

IWRM

Knowledge Café's – A template for learning

A WRC-funded study investigated a tool for narrowing the gap between water policy (rhetoric) and its practical application

Discover common values and mutual ground through interactive dialogue

The *Knowledge Café* (KC) has been described in literature as a type of business meeting or organisational workshop that aims to provide an open and creative conversation on a topic of mutual interest. During this conversation, collective knowledge, shared ideas and insights surface and participants gain a deeper understanding of the subject that is being discussed and of the issues that emerge around that topic.

Participation is critical

A radical appraisal of the paradigm of participation is critical and it is this rationale that prompted the design of a dialogue and learning tool such as the KC. The KC is part of the 'how' collective knowledge, shared ideas and insights can surface. The design of the Knowledge Café aims to sharpen the toolkit for including people in decision-making and to provide an innovative and creative site for meaningful dialogue. In the long run, a more frequent and persistent application of KC (and other types of forums such as the KC) is likely to open up spaces for real dialogue and problem solving for the sector. New mechanisms are required so that meaningful transfers of knowledge and meaningful exchanges can replace mediocre attempts to bring people into decision-making processes relying on stale environments where, despite rhetoric to the contrary, nothing has changed at all.

The objective of using the KC format for the water sector is to build equitable stakeholder relationships and to present an alternative format for dialogue that levels the playing fields and that promotes a space where there can be a more

equitable flow of knowledge between people who have varied levels of experience and practice. It is fundamental that knowledge is shared because knowledge is central in determining who can benefit from which resources and also because shared knowledge becomes pivotal in ensuring that the principles of IWRM are adhered to.

Meaningful dialogue is much more likely to happen when people feel at ease with one another and when there are more equal relationships of power. When there is a more equal distribution of power there is also likely to be a more constructive process of problem-solving and dialogue. One of the strongest features of the KC format is that it is designed to level the playing field between all participants. Within this context, no one's voice resonates louder than another and cultural variability as well as prior-related knowledge is recognised. No single knowledge set or cultural insight is more powerful or important than another.

Knowledge building flourishes with a proper mix of an enabling environment, the right questions being asked and the opportunity to explore solutions creatively and without inhibition. IWRM relies on stakeholders closest to the point of extraction and use of the resource being part of the decision taking process about the resource. This implies an active and alert civil society who are willing and able to co-create knowledge and who maximise their capacity for sharing local knowledge and gaining technical or new knowledge. Such a co-creation of knowledge allows for building and sustaining trust and respect and produces a kind of social capital that is a prerequisite for change and transformation in the water sector.

Meaningful knowledge transfers are critical capacity building blocks. People who understand and share information in

a comfortable setting are likely to build trust between one another and feel good about themselves. In turn, it is more likely that these people will willingly engage with the core challenges of implementing IWRM.

There are barriers to acquiring knowledge. The knowledge that is made available to many of the stakeholders who are brought together because they are supposedly involved in the practical application of IWRM principles, is often scientific and difficult to grasp for people who do not have specialised scientific know-how.

Information that is shared in so many of the forums is devoted to the protection, use, development, conservation, management and control of the resource and it is riddled with this scientific and often inaccessible jargon. In order for the technical information to have practical meaning, those involved in the process need to be able to take what is useful for them and to apply it practically.

People who are drawn into these forums expect that there will be an opportunity to learn about what works and what does not work for them. In other words, the knowledge that is necessary to know what works and what does not work for a particular stakeholder group needs to be supplied in such a way that it can be used.

There is another body of 'expert' and 'scientific' knowledge and that is the knowledge that is generated about society and that they can flourish and exercise their right to decision-taking.

In an environment where the playing fields are levelled and where there is an opportunity for the co-creation of knowledge, government officials and experts with technical know-how are able to benefit because they learn about people. This is because the technocrats can experience a space where dialogue is exchanged in a 'new way' that is not 'top-down.'

This 'new way' allows officials to experience how different types of knowledge can be transferred and how their own knowledge can be better packaged and made more accessible to all. Government officials and technical experts require better people skills and a better understanding of the dynamics around top-down, bottom-up knowledge transfers. The lay person also requires a better understanding of how government and technical experts think

There are numerous occasions where stakeholders get together to discuss the pressing needs of water but it is not easy to equalize the playing fields when people with very

different skills, experience and needs are brought together in formal and restrictive settings. Too often in formal settings there are unequal relations of power and unequal access to knowledge.

Rules of the game

The Knowledge Café provides a friendly space where participants are invited to solve a problem that has everything to do with water management. There has been no precedent for KCs in the water sector. The KC activities that were implemented within the context of the WRC Knowledge Café series are innovative and involve a number of steps:

- Identifying stakeholders
- Identifying and briefing facilitators
- Designing KC's event's content and logistics
- Inviting participants
- Grouping participants around tables – no more than 8 per table
- Identifying an enabler and a scribe for each group
- Introducing the Knowledge Bucket as an ice-breaker
- Presenting scenarios for each table
- Allocating vouchers/resources to each table.

The game is not only fun but importantly, it is designed to stimulate thinking about environmental issues and water resources management. The game serves as an ideal entry point to integrated water resources management. It sets a precedent for participatory practice and establishes the ground rules for a learning environment.

In this way it provides a 'learning by doing' environment. The playing field is levelled between different role players, for instance civil society/government and policy makers and the different players get to know one another. The Knowledge Café is down to earth and it can provide a healthy alternative to highly technical information sharing sessions that are all too often alienating for so many of the stakeholders.

The KC has been developed both as an educational tool and as a pre-decision making tool for water resources management. The KC tool can also be used for 'real' decision making. In this case new scenarios that are real life scenarios and real life site specific resources can be drawn as a follow up to the initial 'game.' The preparatory 'pre-packaged scenarios' provide a preliminary pathway that introduces stakeholders to one another and paves the way for problem solving and dialogue enhancing alternatives.

CMAs and WUAs have been charged with the onerous task of putting in motion participatory decision- making and of facilitating knowledge sharing among water users who have

different socio-economic characteristics, unequal access to information and knowledge and varied skills in negotiating or lobbying for their cause. The development of the model AWARE (Action research and Watershed Analysis for Resource and Economic sustainability) that was mentioned above, was applied in the Kat River catchment and it follows a scientific posture called Companion Modelling (ComMod).

According to this approach stakeholders learn collectively by creating, modifying, and observing simulations. When carrying out simulations, one acts on the decision making process by creating or modifying presentations. ComMod leads stakeholders to share presentations and simulations taking into account possible decisions and actions (management rules, new infrastructures, etc) that are under consideration within their own environment.

The idea of a Knowledge Café as one of the many possible ways to narrow the gap between IWRM policy and its practical application is entirely innovative.

The strength of the KC is that it is able to:

- create a relaxed environment where people think 'out of the box';
- level the playing field around a table so that those with technical or scientific knowledge are not 'superior' to those with local and subjective knowledge;
- 'mimic' real life water problems so that real life water solutions can be explored;
- adjust the pre-packed scenarios so that the KC can be used in real life situations;
- introduce individuals/groups to ideas behind integrated water resource;
- encourage innovation in problem solving around IWRM;
- recognise that there are limited resources for solving problems and that working;
- together as a group is likely to bring the 'best' solution possible;
- introduce people with conflicting interests to each other in a non-threatening environment.

The idea of the KC advanced from one Café to the next. The first one was the most exploratory and the last one the most definitive. The KC as a game is now ready to be branded, packaged and rolled out.

Further reading:

To obtain the report, *Knowledge Cafe's, A template for learning: Narrowing the gap between policy and application of IWRM* (WRC Report No: KV 269/11) contact Publications at Tel: (012) 330-0340; Fax: (012) 331-2565; Email: orders@wrc.org.za or Visit: www.wrc.org.za to download a free copy.

