Case Study Template for Panels

- Please provide your input in the boxes below. Format as you wish. Please aim for a ~2 page case study, but if you go longer that is not an issue.
- Your input will be provided to K* conference attendees and to those participating via Webex. It will also eventually appear in the Green Paper.
- Please return to your session chair with copies to alex.bielak@unu.edu and furqan.asif@unu.edu

Case Study Title: Knowledge Brokers Forum: brokering the brokers

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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?

Knowledge brokers (KBs) and intermediaries are seen as increasingly important in the promotion and uptake of evidence-based decision-making in development contexts and within the development industry. However, connections between K Bs working in different geographical locations and sectors are weak, meaning that lessons and good practice are rarely exchanged, efforts are frequently duplicated, newcomers to the field are not able to draw on others for support.

The Knowledge Brokers Forum (KBF) was created in 2010 to identify good practice in the field and strengthen the collective capacity and impact of this important community. KBF supports discussions and resource sharing between knowledge brokers and information intermediaries primarily but not exclusively working in development contexts.

It was created in collaboration between Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and seven other members of the IKMediary Network, a small community of practice that had been running since 2006 also led by IDS. It has been funded by IDRC/Research Matters and supported in kind by DFID through its support to IDS.

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

Who are the players?

The Knowledge Brokers’ Forum (KBF) is an online community of interest which now convenes 500 members from 75 countries (in March 2012, up from 310 in 63 countries in March 2011). It includes at least 193 Southern country members who between them have made at least 189 contributions since September 2010.

The KBF is aimed at knowledge brokers and intermediaries supporting greater use of research in decision-making and those who are interested in that role, primarily in the development industry, however people from many different contexts have joined, particularly from Canadian health and education sectors, also from the UK third sector.

Members choose to join and do so on an individual basis, people do not “represent” particular sectors or constituencies. There are no selection criteria nor to date have there been deliberate attempts to balance different types of member (eg practitioners/academic, private/public/civil society). Promotion of the KBF was originally through the initiators’ networks, however it now appears to be growing through word of mouth.
We have not attempted to profile members, but we understand from posts that there are a mix of K* practioners and K* academics/researchers/theorists stemming from a range of different backgrounds, although with some emphasis on agricultural context. Many members come from within universities.

What is the reach?
The “reach” of the KBF is likely far broader than the c.500 members, although no evaluation has yet been undertaken. Anecdotally some examples of reach include:

- Sharing ideas and assets beyond members: we know people share assets created by and shared within the group with others so spreading the KBF’s reach.
- Application ideas in members’ work: we know people apply ideas in their work, so extending the reach of KBF to members’ stakeholders
- Influence on other related processes: for example discussions on the KBF and indeed its existence have informed (inspired? Energised?) the K* initiative.

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

Approaches
The KBF plays a range of K* roles, from information sharing when members share useful documents, to construction of knowledge/knowledge generation when ideas are combined and developed to generate new insights for members and knowledge assets in the form of summary outputs.

Perhaps the most influential K* approaches underpinning the way that the KBF has been created and implemented are those around Knowledge Sharing, peer-peer learning and co-construction. The Community of Practice literature (eg Etienne Wenger, Nancy White) has been influential as have ideas around adult learning and reflexive practice (eg David Shon).

So the KBF was not based on the idea of brokering an existing set of knowledge to a pre-determined set of actors. Instead it was about forming connections that would enable not only exchange of knowledge assets but, more importantly, to enable dialogue that would allow different perspectives to be shared, ideas and assumptions re-examined and the combining of ideas to generate new insights.

Another, slightly different objective was around the value of compiling and aggregating existing knowledge around KB roles. The original proposal states “A library of relevant resources will be made available in a structured way to facilitate access by users” and an objective of the KBF is to “Accumulate information and material that can be “harvested” for the possible production of a KB Toolkit by IDRC in 2012 in this way a network model is used as a means of drawing together material from different sectors and sources about a topic.

Tools
To date KBF has been exclusively virtual and has relied exclusively on electronic tools. The K* tools used are an email discussion list on which most of the action takes place, and an interactive web-based platform. The Web-platform features a blog on which members can (and do) post, plus wiki functionality which has been used recently to organise links to resources shared in a discussion about M&E. The moderator also uses other social media tools such as delicious and twitter to collate resources and the latter for dissemination purposes.

Techniques
The KBF uses a somewhat hybrid model of intensive facilitated discussions (2 so far) interspersed with lower intensity, often member led, discussions and ongoing information sharing. The facilitated discussions have run for between 2 and 4 weeks, they were analysed and written up in some detail. Member led discussions –
sometimes extremely intense – have sometimes been informally summarised by the Network Co-ordinator.

In terms of implementation, the key role is the Network Co-ordinator, Yaso Kunaratnam, who undertakes the behind the scenes work of the KBF and currently the network is almost entirely dependent on her input. Like almost all K* practitioners, KBF is only one of Yaso’s projects so she has competing priorities for her time. She is able to draw on other members of IDS staff for technical advice and has drawn on me to summarise discussions and co-facilitate the second.

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

The intended outcomes of the network (taken from an early report to IDRC/Research Matters) were as follows:

- Stronger and broader understanding of knowledge brokering and intermediary related concepts
- Greater awareness of the most effective roles and mechanisms that KBs and intermediaries can play in different contexts.
- Examples of improved and refined intermediary/KB and KT practices
- Greater engagement by KBs with greater awareness and understanding of their role as an intermediary
- Changes in attitudes and thinking by key stakeholders e.g. greater recognition and value placed on intermediary work/KBs
- Greater awareness of the role that knowledge brokers/intermediaries play in evidence-based decision-making, and how they can increase their effectiveness in this role

The KBF has not yet been evaluated so it is not possible to outline whether it has had an impact. However anecdotal feedback suggests it is generating value for those involved from:

**Immediate value:** people felt excited and energised by the quality of discussions, people have been helped by others

- **Potential value:** connections have been formed and people know where they could turn for help/ideas, eg the M&E debate helped to identify potential value by seeing who was interested and what is out there to build on in future
- **Applied value:** a number of people have reported applying learning and advice directly in their work, notably Basil Jones from the African Development Bank who discovered the KBF while writing a paper for the ADB about its role as a Knowledge Broker, the paper was shaped by interventions from the KBF
- **Realised value:** no examples yet of how the KBF has actually improved people’s performance!
- **Reframing value:** some indications that participation in the KBF either discussions or assets shared have helped people to reconsider their position and previous thinking.

These ideas of value creation in communities are based on the highly recommended paper

*Promoting and assessing value creation in communities and networks: a conceptual framework by Etienne Wenger, Beverly Trayner and Maarten DeLaat*


5. **What are the lessons from this example that others should know about/could be transferred, in general and particularly in a resource-limited context?**

- **IT IS POSSIBLE TO BUILD PEER LEARNING AND EXCHANGE RELATIONSHIPS VIRTUALLY**
Many (most?) of the KBF members have never met face to face – indeed the K* event will be the first time for many. So it is possible to develop spaces for quite deep (and in my case transformational) learning without face to face interaction. It may be possible that because KBF was created virtually, it attracts people comfortable working this way. By comparison KBF founding body the I-K-Mediary Network was created through face to face workshops however the vibrancy of those interactions has never carried over into virtual interaction. Will be worth looking deeper into the kind of value generated for whom through exclusively online interactions and the relationship between face to face and virtual behaviours in peer-peer networks.

- **“LURKERS” LEARN TOO (WELL, SOME OF THEM)**
  Generally the KBF follows the 90:9:1 rule (lurker, occasional: active contributor) although in the recent discussion on M&E, the participant rate dropped significantly. Feedback suggests that many lurkers are gaining value from KBF even if they don’t post and feedback solicited about the M&E debate said they were happy to listen to others – a bit like an expert discussion.

- **THE DIVERSITY OF THE K* FIELD IS BOTH A STRENGTH AND A CHALLENGE**
  The diversity of the intermediary/knowledge broker field is becoming clearer through work with KBF which is attracting a much wider range of participants than the closed membership “I-K-Mediary Network”. The landscape includes information intermediaries focused on enabling access to multiple perspectives, knowledge intermediaries who help people make sense of and apply information, knowledge brokers who aim to improve knowledge use in decision making and innovation brokers who aim to change contexts to enable innovation. This diversity has proved ones of its strengths in co-constructing valuable and rich knowledge in this area on KBF. However challenges remain with how to identify good practice for different types of brokers and those who work across different roles.

- **BROKERING + DIALOGUE = CONNECTING THEORY AND PRACTICE IN K* WORK ??**
  In keeping with the weight of evidence around how to increase research uptake, it seems that a space in which a combination of practioners, researchers and practitioners who think and write can build relationships, dialogue and exchange, might be bringing together theory and practice in this area. The nature of the discussion on the list is quite conceptual and theory based, for example people regularly share journal articles and often a short discussion ensues. It will be interesting to see if this means the more practice focussed members are more likely to engage with theory in their work or whether it is the people interested in the theory side talking to each other while everyone else has tuned out. We have stories to support both possibilities with people illustrating they have changed their work according to discussions but also comments from practioners that discussions on the KBF are too theoretical and navel gazing! So its too soon to draw conclusions - perhaps the K* event will shed some light.

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6. Any other observations..:

- The term “network” means many things to many people, they can indeed perform a range of functions, K* practioners need to be mindful of this – there are lots of resources about networks, communities of practice and so on, look at those before you set up a network!
- Don’t set up a “network” if what you want is a distribution list.