EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF K* (KT, KE, KTT, KMb, KB, KM, etc.)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
EXPANDING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF K* (KT, KE, KTT, KMb, KB, KM, etc.)

A summary of the concept paper emerging from the K* conference held in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, April 2012

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Financial, in kind and other support came from a variety of partners, without whose enthusiasm and vision we could not have proceeded. While all contributions were important, we particularly want to recognize the Key Partners in the Conference: The International Development Research Centre (IDRC), The Canadian Water Network (CWN) and Natural Resources Canada (NRCan). A full listing of the key partners, conference supporters, fellowship sponsors and community partners can be found on the K* conference website at: www.tinyurl.com/KStarConference
There are a great many terms used to depict knowledge sharing activities. Terms such as knowledge brokering, knowledge translating, knowledge exchange, and knowledge mobilization are all used extensively, but the different terminology has hidden the fact that the actual functions they describe are all systemically related to each other. We need a broader concept that includes all the functions but recognizes their differences. In April 2012, a conference hosted by the United Nations University – Institute for Water, Environment and Health (UNU-INWEH) in Hamilton, Canada, brought together people from different geographies and different sectors who represented these different functions. The aim of the conference was to discuss their similarities and differences in the context of improving knowledge use in policy, industry and practice. K* (KStar) has been coined as the overarching concept, and as a useful shorthand.

No common language exists for K* practitioners to talk to each other across their different functions, sectors and geographies. The conference demonstrated that not only was this possible but it improved the sharing of experience and lessons. The concept paper sets out the core concept of K* and the principles shared by all its component functions and processes. It also describes a framework for thinking about K*, which will make sharing approaches and lessons learned easier.
Knowledge Management (KM): the process of ensuring that knowledge is available. It is sometimes used to describe the suite of activities from the storage of information through to its dissemination. However, with the emergence of other terms and greater differentiation between roles, it is beginning to refer more to the collection and storage of different types of knowledge so that they can be accessed when needed.

Knowledge Transfer: a one-way process of sharing knowledge which can be construed as more of a teacher-student relationship than other knowledge-related activities and perhaps associated with mutual exploration of an issue.

Knowledge Translation (KT): the process of translating knowledge from one format to another so that the receiver can understand it; often from specialists to non-specialists. KT is sometimes represented as a one-way, and sometimes a two-way, process.

Knowledge Exchange (KE) or Knowledge Translation and Exchange (KTE): a more two-way process of sharing knowledge between different groups of people.

Knowledge Brokering (KB): a two-way exchange of knowledge about an issue, which fosters collective learning and usually involves knowledge brokers or ‘intermediaries’.

Knowledge Mobilization (KMb): a two-way process that makes use of the existing stock of knowledge and co-creates new knowledge to help foster change. The term KMb is most used by the Canadian network Research Impact, which helps translate/transfer university-based knowledge to help citizen groups.

There are many more terms (e.g. Knowledge Translation and Transfer, Knowledge Adoption Systems) which could come under the K* umbrella. The terms above are the most widely used across sectors and geographies. Note the boundaries between the definitions are fuzzy; for instance, KTE and KB appear to be similar in their emphasis on two-way sharing of knowledge and they are both contained within the definition of Knowledge Mobilization.
K* is not attempting to re-label people’s work or regulate it, but to acknowledge what is already there, note the links and commonalities, and strengthen the practical and analytical basis on which it is practiced. The concept paper complements a draft Green Paper that begins to establish our baseline understanding of the global community of K* practitioners, and lists the extensive number of K*-related toolkits that are in use around the world. Finally, the conference participants form the kernel of a global network of K* practitioners who will continue to share experience and learn from each other.

Linear technology-transfer approaches to generating and applying knowledge may be appropriate in particular circumstances, but they may fail to realize the full benefit of knowledge. Knowledge activities do not simply provide a bridge between different ‘worlds’ that do not talk to each other. Instead, there is a set of functions that facilitate interaction among different groups of people, whether or not they belong to the same ‘world’ and whether or not they already talk to each other. Knowledge needs to be shared for various reasons depending on the context and the needs of the people and organizations involved. In some cases, what is needed is simply access to information, which can be facilitated by an information intermediary. In others, knowledge translation functions might be needed to help interpret complex information. Or, there may be a need for a more two-way function of knowledge brokering, which clarifies and shares different understandings of the same issue, bringing different types of knowledge to the table, building relationships between the producers and users of knowledge and helping to co-produce knowledge. Finally, what may be needed is a system-level function – an innovation broker – which reduces the costs of sharing knowledge (for example by ensuring funding is available) and allows the various groups of people to innovate in how they share knowledge and adapt what they do to the local context.

The boundaries between the different functions are fuzzy: it is not clear exactly when knowledge translation merges into knowledge brokering, or when an information intermediary becomes a knowledge translator. The different functions are best represented as a spectrum (Figure A).

Each of these functions in Figure A can be associated with different roles: the presentation as a series of nested ovals makes an important point that they all share a common origin – enabling access to information from multiple sources. It does not mean that being an innovation broker is necessarily any ‘better’ than being an information intermediary: the choice of which functions to use depends entirely on the individual situation. The different functions are not mutually exclusive: most K* practitioners will be doing some of everything, though the emphasis will differ depending on the context and why the work is needed. However, it is clear that they are systemically related.
This framework helps to build an overarching understanding of how the different functions fit together; but does not specify whether they should be performed by organizations or individuals, as one-off projects or embedded in ongoing change processes, as part of an ongoing programme of work or separately and independently contracted. This is intended: there is no prior reason to assume that any K* function should necessarily be done in any particular way. Everyday interactions between people as part of their ongoing work are as important to understanding K* as that done by professionals: it depends entirely on the context of each issue. Ensuring that the enabling environment exists to allow these interactions to happen is an integral part of the innovation brokering aspect of K*.

We recognize that it is not simply that the technology-transfer model has transformed: wider relations between knowledge producers and society have changed over the past half century\(^1\). How change has happened has varied and has given rise to different modes of operation at the interfaces between knowledge, practice and policy, which are explored in this concept paper. A series of short case studies from both developing and developed worlds demonstrates how different organizations work at the intersection of several different functions simultaneously. But context is important: contrasting the development

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1 See, for example, the classic by Gibbons et al., 1994, The new production of knowledge: the dynamics of science and research in contemporary societies. London: Sage Publications.
WHAT OBSTACLES DO KNOWLEDGE BROKERS, TRANSLATORS, EXCHANGERS, MOBILIZERS, MANAGERS (...) FACE?

Prior to the K* conference, a survey revealed that participants faced challenges and obstacles in several areas: structural (e.g., infrastructure, funding, time, etc.), individual (perceptions, knowledge, skills, attitude, etc.), organizational (e.g., organizational/institutional culture, incentive structure, resource commitment, etc.), and network/system level obstacles (e.g., linear thinking on knowledge as resources that are produced by scientific establishments and transferred to policymakers and practitioners, less recognition of co-production of knowledge, particularly in partnership with less fortunate and vulnerable actors, etc.).

For more information see the analysis prepared for the K* Green Paper and a compilation of K* tools available at: http://tinyurl.com/KStarAnalysis

of K* in international agriculture and health research in the UK and Canada shows that while both sectors are able to share current experiences and methods, some of the paths they took were different. It could be argued that international agriculture emerged from a more overtly political background, shaped by the participatory movement and a concern with power relations between donors and recipients of aid. Health research in Canada certainly has had a long tradition of behavioural based communication and knowledge mobilization, but without the heavy political overtones that characterized international agriculture. Assessing the political economy of knowledge will be an important part of developing K* strategies: this paper develops a speculative framework for understanding the degree to which this will influence the type of K* functions that are needed.

There are many different approaches to sharing knowledge, each with different names. It is important to recognize their differences while acknowledging that they are related: this will help people understand where they or their organizations fit into the bigger picture and how they could best relate to others to deliver better policy or practice. K* describes a concept but also a framework for analysis: this paper sets out this framework and in doing so begins to shed light on the underpinnings of this emergent field of study.
The full K* Concept Paper & Case Studies is available for download at: http://tinyurl.com/KStarConceptPaper