

International development: exploring the gap between organisations' development policy and practice—a Southern perspective

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Abstract International development policies inevitably encounter a conflict in their implementation, representing the gap between universal goals and grass-roots practice. The aim of this study was to explore and understand the significance of this gap, and to apply knowledge management principles as a lens to suggest bridging solutions. The research focuses on non-governmental organisations, which are a sub-section of the civil society. The study was unique as it took a Southern perspective—the views and experiences of policy-makers, practitioners and beneficiaries in Kenya form the basis of the empirical research. Consequently, the research and its findings provide some answers as to how systems of knowledge can be aligned with the core values of organisational and societal culture in order to positively influence international stability.

Keywords Non-governmental organisation (NGO) · Knowledge management (KM) · Organisational learning

1 The quest for knowledge

1.1 Knowledge and international development

The concept of 'knowledge' and attempts to define and analyse it have been the preoccupation of Western

philosophers for many generations. For example, over 2,500 years ago, Aristotle famously wrote '*all men by nature desire knowledge*'. However, the quest for knowledge has not been confined to Western society, as other recorded works have been identified in Islamic literature and African philosophy such as the Egyptian manuscript known as the 'The Moral Teachings of Ptah-hotep' dating from 2400BCE. For many philosophers, knowledge is intimately linked with notions of personal development, social justice and the pursuit and communication of truth (Johnstone 2005). It is with this understanding of knowledge that the study pursues and communicates the truth about the values and experiences of organisations and societies in the South, within the context of international development.

In recent years, 'knowledge' has been presented by governments and international development agencies as the basis for a new way of living in the twenty-first century. This contemporary application has brought with it notions of 'knowledge workers', 'knowledge societies' and 'knowledge economies'. International development is essentially a knowledge-based process, and as a result, the link between learning and knowledge has increasingly gained importance in international development as they are key components to improving the outcomes of development work (Hailey and James 2002; Krohwinkel-Karlsson 2007). Britton (2005) describes the nature of development as involving change in human systems at individual, family, community and the wider levels of society.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are a sub-sector of the civil society which consists of other non-NGO formations including social movements, welfare organisations, secular organisations and faith-based organisations. The contribution of faith-based organisations to international development has been widely acknowledged both

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