Case Study Title: GDNet: From Knowledge Hub to Knowledge Broker?

Case Study Presenter: Andrew Clappison

Presenter Affiliation: CommsConsult, UK and GDNet, Egypt

1. What is/was the context and key challenge(s) in your K* case study?
   a. When, where and how long did this initiative occur, or is it ongoing?

Context

GDNet is a knowledge hub that brings together and communicates policy-relevant research from the Global South. It aims to be an internationally recognized focal point/knowledge broker for development research to inform policy debate. GDNet is a partnership with regional networks and leading experts in the field. GDNet provides access to on-line journals and data, synthesizes and communicates Southern research, and strengthens research communications capacity.

It does this through: i) a cluster of on-line information services, particularly a Knowledge Base (KB) of research papers, and profiles of researchers and organisations, all drawn from developing and transition countries, ii) a programme of capacity building of knowledge management and research communications. GDNet undertakes these two streams of activity in collaboration with seven Regional Network Partners, who manage Regional Windows, and iii) it also provides thematic networking platforms which allow Southern researchers to contribute and debate ideas in development thinking and practice.

Timeframe

GDNet is in its fourth phase, having been piloted from 1999 – 2002. It began a substantive second phase between 2002 and 2004, and has since received funding for two subsequent phases (2005-2009 and 2010-2014). GDNet is currently funded by DFID.

2. Who are/were the players and why did/do they need to come together?
   a. What was/is the reach of the initiative?

Key players

National producers of research (i.e. researchers), who need support in communicating their findings to national, regional and international audiences, and potential end-users of research (i.e. policy makers and civil society),
who find it difficult to access research information generated in developing and transition economies.

Why do they need to come together?

“National producers of research may face problems in communicating their findings to national, regional and international audiences due to factors such as lack of access to the internet, lack of resources and capacity to disseminate or closed institutional cultures”, and “potential end-users of research information may have problems accessing locally generated research due to factors such as atomised availability, lack of time, variable quality and the wider availability of Northern research”.

Reach

GDNet operates in 7 regions through a series of regional network partnerships, and has over 12,000 individual network members.

3. How did/does K* play a role in the story, i.e. tools/techniques/approaches.

The following K* activities are undertaken by GDNet:

A. Support research generation through access to information and knowledge resources:

1. Provide access to on-line journals that are normally only available to paying subscribers. Access, which has been negotiated by GDNet, is via two main portals: J-Stor and Project MUSE at Johns Hopkins University. Free hard-copy document delivery is also available through the British Library of Development Studies (BLDS). GDNet has also assembled a comprehensive listing of publicly accessible, non-subscriber journal services, many of which have their own eligibility criteria.

2. Provide an on-line Knowledge Base (KB) of development research articles produced in developing and transition countries. These are generally articles not published in peer-reviewed journals, and are thus working papers, research reports, conference papers, policy briefs, or similar. The KB has over 18,000 articles, which are available free on-line, less than three years old, and are accompanied by clear conclusion-based summaries written by GDNet.

3. Provide access to the GDN library of a selection of papers produced as part of GDN activities or that have been funded by GDN

4. Provide access to on-line data – the GDN Data Initiative is working with the World Bank's Development Data Group, to provide access for eligible researchers to two important databases: Global Development Finance (GDF) database and the World Development Indicators (WDI) database.

5. Provide information on funding opportunities, including the fortnightly free GDN Funding Opportunities Newsletter (FON), which is emailed to researchers who have created a researcher profile in the KB. The FON draws from the Community of Science database12, and covers research grants, scholarships, subsidized conference and workshop attendance and calls for project proposals. Information is also provided on GDN global and regional funding competitions and awards

B. Communicate and promote the communication of this type of research:

1. As well as acting as a stock of knowledge, the KB helps link researchers and research institutes. The KB includes profiles of 12,000 researchers and 4,800 research organisations, with the aim of helping promote the individuals and organisations and their research, and promoting informal networking between them.

2. The 7 Regional Windows, coordinated by GDN Regional Network Partners (RNPs) and the GDNet Cairo
team, support linkage of individuals and organisations through both regionally specific web portals, and through events, such as RNP conferences, face to face meetings (Many of these Regional windows are bilingual)

C. Assist research institutes in better communicating their research. This is primarily concerned with **developing capacity** for research communication, and involves activities including:

1. A series of training and skills building **workshops** in Africa, South Asia and Latin America to enhance the knowledge management and research dissemination capacity of research institutes and networks.
2. GDNet has developed **on-line resources for knowledge managers** in Southern institutes, to help them in the dissemination of research knowledge. These tools and services remain in a development stage, but include: tools for realizing dissemination strategies, web-building dissemination toolkits specifically for research organizations facilitating access to information for researchers, and community of practice for knowledge managers

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6. **What was/is the intended impact/contribution of K* and, if you can, tell us whether K* had an impact and how.**

- GDNet knowledgebase holds more than 18,000 research documents repackaged into regional and thematic portals, helping researchers to find information more easily
- The online network brings together over 12,000 individual researchers
- GDNet’s community groups act as an online collaborative workspace for researchers, knowledge networks and intermediaries to jointly work together on research projects/ themes
- GDNet knowledge services provide access to over 1000 free journals, 32,000 subscribers receive the ‘Research in Focus’ newsletter, 8000 subscribers receive the ‘Funding Opportunities’ newsletter and the Knowledgebase is available as a free public good to all
- Active partnerships and networks through seven regional windows - Africa, MENA, CIS, CEE, South Asia, East Asia and Oceania
- Strong partnerships with leading training providers covering research uptake and policy influence in the regions (i.e. CommsConsult (Africa) and CIPPEC (Latin America)), which enables researchers to develop the confidence and ability to communicate their research to wider audiences, specifically to inform policy processes
7. What are the lessons from this example that others should know about/could be transferred, in general and particularly in a resource-limited context?

GDNet has delivered a wide range of well received services to researchers over the years, created a number of highly valuable regional partnerships, developed a knowledge base of Southern research that contains thousands of documents, and developed the basis for an online ‘community of over 12,000 researchers. In other words, GDNet has been highly successful in delivering ‘supply-side’ K*.

A review of GDNet in 2009 (conducted by ITAD for DFID) suggested that one of the key challenges facing GDNet was the need to shift its focus from being a ‘knowledge hub’ towards a ‘knowledge broker’, if it is to meet its aim of influencing policy. This challenge has begun to be met by GDNet through initiatives such as that outlined in the case study by Leandro Echt and Vanesa Weyrauch entitled “Spaces for engagement: using knowledge to improve public decisions”. This example shows how more focus can be brought to supporting the ‘demand-side’ of K*.

GDNet has a powerful information network in place, and better brokerage might be achieved by shifting its structure towards a more formal knowledge network. However, this shift might not be possible in all regions and an alternative course of action for GDNet would be to provide much more demand focused K* services, removing the focus from the network.

A number of issues need to be considered in the shift from information network to formal knowledge network in the GDNet context:

1) **Sustainability of capacity building efforts**: Developing the network through ongoing capacity building and the development of new strategies provides the ‘promise’ of more longstanding ‘impact’, but donors want value for money and quick results that might be more likely to be delivered in the short term if GDNet becomes the broker itself (success is not guaranteed in either case).

2) **Knowledge services versus advocacy**: Sections of the research community are very nervous about K*, aligning it with advocacy, which in turn is seen to dilute the ‘neutrality’ of the research uptake process. If GDNet takes on this role directly then it may lose credibility in the eyes of some. However, investing in the network and allowing partners and actors across the network to take up this role creates a degree of separation that the research community may feel more comfortable with.

3) **Nature of Regional Partnerships and Networks**: Developing GDNet’s partnerships and networks so that they reflect a greater concern with demand-side activities is likely to depend on making the network more ‘social’ through better engagement practices. In Latin America initiatives are already underway to achieve this through theme-based on-line communities, but in the African context (based on evidence of researcher’s social networking activities) it is possible that this approach will not be popular among researchers. These partnerships and networks will continue to be resource dependent, and it may be difficult to sustain a formal knowledge network on this scale. In which case, direct brokering activities by GDNet may be required to deliver key outputs.

4) **GDNet and culture change**: GDNet has learnt over the years that it’s important to be responsive to partner’s needs, and to create synergies based on these. In order to ensure that GDNet maximises its responsiveness as an organisation, within differing contexts, a number of important steps have been taken to ensure GDNet ‘learns as it goes’. A reflective learning log, a theory of change, a more reflective M&E structure, more audience focused research and strategic use of external experts (to help develop synergies between partners), represent some of the steps that are been used to help GDNet take the appropriate steps in relation to its networks and partnerships.

- **Any other observations..:**
  - Networks are made up or affected by both human and non-human influences (i.e. quality of internet and cultural context)
- Networks have a lifecycle that mirrors their changing function (they are constantly changing and emerging)
- K* cannot always be seen as the precursor to change (policymaking non-linear)
- Networks don't exist unless relations are repeatedly “performed”, and this means strategies need to be implemented to ensure different elements of the network are held in place
- The ‘social’ provides a powerful force that shapes the way learning takes place. Social groups ensure that network relations are repeatedly performed and reinforced, but this element can materialise in different forms, through various means (i.e. online collaboration, face to face meetings)
- Southern researchers and shy away from using social media tools to communicate the results of their research.
- There is little data available on adoption of web 2.0 tools among academics in developing countries – something GDNet plans to address by carrying out follow-up primary research. From the data that exists, levels of take-up among academics are relatively low and there do seem to gender and regional difference both in terms of use and reasons why adoption might not occur.