users, particularly targeting users in the global South

- The Global Development Network (www.gdNet.org) , based in Egypt: a searchable database that also provides free membership, claiming to 'support Southern researchers to contribute and debate ideas in development thinking, policy and practice';

- D.Net (www.dnet.org.bd/), based in Bangladesh; it describes itself as a 'social enterprise established in January 2001 to promote access to information and knowledge for all citizens though interactive digital media in achieving constitutional, national and international developmental objectives', based in Bangladesh.

The focus of the analysis here, then, is to interrogate the response adopted by many information intermediaries to the dual concerns of marketization and Northern hegemony in the original World Bank K4D model, by increasing the volume of information and improving accessibility to this increased volume of information through the Internet and printing/posting materials directly to individuals and intermediaries free of charge, with an emphasis on users in the global South. This has included moving the focus away from scientific, technical or

market-specific information; the websites, portals and gateways cited here, amongst many others, provide information geared towards support for social concerns including gender equality, human rights, HIV/AIDS or reproductive health. Ensuring that greater volumes of information are being produced and disseminated free of charge is also meant to enhance the capacity of those who receive information in both Northern and Southern contexts to either act upon this information, or to produce and disseminate new information. This is to promote not only goals that are narrowly linked to economic growth, as emphasized in the original K4D model, but broader development goals such as empowerment, participation and the opportunity for marginalized groups in particular to challenge mainstream development paradigms by developing their own knowledge systems.

Increasing the volume, diversifying the types (which frequently privileges the inclusion of Southern-based content) and removing the costs associated with accessing information are 'progressive' measures intended to address key shortcomings of the original K4D model. They have, in theory, a dual effect. First, they respond to marketization by effectively de-linking information from its relationship with the exigencies of markets and the limits this may place on the nature of information acquisition activities as well as the content of the information itself. This corrective is therefore designed to improve both accessibility to, and inclusion in, the dominant knowledge infrastructure, which is perceived as largely inaccessible to those individuals and groups in the global South who, given their relative marginality, are frequently the target of development interventions. Second, ensuring that greater volumes of diverse information are available addresses Northern hegemony by increasing stores of accessible information to underpin and strengthen the development of Southern knowledge systems in a way that does not dictate how that information is to be used or applied. This diversified, hands-off approach to information provision ensures that Southern-based actors in particular are able to engage with, and potentially act on, information in ways that are appropriate to strengthening their own knowledge systems, marking a deliberate move away from historical tendencies for problems and solutions to be defined on narrow, Northern terms.

PROBLEMATIZING THE WORK OF INTERMEDIARIES

Where the work of intermediaries such as Eldis and D.Net deviates from Michaels'
formulations, then, is the objective to go beyond policy makers to variously reach 'the poor',
'Southern researchers' and 'all [Bangladeshi] citizens', thus broadening but also diluting the
strategies Michaels describes. In Michaels' original formulation, 'informing' as a knowledge-
brokering strategy with policy makers may be feasible, as policy makers and others with
whom intermediaries work at this level may reasonably be expected to have a store of
relevant information with which to undertake the process of synthesis required to make
decisions about action (or inaction). The difficulty occurs when this knowledge-brokering
strategy is broadened beyond a specific policy area such as the environment or health, and
beyond policy makers, to include a wide range of information that is to be disseminated to
'the poor', 'all citizens' or 'the global South', as the information has to potentially traverse an
increased number of discursive or pedagogical barriers to demonstrate relevance and
applicability. While these services challenge the Northern hegemony of mainstream
knowledge paradigms by privileging Southern research and users and avoiding the kinds of
initiatives that have historically been associated with intrusive and paternalistic attempts to
direct the growth of Southern knowledge economies in line with Northern ideals and
priorities, the danger is that they in fact reinforce the tendency in the original K4D model to
treat information as an isolated entity that may be removed from a knowledge system and
readily traded, adapted or applied in a range of diverse contexts (see Samoff and Stromquist,
2001). Indeed, they reiterate the basic premise of this model, namely that knowledge systems
may be broken down into constituent parts and delivered as 'information products or
services', where the essential work of comprehension, absorption and action/reaction is left to
those to whom the information is being communicated.

This is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, it runs contrary to Freireian notions of
conscientization. Freire (1970) famously 'advocated an education based on dialogue that
would lead to an on-going process of reflection, followed by action' (Richards, 2001: 4).
Freire's vision of dialogical learning necessitated active engagement in knowledge processes
to facilitate action in support of goals such as empowerment and social justice. To produce
and disseminate information without ensuring that engagement is occurring assumes — as
does Michaels' 'inform' knowledge-brokering strategy — that 'recipients of expert-delivered
wisdom ... [will] accumulate and store that wisdom in order later to draw on it' (Samoff and
Stromquist, 2001: 654). Indeed this intermediary role that consists of 'portals, gateways,
resource centres and related services' is underpinned by a common set of assumptions about

the potential for increased information availability to contribute to strengthening the knowledge systems of others, where information and knowledge are treated as isolated entities, effectively disaggregating the knowledge process. This runs counter to what we know about the nature of knowledge systems, which, as Freire (1970) amongst many others repeatedly asserts, are linked, situated and experiential.

Secondly, within K4D initiatives premised on the disaggregation of knowledge processes, the production and dissemination of vast amounts of information can be justified as an end in itself; the imperative of seeking out and then acting on this increasingly available information is transferred to the poor. Underpinning this approach is an assumption that information, like wealth, will 'trickle down' (Goetz and Sandler, 2007) to those most in need of information to promote their own development, ultimately addressing goals of poverty alleviation in the aggregate. The key effect of this has been to side-line the state and structural explanations of inequality and instead to emphasize the agency of the individual (Radhakrishnan, 2007; Sharma, 2008). Efforts to diversify and improve access for users in the global South reinforce the assumption that individuals need access to information and that empowerment will result if they choose to act upon the increased volumes of information now being made more widely available. Yet given the nature of embedded inequalities in both existing market structures and in the mainstream knowledge infrastructure, increasing the access to, and the volume of, information produced is not inherently valuable. Contrary to the assumption that intermediaries are effective at ensuring that information is 'passed on to a wider group of people' (Humphries, 2008), Goetz and Sandler (2007: 169) instead suggest that information is as likely to be hoarded by people 'in their own private knowledge bank' as it is to 'trickle down'. As Davies (1994) argues, where information production and dissemination are not tied to particular decision-making tasks or geared towards more dialogic learning relationships (Freire, 1970), concerns persist around how this fragmented K4D model could be relied upon to actively address the knowledge deficits of 'the poor' in the global South.

INTERROGATING THE WORK OF KNOWLEDGE INTERMEDIARIES: CASE STUDY

The analysis up to now has suggested that removing the costs and improving the diversity of information, whilst undoubtedly important and laudable, still do not address the fundamental

fragmentation of knowledge processes that tends to occur in K4D initiatives designed to improve its supply — efforts that are largely undertaken by infomediaries in isolation of other knowledge-process strengthening measures. Yet, what is also clear is that this is a reasonable and perhaps even necessary response, especially on the part of Northern organizations. Given the well-documented critiques of the monopoly on knowledge creation with respect to the original K4D model, they want to improve the supply-side of information and to be both strategic and hands-off about trying to reach knowledge intermediaries based in the global South. These Southern organizations should, in theory, be better placed to use that information to strengthen and underpin Southern-based knowledge systems on their own terms with local stakeholders. This approach rests on the assumption that distinct Southern knowledge systems exist, and that Southern-based organizations are able and willing (by virtue of their geographic and/or discursive location), to use and to repackage information to address local or regional information deficits.

Given what we know about knowledge systems and the related concerns around treating information as an isolated entity, the two questions the empirical study needs to address in this analysis are: does increasing the availability of information with an emphasis on the needs of Southern-based users and intermediaries improve the use and/or uptake of information amongst this group? Are Southern-based users, themselves privileged in their role as intermediaries with greater insight into, and incentives to address, the needs of their own knowledge processes, able to harness this information to meet the information needs of 'the poor' and strengthen their own Southern knowledge systems?

In order to gain insights into these questions, I chose to focus on the K4D practices of one network of women's NGOs and research centres. Capitalizing on the growth of new ICTs and the possibility of linking local issues to global movements, women's NGOs and networks are frequently credited with assiduously undermining hierarchies in organizations and the associated Northern hegemony in both the production and the distribution of information and knowledge (Mawdsley et al., 2002). Moreover, they are often perceived as being able to overcome barriers to information sharing and utilization, including a lack of access to new ICTs. Even where barriers to ICT access exist: '[i]t is often assumed that the horizontal or circular structures provided by women's networks defy the vertical exercise of power and redistribute it, while using the technology for a wider reach and a more friendly use' (Riaño, 1994, cited in Valk et al., 1999: 30).

Recognizing this Northern hegemony in information production and participating actively in, as well as drawing legitimacy from, the exponential and well-documented growth of transnational feminist networks (see Moghadam, 2005; Rai, 2003), organizations committed to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment have engaged proactively with the potential for improved information provision to act as a key driver of change, embracing the twin strategies of improving accessibility to a greater diversity of information whilst privileging the information needs of individuals and organizations acting as intermediaries in the global South.

In order to interrogate the importance of producing and disseminating ever greater volumes of diversified information and privileging the capacity of Southern intermediaries to use and repackage information to strengthen Southern knowledge systems, I conducted a qualitative, multi-site ethnography, consisting of interviews, (participant) observation and extensive documentary analysis between October 2006 and June 2009. This work set out to examine the changing nature of information as it moved between one gender information intermediary based in the North — the Gender and Development Knowledge Service (GDKS)[4] — to a number of intermediaries and user groups based in the South, in this case, in the city of New Delhi in India. GDKS aims to provide a link between theory, policy and practice for practitioners and policy makers in order to further gender equality, particularly in the global South. It produces and disseminates information on key areas of interest that cross-cut with gender in both printed and online formats to mainstream and gender specialists as well as other information intermediaries who are identified as key development change agents in both the North and South.

GDKS is part of a broader landscape of women's research/information dissemination NGOs/services based in both the North and the South that host online websites and databases, and produce and disseminate copious amounts of information through reports, newsletters and e-mail alerts to a global audience of development stakeholders, to address perceived information gaps for and about women that are presumed to inhibit development. Examples include the International Women's Tribune Centre (IWTC) based in New York whose

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[4] As per ethical guidelines and agreements with study participants, all names related to the case study have been anonymized. GDKS is a pseudonym.

mission echoes GDKS's desire to reach NGOs 'on the ground' perceived to be more aware of local information needs. Isis International, based in the Philippines, is a feminist development communications NGO committed to 'facilitating networking and information sharing of women's movements in the global South' (Isis International, 2010).

In addition to following the information trail created between GDKS's print and electronic products through to subscribers in New Delhi, the findings were further triangulated through an in-depth study of the K4D work of seventeen women's organizations, including NGOs, research centres and units within large, mainstream Indian development NGOs on GDKS's mailing list in New Delhi. Although issues related to gender equality and women's human rights featured widely, the mailing list included NGOs engaged in women's political rights, employment and economic rights, women's sexual and reproductive health, women's empowerment, consciousness-raising, education and literacy, social policy and women's rights, governance, democracy and participation. The organizations ranged from small NGOs housed in a two-bedroomed apartment, through to mid-size NGOs occupying an entire house, to large, internationally recognized research centres providing research and consultancy services on women, gender and development in India. Of the seventeen organizations in the study, ten hosted resource centres offering printed material for loan or purchase on a range of gender and development issues.

Although most of these organizations are not exclusively information intermediaries, knowledge building, the centrality of information production and dissemination, and 'information as power', all feature as key elements of their work programmes, reinforcing the assumption that there is a paucity of available information. All seventeen mission statements articulate commitments to develop, promote and disseminate increased volumes of information to support activities such as education, awareness-raising, advocacy, conscientization, training and capacity building to promote the exercise of 'knowledge as power' amongst groups, notably women, perceived to be marginalized from the dominant knowledge edifice.

The findings emerging from this study allow us to address the two questions posed above as to whether GDKS's efforts have improved the uptake of information amongst recipients in New Delhi and whether the K4D practices of these users in turn strengthen local, Southern knowledge processes. With regards to the first question, the findings suggest that questions

remain about the efficacy of this approach in improving the uptake and availability of relevant information; in the Indian context there is a general perception of information overload that results in materials simply not being read, let alone used. Perhaps ironically, this does not appear to have curtailed the production and dissemination of large amounts of information across the case study organizations. Indeed, there are concerns around the tendency for information production and dissemination activities amongst New Delhi-based organizations, in particular, to result in extensive repetition and overlap in the themes or issues being addressed. With regards to the second question, the monitoring and evaluation practices of GDKS and the collective case study organizations are neither consistent nor robust; there is simply not enough information or feedback to assess whether these information resources, once produced and disseminated, are meeting any specific information needs that would contribute to information diversity or the strengthening of Southern knowledge systems, let alone to increased participation and information uptake amongst marginalized groups. Each of these outcomes will be analysed in turn.

Information Overload and a Lack of Diversity

Whilst the principle of removing impediments to the uptake of information is important, one side-effect of privileging the increased production and dissemination of information as a way of improving the accessibility of marginalized groups to the dominant knowledge infrastructure, as Gow and Morss (1985: 176, cited in Davies, 1994: 3) argue, is the 'tendency to generate information for its own sake — or the "more-information-is-good syndrome"'. Davies continues (ibid.): '[t]he generation of too much information can be as unusable as too little, especially if it is not explicitly tied to specific decision-making tasks'. The result, given increasing demands on the time of workers in both Northern and Southern NGOs and agencies, in the context of a growing 'report culture' and the need for increased documentation in relation to donor accountability (Mawdsley et al., 2002), is that there is very little time left for practitioners to actually read, let alone share or disseminate, information to facilitate improved development outcomes. As Mawdsley et al. (ibid.: 24) argue: 'The importance of published material is hard to evaluate. Most NGOs have shelves of books, government publications, NGO publications, manuals and newsletters, but staff usually say that they "have no time to read"'.

Both of these concerns are reflected in the GDKS case study findings, with implications for

the question of uptake amongst recipients. Despite GDKS's efforts to improve the availability of relevant information, respondents in New Delhi repeatedly pointed to a lack of *appropriate* information as a barrier to the utility of the information being made available, not just by GDKS, but also by many information intermediaries. The key problem is that general information of the kind produced by GDKS was considered to be inapplicable and inappropriate for the work and research that many of the NGOs do with disadvantaged women in Northern India (see also Srivastava, 2002). Perhaps it is this reported lack of information that organizations like GDKS are responding to in their attempts to produce more and more information, but the research suggests that this is a problem that information intermediaries will find very difficult to solve from remote sites that produce generic information. Whilst respondents did feel that GDKS could feature more South Asian material, they did not necessarily see it as GDKS's responsibility to fill this gap.

Moreover, even if information intermediaries try to provide such information, it does not mean that it will be utilized. By far the most consistent response when asked about the use of GDKS and similar materials was to cite a lack of time as the key barrier. This was the case across all professional and organizational types, and echoes Mawdsley et al.'s (2002) findings. Complaints about 'information overload' that resulted from being 'bombarded' by too many e-mails, too much information 'on my desk' and not having 'time to read' were voiced variously by heads of Southern women's NGOs, senior staff in multilateral and bilateral agencies and university professors.

Related to this are concerns around repetition and a lack of diversity in the materials, which are particularly notable in the K4D work of the New Delhi-based organizations. As the capital of India, New Delhi could be expected to have a greater concentration of non-profit organizations, given that other government and donor-based development stakeholders are located in the relatively small geographic area of Central and South New Delhi. On the other hand, it is important to consider the disproportionate resources that are being spent by these organizations, working on similar issues and producing a wide range of printed and electronic material, which, according to respondents, is primarily produced in English, raising questions about the diversity of information potentially contributing to the strengthening of Southern knowledge systems. As one respondent pointed out:

> What has happened is, there's a logic to NGO functioning, so bringing out a
> newsletter is like, you know, part of your funding agenda … Who is gaining

from it, I don't know. I mean, I am not writing off all NGOs and I am not writing off all the newsletters, but, what I am saying is, there's a lot of duplication, there's a lot of re-inventing of the wheel, there's a lot of repetition (IA, Research Fellow, Research Centre).

Concerns around repetition in published outputs and the expected outcomes associated with more 'progressive' knowledge initiatives raise what AV, a Research Centre librarian, suggests are key questions about the fundamental premises of the K4D model itself:

I feel ... a lot of information ... its not being used to the extent it is being produced. And the efforts that are spent in bringing these things out, they are not fully utilized to that extent … there's no dialogue happening between the agencies who are producing information, between the agencies who are processing information, and between the people who are using information. This is where I feel the gap lies.

Taken together, these findings point to a key paradox. Greater volumes of information may be produced and disseminated to try to address perceived gaps, but this seems only to reduce the likelihood that potential recipients will have the time to access it, as these greater volumes of information add to feelings of 'information overload' — particularly when there are also concerns about repetition, with the same ideas being expressed through similar output types. Despite these problems, all the organizations examined here disseminate copious amounts of information in a range of print and electronic formats to a wide range of stakeholders in a manner similar to GDKS, with a notable emphasis on websites, books, reports and training manuals. As a Retired Senior Advisor to the Government of India suggested, the sheer volume of information being made available in these formats by a range of agencies does not address the real information gaps that many poor and/or marginalized women in particular may face. This, she argues, is primarily because low levels of literacy limit access to this information for the vast majority of recipients who would be considered the ultimate targets or beneficiaries of these efforts. The concern here is around the discursive exclusions that persist in relation to the professionalization of development discourse and practice (see Kothari, 2001; Laurie et al., 2005). It is not possible to address the exclusion of those groups who are unable to participate as a result of language or literacy constraints by simply increasing the volume of freely available information. This is the case even when we consider those knowledge initiatives attempting to be more 'progressive' by privileging Southern

and/or marginalized groups. This is limiting the realization of the presumed benefits of producing and disseminating ever greater volumes of information.

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Mechanisms

Whilst information overload and the repetitiveness of information products clearly affect the uptake and use of information within this network of organizations, there remains the question of whether any monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms are in place to gain insight into the nature of regional or local information gaps and what efforts may be necessary to strengthen local knowledge systems. The empirical evidence demonstrates the persistence of the belief that information, if made more widely available, will simply trickle-down to where it is needed, either directly or through other intermediaries. The evidence further suggests that existing M&E practices are weak or non-existent, in turn inhibiting more constructive reflection on the efficacy of these types of K4D initiatives. There is a tendency for information intermediaries to employ quantitative over qualitative M&E mechanisms, such as the frequency and diversity of website visitors, the number of newsletters printed or posted or the number of subscribers located in the global South, as proxy measures for efficacy. These types of measures provide little insight into how or even whether improving the diversity and availability of information for marginalized users is beneficial and whether it is having any effect at all on Southern knowledge systems. A concern about the need for more robust indicators was echoed by a recent external evaluation of GDKS's information services.[5] In addition to critiquing its use of the types of quantitative proxy measures outlined above, the report suggested that GDKS's existing measures of influence or impact tended to be 'ad hoc' or 'anecdotal', making it unclear how or where GDKS services are being used in any meaningful way.

We can identify a similar issue in the M&E practices of the collective case study organizations, all of which admit that in the majority of cases, there is no M&E for their

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[5] In order to protect the anonymity of GDKS, the reference for this evaluation is withheld.

knowledge initiatives, instead citing ad hoc and anecdotal feedback as evidence of the importance of the information production and dissemination tasks they undertake. Indeed, many of the respondents in the study claim, based on their anecdotal feedback, that the demand *is* there for the materials they produce, despite having no detailed dissemination or feedback mechanisms. Whether based on people requesting translations (mentioned by RC, Executive Director, Southern NGO) or the fact that their organizations continue to receive an increasing number of information queries (indicated by AK, Director, Southern NGO), respondents appear to equate requests for information with the usefulness and importance of information. Others argue that the sheer volume of publications they shift, measured by the number distributed at events or the size of print-runs, is a good indicator of demand (indicated by RK, Regional Programme Manager, International NGO and PM, Director of Programmes, Southern NGO). Given that these organizations do not, by their own admission, have any systematic dissemination or feedback mechanisms, it is impossible to know who is requesting the information, how, or even whether it is being used, whether any of it is filtering down to the marginalized groups that the NGOs are committed to supporting, and whether any of this information production and dissemination activity is actually strengthening Southern knowledge systems.

PM (Director of Programmes, Southern NGO), echoing GDKS's beliefs in how progressive knowledge practices function, repeats the persistent assumption that producing more and more information is both necessary and crucial; the act of putting information into the public domain is the most important outcome, whether or not it is useful or used:

> I will indiscriminately send out information ... at some point, somebody is going to turn it over or it goes into the library. So somebody will read it. I mean that's the kind of logic we are using which can be flawed, because it means that you are just sending out material into this abyss and you don't know what's happening ... Very clearly there is no strategy, I mean we produce material, it goes out and sometimes we get responses, sometimes we don't. So we don't know … I am perfectly happy with it going out into the large wide world and actually not knowing what is happening with it.

This reflects a belief, at the organizational level, in the power of information alone to act as a driver of change and to support progressive development outcomes. Weak monitoring and evaluation systems make the relative success of these information-brokering efforts hard to measure.

CONCLUSION

Scrutinizing the K4D practices of women's NGOs and networks based in the North and New Delhi, chosen as a focus because of their frequently lauded capacity to overcome the shortcomings of mainstream knowledge paradigms, provides crucial insights into the concerns that persist over the fragmentation of the knowledge process in K4D initiatives. Revisiting the questions posed at the beginning of the empirical analysis, we can reflect firstly on whether increasing the availability of information with an emphasis on the needs of Southern-based users and intermediaries has improved the use and/or uptake of information amongst users in New Delhi. The empirical evidence suggests that GDKS's efforts to improve the availability and diversity of information to promote positive change has met with limited success; recipients of this information express concerns around information overload and repetition, whilst experiencing context-specific information gaps that a Northern-based information service is not likely to be able to fill.

Secondly, the empirical evidence allows us to reflect on whether the Southern-based users to whom GDKS disseminates information are able to harness this information to meet the information needs of 'the poor' and strengthen their own, Southern-based knowledge systems. Despite identifying concerns around information overload and the need for more targeted information products, these organizations are themselves flooding New Delhi's development sector with a range of information products focusing on similar, often repetitive themes that are disseminated widely but without any particular strategy. The existence of more information in this context is, by the admission of those working in these organizations, not necessarily useful to anyone; nor are there monitoring and evaluation systems in place that would provide insights into how, or even whether, this information was being used either to address the information gaps experienced by marginalized groups or to underpin the development of Southern-based knowledge systems. Instead, for the intermediary functions undertaken by all of the case study organizations, the limited focus in relation to monitoring consists of proxy measures of success such as requests for translations, growing numbers of information queries, numbers of website visitors or print runs, which provide little insight into the actual value of the information being made available.

Despite the efforts of these intermediaries to address the market-focus and Northern hegemony associated with mainstream knowledge paradigms, what remains intact is the

disaggregation of knowledge processes into their constituent parts, where information is treated as a tradable entity. Whilst improving the availability and diversity of information, with a particular emphasis on reaching Southern-based intermediaries and users and thus creating the conditions for Southern knowledge systems to develop on their own terms, is an important way to counter concerns around Northern hegemony, treating information in this way mirrors neoliberal beliefs that information, like wealth, will filter down to wherever there is a need or demand. This approach establishes a self-help model; once the information is made available in the public domain, whether by Northern or Southern-based intermediaries, the responsibility for the uptake of information resources is ultimately transferred to 'the poor' themselves, who are the least likely to be able to capitalize on them.

The empirical evidence also highlights the problem of measuring the influence of these mechanisms: monitoring is less about ensuring that information is reaching people or is tailored to maximize its utility, and more about ensuring that more and more information is simply made available as an end in itself, regardless of whether it is being used by anyone at all. The suggestion from this research is that less information, tailored to the specific needs of certain groups to address key shortcomings in their own knowledge processes (after establishing whether a gap exists), would be preferable. But this would require a shift in thinking to focus less on the availability of information and more on why and how marginalized groups are constrained in how they access and utilize available information to strengthen their own knowledge systems. This analysis would suggest that, at the very least, stakeholders engaged in knowledge-based development should undertake two tasks: first, to prioritize demand-led, targeted information production and dissemination practices that take account of the nature of the knowledge processes into which the information is being disseminated; and second, to ensure that their K4D initiatives are regularly monitored and evaluated not just for diversity and accessibility, but also for questions of relevance and uptake of information, notably in relation to the needs of marginalized groups attempting to develop their own knowledge systems.

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