AGEXCHANGE #2

Best Practices, Lessons Learned, and Effective Tools in Knowledge Sharing

Summary Report

This report summarizes key themes and lessons learned from the AgExchange, “Best Practices, Lessons Learned, and Effective Tools in Knowledge Sharing for Food Security and Agriculture Programs,” held March 20-22, 2012. The full discussion is available at agrilinks.org/groups/agexchange-knowledge-sharing.

This synthesis focuses on the main topics and themes discussed during the three day discussion and provides a platform to assess next steps. USAID’s Bureau for Food Security sponsored this event with a broad range of USAID staff, partners, donors, and implementers from both the public and private sector contributing to the discussion.

The AgExchange was structured into three main discussion topics, including: (1) Current Practices and Challenges; (2) Tools and Approaches; and (3) The Way Forward and Next Steps. Knowledge cycle components including knowledge capture, sharing, and application served as sub-themes for all three days.

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**Key Themes**

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- Developing dynamic and demand-driven knowledge sharing activities for different stakeholders
- Maximizing human connections and networks for knowledge sharing
- Achieving sustainability through knowledge application
- Empowering organizations and people to share knowledge
- Improving knowledge management in food security and agriculture

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1. Developing dynamic and demand-driven knowledge sharing activities for different stakeholders
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DEVELOPING DYNAMIC AND DEMAND-DRIVEN KNOWLEDGE SHARING ACTIVITIES FOR DIFFERENT STAKEHOLDERS

Knowledge sharing is fluid, complex, and variable. Practitioners should first ask the following questions when deciding on an appropriate approach for knowledge sharing:

1. What information will be shared?
2. With whom will it be shared?
3. How can this targeted audience best be reached?

During the AgExchange, participants identified three main categories of potential audiences which included: (1) donors; (2) implementing organizations; and (3) beneficiaries. Additional audiences could include the research/academic community as well as local, regional, and national governmental agencies. Internal knowledge sharing (within an organization or group) was also distinguished from external (across organization or program) sharing.

Appropriate tools must also be assessed for effective knowledge sharing. AgExchange participants noted that it is important to evaluate a wide range of factors when selecting the right tool (or mix of tools) for capturing and sharing learning, since different audiences and types of information often call for different approaches. Knowledge sharing needs and activities can differ based on a variety of factors including technological accessibility and understanding, language ability, content familiarity, and time allowance. While not everyone can be accommodated at all times, the primary audience must be able to actively participate in proposed knowledge sharing activities.

Participants in the AgExchange currently utilize a wide variety of tools for knowledge sharing, including:

- **Publications and reports** (technical papers, synthesis documents, program evaluations and reports, sector studies)

"As our tool boxes get more and more crowded it can be difficult deciding which tool to choose. One useful approach is to ask yourself what you are trying to accomplish in your knowledge sharing efforts. Ask yourself: "Who am I trying to reach?” and "What do I want them to do?” This should serve as a guide in choosing the most appropriate tool.”

-- Denise Mortimer,
USAID Africa Bureau

The AgExchange included participants from the United States and the following countries:

- Antigua and Barbuda
- Bangladesh
- Canada
- Costa Rica
- Ethiopia
- Finland
- Ghana
- India
- Italy
- Jamaica
- Kenya
- Mozambique
- Nigeria
- Pakistan
- Senegal
- Tanzania
- Uganda
- Zimbabwe
In-person events (conferences, workshops)
Mentoring (peer exchanges and assists)
Marketing materials (brochures, information sheets)
Websites (Google, Wordpress, Drupal)
Online collaboration spaces (working groups, communities of practice, Adobe Connect, Go-to-Webinar, Illuminate)
Online sharing spaces (Flickr, Slideshare, Yammer, Wordpress, Wikis, YouTube, Blip.tv)
Mobile technology (apps, text messaging/SMS)
Social media (Facebook, Twitter)

Increasingly, technology is making knowledge sharing faster and easier. During the AgExchange, participants shared experiences about how they are incorporating technology into their knowledge sharing activities in the field with community groups, farmer associations, and small scale farmers. Examples include Project ABC in Niger and the Knowledge Help Extension Technology Initiative (KHETI) in India that are utilizing cell phones and village ICT centers to increase literacy and share agricultural knowledge with farmers.

Social media as a technology-based knowledge sharing approach generated much discussion during the AgExchange. Social media enables individuals and organizations to reach a broader audience, increase visibility, and provide critical information quickly. Successful examples of utilizing Twitter as a knowledge sharing tool included conference updates and “ask the expert” forums (for example, please reference the recent Agrilinks Twitter Hour on the Women’s Empowerment in Agriculture Index). However, social media can also present challenges to certain types of audiences that may not have access to required technology or who might not have sufficient knowledge to engage in social media activities. While social media tools can prove effective in sharing knowledge, they should ideally be used in tandem with other types of tools to increase impact.

Performance Management Plans (PMPs) represent another tool discussed during the AgExchange. USAID currently utilizes PMPs to “plan and manage the process of monitoring, evaluating, and reporting progress towards achieving a [direct objective].” AgExchange participants noted the potential benefits of PMPs but questioned whether they focused too much on accountability and not enough on learning and adapting. Others noted that the audiences for PMPs are primarily donors and implementing organizations with less of a focus on beneficiaries. For PMPs to have the greatest impact, participants felt that they must accurately reflect realities on the ground and allow programs to adapt as appropriate. One way to do this could be to better integrate monitoring plans into program learning agendas so that any learning resulting from program implementation can feed back into the program cycle for maximum impact.

MAXIMIZING HUMAN CONNECTIONS AND NETWORKS FOR KNOWLEDGE SHARING

The power of human connections and networking for knowledge sharing emerged as another major theme during the AgExchange. Participants highlighted partnerships as one important way to capitalize on the diverse experience of different stakeholders working in food security and agriculture interventions. Successful partnership initiatives discussed included the development of the Feed the Future research agenda that involved

participating partners in the Feed the Future Research Forum and the Public/Private Partnership Technical Forum.

AgExchange participants also discussed working groups as another approach to encourage knowledge sharing through human connections and networks. Working groups can bring together different stakeholders working on similar questions, concepts, or themes to a common space to encourage information sharing and idea generation. While working groups can serve as an effective method for knowledge sharing and collaboration, practitioners emphasized the need for ownership as well as active and committed facilitation. Many viewed this as integral to ensuring that working group activities and discussions move forward and that members have a shared sense of responsibility for success. One successful working group that was noted is the Knowledge Management working group hosted by the Knowledge for Health (K4Health) project funded by USAID and the Office of Population and Reproductive Health (PRH) through the Global Health Bureau.

The role of extension workers in knowledge sharing emerged as a key part of the three day discussion. Participants debated whether traditional extension services are still needed now that technology can help to bridge certain knowledge gaps. Benefits of extension workers as “knowledge brokers” include relaying complex information and developing two-way discussions with farmers about key issues. Even though different types of technology are now commonly used to communicate with farmers, extension workers still represent an “important bridge between the research, the technology, and the farm.” Participants shared a number of hybrid approaches including training farmers as “Farm Business Advisors” to advise on best practices for agricultural activities in lieu of traditional extension workers. However, regardless of the specific approach, AgExchange participants emphasized that avoiding duplication between public and private extension services remains essential and that stakeholders should work closely together to clearly define roles.

ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH KNOWLEDGE APPLICATION

Participants agreed that while knowledge sharing is important, knowledge application is essential for ultimately achieving impact in food security and agriculture. For impact to occur among various stakeholders, recipients must apply shared knowledge and translate it into behavior change. Furthermore, knowledge application must not only occur with one audience group but must be adopted by a wide variety of stakeholders at scale to address the enormous issue of food insecurity.

Closing the learning loop by facilitating the application of lessons learned at the local level through learning and behavior change is one way to achieve impact. By engaging a variety of stakeholders including beneficiaries, local governments, associations, and community members at the local level, practitioners can potentially observe long-lasting changes in behavior and activities. Many AgExchange participants pointed out that the focus is often on collecting information from the field with less of an emphasis on applying lessons learned in the field. In the words of one AgExchange participant, there is too much of a focus on “collecting vs. connecting.” In addition,
Information often flows “top-down” with less application of “bottom-up” strategies that engage in crucial conversations with beneficiaries to objectively evaluate different interventions.

SEEP’s Marketing Facilitation Initiative (MAFI) represents one successful knowledge sharing initiative that has worked to involve audiences at the local level. In partnership with the KDMD project, MAFI drafted guidance on how to support local learning opportunities for food security and microenterprise development by using a variety of knowledge sharing tools such as reports, webcasts, audio recordings, and file sharing. MAFI also provided guidance on how to effectively capture outcomes of conversations with local stakeholders. Although this information proved valuable for reaching down to the local level, it was suggested that local partners might need more incentives in the future to explore and utilize this guidance in their everyday activities.

EMPOWERING ORGANIZATIONS AND PEOPLE TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE

How do we encourage the capture and dissemination of knowledge and good practices among stakeholders? As one AgExchange facilitator noted, getting people to spend time on learning activities represents a challenge, especially if they only see indirect applications to their own work. Unfortunately, knowledge sharing often falls into the category of implicit (as opposed to explicit) job duties and most people struggle to find the time to engage in activities that their job descriptions do not specifically mandate. Many organizations and institutions encourage knowledge generation, capture, dissemination, and application but few put into place the frameworks to empower employees to engage in these activities.

AgExchange participants mentioned incentives as one possible solution to encourage individuals to actively engage in knowledge sharing activities. Appropriate types of incentives differ depending on a variety of different factors including the type of organization, the individual, and the desired types of behaviors. For some organizations, tangible incentives such as the incorporation of knowledge sharing activities into employee performance assessments and reviews could be effective. Organizations could also emphasize learning and knowledge sharing by sharing “open educational resources” or learning materials with all employees. One participant noted success in providing farmers with agricultural tools, inputs, and other prizes as part of a rural education scheme to promote knowledge sharing. Intangible incentives can also be an important way to encourage employees to engage in knowledge sharing. Examples of intangible incentives could include recognition by colleagues, kudos, and the deepening of professional networks. One AgExchange participant envisioned knowledge sharing as part of an “impact pathway” through which all employees would feel empowered and engaged to maximize the outreach of their work.

Ideally, an organization should include

“One approach that may improve the ability to achieve scale, or at least allow us to learn how to more effectively apply lessons at scale, is to “close the loop” of the knowledge cycle through local learning. If we can document how implementers are applying the learning that is shared out [through] traditional reporting and knowledge products, understand what works and doesn’t in their specific contexts, and filter that learning back to a broader base, it becomes much more valuable.”

-- Brandon Szabo, International Resources Group (IRG)
knowledge sharing as part of a larger message around learning and knowledge management. One AgExchange participant suggested some best practices surrounding organizational knowledge management:

- Develop common goals
- Practice transparency and clear communication
- Promote cooperation and trust
- Encourage motivation
- Develop a project management workspace
- Highlight frequent connections by synthesizing highlights, outcomes and next steps
- Provide administrative support and work towards seamless logistics

By establishing common goals within an organization or group, openly communicating these goals to group members, and providing members with necessary tools and resources, knowledge sharing can become more embedded in an organization’s structure. In 2011, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) developed a knowledge strategy that effectively integrated with existing organizational standards, guidelines, and processes. USAID has started to focus on developing new approaches to knowledge sharing by better integrating learning into program strategy and implementation. USAID missions currently utilize tools such as the Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) that facilitate context-specific programming by analyzing a country’s context (including different technical sectors and other stakeholders working in the area) to develop a comprehensive strategy and results framework. In addition, select missions are now adopting a collaborating, learning, and adapting (CLA) approach that links different components of the program cycle together to demonstrate interconnectivity while being flexible enough to react to key shifts in regional and local contexts. Ideally, the CLA approach will help to shorten feedback loops between practitioners and USAID to strengthen collaborative and evidence-based programming. An Organizational Network Analysis (ONA) was another tool mentioned by participants to survey and map out connections across sectors and organizations to avoid duplication of efforts and to gain essential information for evidence-based programming.

IMPROVING KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN FOOD SECURITY AND AGRICULTURE

Throughout the three day discussion, participants noted that there is not (and should not be) a one-size-fits-all approach to knowledge sharing. AgExchange participants viewed a single platform for knowledge sharing around food security and agriculture as unnecessarily time consuming and unrealistic since knowledge sharing approaches differ according the type of information being shared, available tools and resources, and the targeted audience. However, participants did emphasize the need for better knowledge aggregation and interaction of tools and resources among stakeholders.

Numerous AgExchange participants expressed that they often felt challenged by information overload and duplication of knowledge sharing
efforts by organizations and implementers. While information continues to become easier to document and share, many practitioners find that they often do not have adequate time to conduct everyday work activities while also engaging in knowledge capture and dissemination. Associated with this are numerous websites and platforms devoted to knowledge sharing managed by different organizations and implementers. While participants felt that knowledge sharing platforms should be diverse and independent, they did feel that coordination among different knowledge sharing platforms should be more deliberate to avoid duplication in efforts and to assist in identifying key information.

Participants provided numerous examples of organizations and initiatives that successfully bridge the gap between data generation and organization. One good practice common among many of these initiatives is clear taxonomy and organization of data on websites and in databases. AgrifoodGateway.com has developed an online interactive database to collect and share information on applied technology and business information for the agricultural community worldwide. USAID’s Global Broadband and Innovations (GBI) program also utilizes an online database to demonstrate how information, communication, and technology (ICT) solutions can be integrated into the agricultural value chain. Finally, the Agrilinks website and Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) Network provide technical information for USAID employees and practitioners on the latest developments in food security and agricultural programming for USAID programs worldwide.

CONCLUSIONS
The AgExchange explored some of the current practices, challenges, tools, and approaches that stakeholders working in food security and agriculture utilize for knowledge sharing. However, participants agreed that in order to work towards addressing the enormous issue of food insecurity, stakeholders need to move beyond capture and sharing to focus on application of best practices and lessons learned. In order for this to occur, we need to be willing to discuss failures as well as successes as an integral step towards improved practice.

Selected Resources
For a full selection of over 50 resources shared during the AgExchange, please visit the Discussion Resources page at http://agrilinks.org/groups/agexchange-knowledge-sharing/resources.

USAID Program Cycle Overview

USAID Strategic Learning Plan
http://prezi.com/xzimbunhnn8l/usaid-strategic-learning-plan/?auth_key=88bcff92594948cb199b3c1c820968a8cb3f4182

FAO Knowledge Strategy
http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/am492e/am492e00.pdf

Feed the Future Monitoring System Training Webinar

KM Impact Challenge UnConference Synthesis

Knowledge Management for Health and Development Toolkit
http://archive.k4health.org/toolkits/km

MEAS Open Educational Resources
http://www.meas-extension.org/oer

International Livestock Research Institute (IRLI) Repository on Livestock Research
http://mahider.ilri.org/handle/10568/1

mBCC Field Guide http://www.mbccfieldguide.com/
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