
HELVETAS KNOWLEDGE SHARING STRATEGY 2009 - 2012: AN OVERVIEW

Helvetas has been explicitly involved in the area of Knowledge Sharing for the past decade, recognizing its value at the same time as it was generating increased interest in the development community as a whole. Helvetas helped to shape the now-thriving Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) community of development practitioners with an interest in this field, and it continues to play an active role in this and other relevant communities such as the Swiss KM Thinktable and the Dgroups partnership. Internally, successive Knowledge Sharing strategies have emphasized the nurturing of various thematic Communities of Practice as well as a variety of mechanisms to support the broader development of a culture of knowledge sharing and learning. Helvetas also continues to be mandated by various partners to assist in their knowledge- and learning-related activities.

Knowledge Sharing and Learning are Crucial to Development

Development activity is undertaken in increasingly complex contexts, which significantly elevate the importance of knowledge and learning to development organisations. This realization, coupled with the Helvetas commitment to promoting shared ownership, transparency, accountability and collaboration in its work, underlie the Helvetas commitment to Knowledge Sharing (KS).

The Helvetas Knowledge Sharing (KS) strategy is focused on the promotion of an **organisational culture** that supports knowledge sharing, learning and collaboration within Helvetas as well as between Helvetas and its partners.

In a nutshell, the Helvetas KS strategy aims:

*to create the conditions for **increased capacity** of Helvetas staff, organisational units and partners to learn, to share knowledge and to collaborate*

This increased capacity will contribute to **increased effectiveness** of the work we do and – of equal importance – to **increased adaptability** to rapidly changing environments.

What does this mean in practice? The KS strategy's objective will be pursued by promoting the use of specific **tools for knowledge sharing** (such as storytelling, enhanced intranet/extranet functionality), providing exposure to **capacity building** opportunities (e.g., training exercises in facilitation techniques, increased attention to thematic Communities of Practice[CoPs], as KS vehicles), and supporting more explicit **learning methodologies** (e.g, building collective reflection into evaluation processes, using KS tools and methods to promote learning).

The Strategy in Action

The Helvetas KS strategy consists of four elements (shown graphically in Figure 1):

- Promoting a KS Culture
- Strengthening Learning
- Informing Helvetas ICT Policy and Practice
- Playing a lead KS role in the Development Community



Figure 1. Elements of the Helvetas KS Strategy 2009-2012

Promoting KS Culture



In order to have a KS culture within Helvetas, KS practice and capacity must be diffused throughout the organisation. This is particularly important in the context of an organisation with a wide variety of independent programme offices.

Two mechanisms will be used to promote a KS culture within Helvetas and between Helvetas and its partners:

- Support for **Communities of Practice (CoPs)**
- Cultivation of **KS Champions**.

Turning dialogues into value-added content

Isabelle Diallo in Mali posts a request to the Natural Resource Management (NRM) CoP discussion group about her difficulties with certification in an organic mango value chain project.

Over the coming days, Francisco Muchanga in Mozambique, Giorgio Alvarez in Guatemala and Charity Mekele in Ethiopia all post responses providing descriptions, pointers and brief assessments of different certification methodologies, based on their own experiences.

The CoP facilitator, Tran Vin from Vietnam, puts a summary together, including various links that were provided for further information, and shares the summary with the NRM CoP.

In addition to Isabelle gaining new energy and inspiration from these responses, all NRM CoP members now have a collection of key resources and approaches for their future work! On top of this, CoP members feel a greater sense of community and common purpose because they can see a tangible benefit coming out of their discussions.

Strengthening Learning



Individual and collective learning within Helvetas will be enhanced by:

- Supporting periodic **learning events**
- Playing a catalytic role in the production of **learning outputs**
- Increasing the emphasis on **learning from evaluation**

South-South Learning

Suspension bridge team members from Ethiopia are excited about the help they received from the Helvetas Nepal Trail Bridge Support Unit. They want to share what they've learned so others can also benefit, but are not sure how to do it.

They hear Helvetas is experimenting with Digital Stories as a way to make such learning widely available. After some discussion they assemble their story and a few relevant photos. The story is shared at a regional infrastructure meeting, leading to several requests for similar assistance from partners in other African countries.

The Helvetas Head Office also takes up the story for the main Helvetas website to further increase the number of people who benefit from seeing a real example of South-South collaboration.

Informing ICT Policy and Practice



Although overall responsibility for ICT policy and use lies with the Helvetas IT Department, the increasing pervasiveness and role of ICTs in communications, information sharing and the creation of (virtual) social spaces for ongoing interaction creates a direct and strong linkage between technology decisions on the one hand and the promotion of KS and learning on the other.

From Testing to Practice

Bibhusan Shrestha and Shikha Bista of Nepal are leading the development of a project among four Helvetas country programmes in Asia and Africa on dry river bed farming. They want to work with colleagues to elaborate a funding proposal for a joint 5-year pilot project.

With the help of the Helvetas KS Coordinator, Bibhusan sets up a wiki so the various staff involved can collaboratively create the proposal. This saves them a lot of effort trying to send around and track changes on various copies of the document, waiting for each person to comment and edit before the next person can contribute.

The wiki allows them to generate a proposal in two weeks, which Shikha then takes over for a final edit. They are so impressed with the ease of using the wiki that they share their story on the Helvetas NRM CoP discussion list and others begin to experiment with it.

Six months later, an organisation-wide evaluation of experiences leads to the decision that the IT Department will integrate the wiki with the Helvetas intranet and offer it as a standard service.

The 2009-2012 KS Strategy will focus on the following areas with respect to Helvetas and partner use of ICTs:

- engagement in dialogues around Helvetas **ICT policy and use**
- support for **exploration and strategic adoption** of ICTs
- engagement in dialogues and strategies around **information output production, distribution and use**

Playing a Lead KS Role in the Development Community



Helvetas will continue to strengthen the lead role it plays in the KS field both in Switzerland and in the wider development community. Conducting KS-related activities outside Helvetas serves multiple functions. It ensures that Helvetas maintains engagement with and learns from cutting-edge KS ideas, networks and partnerships; it makes existing expertise within Helvetas available to a wider variety of partners; it contributes to Helvetas' reputation both within Switzerland and around the world as a leading organisation in the area of Knowledge Sharing for Development, and; it contributes to the evolution of the discipline of KM for Development.

Helvetas external engagement in KS-related activities will continue to be implemented through two mechanisms:

- Provision of **KS services** to partners through mandates
- Engagement with **KS communities** in the development sector

KS Capacity Building

Helvetas is mandated by the Development Alliance to facilitate a strategic planning process for its upcoming 5-year plan.

The Helvetas KS Coordinator works with the planning team to support an alliance-wide process of identifying objectives for the face-to-face strategic planning meeting, and designing an appropriate and participatory methodology.

Because of this participatory process, and the fact that the KS Coordinator works closely with a member of the planning team to facilitate the meeting and the follow-up, the Development Alliance not only ends up with a broadly supported and stronger strategic plan, but they now have the internal capacity to plan and facilitate their own future planning.

For more information on Knowledge Sharing at Helvetas, please contact:

Riff Fullan riff.fullan@helvetas.org

Coordinator Knowledge Sharing