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KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AT THE AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

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The African Development Bank

The African Development Bank (AfDB) Group was established in 1964, and its mission is to mobilize resources for Africa's economic and social development. With this objective in mind, the institution aims at assisting African countries – individually and collectively - in their efforts to achieve sustainable economic development and social progress. To achieve its development objectives, the Bank seeks to stimulate and mobilize internal and external resources to promote investments as well as provide its regional member countries with technical and financial assistance. The Bank's Headquarters is in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, but since 2003 it has been temporarily relocated to Tunis, Tunisia, with 30 Field Offices and two Regional Offices throughout Africa. The AfDB Group comprises of 78 shareholders, including all the 53 African countries (Regional Member Countries), in addition to 25 non-regional member countries from the Americas, Europe, and Asia.

Definition of Knowledge Management

The thrust of knowledge management (KM) is to create a process of valuing the intangible assets of organizations in order to best leverage knowledge internally and externally. Knowledge management (KM) therefore, deals with creating, securing, capturing, coordinating, combining, retrieving and distributing knowledge. The intention is to create an environment where knowledge sharing becomes power, in contrast to the old paradigm that describes knowledge as power in its own right. Organizations that succeed in KM are likely to view

knowledge as an asset and to develop organizational norms and values which enable knowledge to grow and flow to its intended users at the appropriate moment. The AfDB simply describes KM as "getting the right knowledge to the right people at the right time, and helping them to apply it in ways that strive to improve organizational performance".

The emerging role of knowledge in development

The role of knowledge in improving the living standards of poor nations has been the focus of development research in recent years. Knowledge economies allow developing countries to bridge the current resource gaps that divide the world into rich and poor nations. The role of KM in development only emerged in 1996, however, when the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) produced its seminal report on the knowledge economy. This was followed in 1998 by the World Development Report on knowledge for development which concluded that "knowledge has perhaps become the most important factor determining the standard of living" (World Bank, 1998). From that time KM began to constitute a core theme in the development agenda of many development actors.

Unfortunately, however, because of this relatively recent emergence of the concept of KM, many organizations lack consistent processes or approaches for successfully identifying, capturing, sharing, transforming, and applying knowledge. The result of such a situation is random and informal knowledge sharing and transfer activities that, in turn, have little impact on the business.

The KM of the African Development Bank

KM is integral to the objectives of the AfDB's mandate as Africa's premier development finance institution. In his inaugural statement on 1st September 2010, at the beginning of a second term of office as President of the Bank, Dr. Donald Kaberuka announced that during the following five years of his presidency he would "strongly reinforce [the AfDB] internal knowledge generation [and] dissemination capacity, to inform [its] own work in this area, but also to determine how best Africa draws dividends from this new global economy". This statement was a clear testimony of the commitment of the Bank's leadership to combine knowledge and financial resources for developing innovative solutions to Africa's complex economic challenges. The statement also emphasized AfDB recognition of the need to implement an enterprise-wide KM strategy as a conscious and consistent long term vision to gather, store and retrieve knowledge and then help disseminate such information and knowledge in a timely manner to those who need it.

Since 2005 the Bank has approved and implemented two KM strategies. An initial strategy for strengthening the Bank's role as a "knowledge bank" was approved by the Board of Directors in March 2005, and covered the period until 2007. The implementation of the first strategy gained momentum following the establishment in 2006 of the Office of the Chief Economist with the specific responsibility of improving KM and initiating the process of making the AfDB a knowledge bank. The second KM strategy, covering the period from 2008 to 2012, was

approved by the Board of Directors after taking account of the lessons learned from the implementation of the previous strategy.

The overarching goal of the current strategy is to enhance the development effectiveness of the Bank as the leading knowledge bank in Africa, and seeks to achieve two key strategic purposes: to establish and entrench a knowledge culture within the Bank; and to enhance the operational effectiveness of the Bank's development intervention. The first objective requires that the Bank takes steps to transform itself into an institution where knowledge can be effectively produced and used for improving quality at entry and achieving results on the ground. The strategy has identified four knowledge pillars related to

1. knowledge generation for development effectiveness;
2. leveraging knowledge through partnerships;
3. enhancing knowledge dissemination and sharing; and
4. enhancing the application of knowledge to strengthen operational effectiveness.

The role of the African Development Institute

In 2010 the Board of Directors approved the first Bank-wide Capacity Development (CD) strategy. In addition to offering stakeholder demand-driven training courses, the CD strategy focuses on the need to transform the Bank into a learning organization: one that provides opportunities for Bank staff and regional stakeholders to continuously improve their organizational and technical competencies as a means of achieving the Bank's development objectives. The strategy has been largely informed by lessons learned from the Bank's experience as well as best practices of other capacity development partners world-wide, and is aligned with the Bank's KM strategy.

Perhaps, it is worth noting that several other KM learning and capacity development activities and practices are taking place throughout the Bank. These are organized and conducted by individual organizational units including Human Resources and Operations Departments, under different names and at different times, both within the Bank and externally. The African Development Institute is currently working more closely with these and other units of the Bank to coordinate such activities in a more coherent manner. The good news is that the Institute's efforts in this direction have resulted in a series of inter-departmental coordination meetings. Some remarkable agreements have been reached, which will be reflected in better coordinated Capacity and KM Development Programs in 2012.

Information and knowledge repositories at the African Development Bank

The Bank has a number of robust online repositories that store data, knowledge and information resources, often in documentary formats. The information in these repositories falls into three categories: some resources are open to all users, including external users; some can only be accessed within the Bank intranet site; and others can be accessed by external users who request login authorization. The repositories include:

- those which provide Bank staff with access to external knowledge and business intelligence subscription databases;
- those that store internal knowledge, such as the Board of Directors' documents, annual reports and other official Bank publications and flagship knowledge products;
- the AfDB Statistical Data Portal;
- the AfDB Internet Website; and,
- AfDB internal workflow and human resources applications.

The widespread use in the Bank of downloaded desktop search toolbars, including those from from Google and Yahoo, brings to mind a way of integrating access to the Bank's considerable knowledge and information resources that are available through the above mentioned repositories. In addition the Bank has numerous and often overlapping professional, thematic and country-based networks that share information and knowledge via the AfDB Outlook email system. Most prominent among these is the AfDB Network of Economists, which has more than 500 members. Little or no coordination appears to exist, however, among these networks, although they could form the nucleus of a coherent Bank-wide collaborative network of practices.

The Bank is currently studying modalities to implement an integrated "search toolbar" to be installed as part of the Bank's intranet browser, to give access to its networked knowledge and information resources. Such a toolbar would provide users with quick, permanent and always-visible entry points for the many search tasks undertaken by professional staff. Some publishers of external subscription knowledge resources have however been sensitive to allowing access to their resources by any methods other than their own search interfaces.

The Role of the Information and Knowledge Management Division

In 2010 the Board of Directors of the Bank Group approved the establishment of the Information and Knowledge Management Division as a new division within the Office of the Chief Economist complex. The role of the new division is to provide and manage knowledge and information services to support the operations, research and management activities of the Bank with the ultimate objective of serving as a global last-resort provider of information relevant to African economic and social development issues. The Division will also act as an important tool in the implementation of the Bank strategies for Capacity Development, Knowledge Management and Knowledge Dissemination. Extending the reach and range of development knowledge is a key feature of the Division's objective, whose principal activities are to:

- develop and maintain balanced collections of information resources in print and digital formats that will be accessed via an online information portal of digital resources. These include strategic business intelligence databases, statistical portals, electronic research journals, full text documents and digital libraries from external sources;

- provide information searching and retrieval assistance face-to-face and remotely;
- facilitate the circulation of information material, including newsprint services, to senior management and Board members;
- provide computing facilities for consultants and external visitors;
- organize awareness services to inform users of new resources and services via email alerts, newsletters and promotional events; and
- organize information searching skills, training seminars and workshops for staff, including those who are deployed in the Field and Regional Offices;
- coordinate editing, printing and publishing Bank flagship knowledge products, including books, journals, research papers, conference proceedings and publicity materials, as well as e-learning and distance learning materials and electronic publishing on the Web;
- coordinate and organize activities aimed at the dissemination of Bank flagship knowledge products internally and externally via mail, E-mail, and knowledge dissemination stands as side events during Bank Annual Meetings, conferences and other professional gatherings;
- coordinate innovative KM approaches such as communities of practice, staff profile pages, networks of practice, story telling, after action review seminars and other KM strategies, as new Bank KM tools; and
- assist in the organization and management of learning events including conferences, seminars, workshops and meetings.

The principal beneficiaries of the Knowledge and Information Services Division include all Bank staff, with emphasis on professional staff, senior management and Board Members. Other important users will be those Bank employees who are deployed in Field Offices as well as researchers, policy makers and the academia in Bank Member Countries.

Internally, the Division works closely with all AfDB organizational units and Field Offices, while externally it maintains close collaborative arrangements with several regional and international development partners including libraries, knowledge centres, research and information institutions of several organizations, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Asian Development Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, the Islamic Development Bank, the Development Bank of Southern Africa and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). In addition to exchanging information, documents and experience, the Division will be working with these organizations on ongoing initiatives, including the effort to establish a consortium of Digital Information Database for Development.

From users' feedback and testimonials, it appears that the Bank's current collection of digital information resources is rated as adequate, up-to-date and highly relevant to the AfDB and stakeholders' needs. Our vision is to provide the right information at the right time to meet the

specific information needs of each individual client. Building on available technologies, resources and excellent collaborative working relationships with numerous institutions, we are on the right track to establish a full-fledged knowledge centre for the Bank. Our employees include professionally trained and user-oriented staff with excellent skills in identifying, processing, retrieving and disseminating information. These characteristics are both relevant and essential for converting tacit knowledge into a format that can be communicated, shared and stored in digital formats. With strong encouragement and commitment of management to our KM activities, we will strive to help reposition the Bank as a major player in the emerging knowledge economy pyramid.

The Way Ahead

From the progress made in knowledge management activities during the past few years, it is clear that a Bank-wide review of KM practices needs to be conducted. Such a knowledge audit exercise will be an investigation of the knowledge needs and demands of the AfDB and its stakeholders. The audit will also examine the interconnectivity of the Bank's management, staff, technology and learning in meeting these needs and demands. In other words, the knowledge audit will investigate the strengths and weaknesses of the Bank's knowledge, as well as the opportunities and threats facing the implementation of a Bank-wide KM programme. This is the most basic stage of knowledge maturity, at which most organizations begin their KM journey. The purpose of the knowledge audit is to answer the following questions:

- What are the Bank's knowledge needs and demands?
- What tacit and explicit knowledge assets are currently available, and where are they?
- How does knowledge flow in various directions within the Bank, and to and from RMCs, regional offices and other development partners?
- How is that knowledge being managed, i.e., identified, created, stored, shared, and used?
- What are the major barriers to knowledge flows and, in particular, what are the human, financial or organizational constraints to effective knowledge management?
- What gaps and overlaps exist in the Bank's knowledge assets?
- What are the staff skills and needs for competency improvement, collaboration and team work; opportunities for learning and development; organizational culture practices; leadership; and performance management?

The progress made in KM at the AFDB since 2005 is highlighted in various knowledge and learning activities and programmes, including flagship research publications, capacity development and learning activities, external and internal seminars, knowledge dissemination events, Internet presence and other communications platforms. While the main momentum of KM remains valid, the Bank recognizes the need to make more adjustments to further strengthen its work on knowledge management. Adjustments will be practical, incremental, and forward-looking and, in particular, will be aligned progressively to Bank strategies. Emphasis will be placed on improving the AfDB's ability to deliver timely, adequate and focused

knowledge products to its stakeholders. Furthermore, a coordination mechanism will be established to enhance the flow of knowledge to and from the regional and field offices.

The Bank will harvest quick wins in knowledge management initiatives and make enhancements in existing KM platforms, repositories and IT infrastructure. There is a growing awareness within the Bank that successful KM programmes begin with a thorough understanding of how business processes, human skills and technological assets interact and support the transfer of knowledge throughout the organization. This approach will give the AfDB staff and stakeholders the opportunity to experience the benefits of KM and create a bottom-up process that affects people and processes. Furthermore, implementing IT-based solutions can enhance the results and produce a fully operating KM system. The most difficult part seems to be the beginning.

The areas on which the Bank will focus in the coming years in order to achieve quick results in the implementation of its KM objectives include the following:

1. Enhancing the knowledge environment in the Bank;
2. Raising staff and management awareness of the role of KM in development;
3. Enhancing Bank staff information searching skills;
4. Developing a coherent system to access the Bank's knowledge and information sources;
5. Implementing collaborative networking applications as KM Solutions, such as communities of practice and an expertise-location knowledge base;
6. Coordinating Bank-wide production and dissemination of knowledge products;
7. Enhancing the capacity of the Knowledge & Virtual Resources Centre (KVRC);
8. Setting up and empowering knowledge centres in the regional and field offices;
9. Nominating KM focal persons in the operations departments;
10. Recruiting regional knowledge coordinators at the Regional Offices of the Bank.

Conclusion

The African Development Bank, in spite of the relatively recent emergence of the concept of knowledge management, appears to be progressing well along the way to harnessing innovative KM-learning approaches as business processes. It is indeed taking major steps to develop consistent approaches to identifying, transforming and putting into action knowledge. There is now a wide consensus within the Bank that financial interventions alone are not sufficient to win the battle against poverty in Africa. More important is the buy-in and clear commitment from AfDB Management to develop and leverage formal knowledge sharing and transfer approaches that have proven impacts in combating complex development challenges.

From the progress made in KM activities during the past few years, it is clear that a Bank-wide review of knowledge management practices needs to be conducted, and the Bank should start harnessing quick-win KM solutions. Many development partners and practitioners already have a wealth of KM experience; we need to benchmark and learn from the experiences of such institutions.