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Knowledge Sharing and Development Cooperation through Virtual Platforms

by Carol Tisshaw¹, Save the Children.

Abstract

As an international network of 29 development and humanitarian-response member organizations, Save the Children has been using virtual platforms (VPs) to preserve and nurture knowledge throughout its network and programs in over 120 countries. This paper highlights three examples of VPs that Save the Children uses in its knowledge management and collaboration work: the Thought Cabinet, the Child Protection Working Group, and the Community Child Protection Exchange Forum. The author notes the importance of starting small, and growing organically in response to user needs and initiatives, as well as the challenges of internet connectivity and user capacity.

A) Introduction

Save the Children International (SCI) is a network of 29 member organizations that raise funds and operate programs in 126 countries. In the past five years, Save the Children has been making the transition from being a network of regional and country programs to becoming one, unified international organization. In order to preserve and build upon the enormous reservoir of explicit and implicit knowledge of its members, Save the Children is interested in documenting and communicating the contribution of our activities to a variety of audiences. Accordingly, it has made knowledge management (KM) an explicit and required component in its Theory of Change (see following diagram).

B) Knowledge Management Objectives & Benefits

SCI's KM framework (currently in development) aims to share collective experience and know-how in order to contribute to positive changes in children's lives. It sets out a process of knowledge generation, capture, documentation, sharing and application to meet three strategic objectives related to:

1. People: enhanced staff capacity as knowledge workers and transferors;
2. Process and content: program operational knowledge used/applied in support of achieving Save the Children's strategic goals; and

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3. Collaborative technology: efficient and accessible KM technology solutions developed.

SCI's KM framework will ensure better use of collaboration and communication tools, further creation and promotion of internal communities of practice, and fostering the identity of virtual teams.

Effective KM allows Save the Children to improve knowledge and share good practices across country programs and members to increase effectiveness and output. Equitable sharing, knowledge retained and lessons gained are critical to an organization that is so geographically dispersed. Efficient KM supports and promotes collaboration and partnership across Save the Children, with external partners and other organizations working within the sector and, in some instances, with the wider public.

Theory of Change:



C) Examples of Save the Children's Virtual Platforms

Save the Children has developed a suite of VPs that support the continuous improvement of collaborative work as well as sharing best practices. This paper highlights three examples of VPs that Save the Children uses in its KM and collaboration work:

1. The Thought Cabinet;
2. The Child Protection Working Group; and
3. The Community Child Protection Exchange Forum.

1) The Thought Cabinet

Public policies regarding children and young workers in Latin America are not satisfactory to address their needs and fulfill their rights. To address this, Save the Children Canada and its regional partners, the Latin American Movement of Working Children and the Latin American Network of Masters Programs have created a virtual "Thought Cabinet" (*Gabinete de Pensamiento in Spanish*) to promote thinking and innovative knowledge sharing on public policy issues of child and adolescent workers, and provide the guarantee of child rights.

The "Thought Cabinet" is a VP and meeting host for member organizations to engage in creative visioning (social and political) and to work collaboratively with technological support (e.g. virtual classrooms mode, simultaneous conversations, storage and access to key documentation).

Functions of the Thought Cabinet

For each initiative implemented so far in the Thought Cabinet, a participant organization approved concept/project was developed. A coordinating committee was formed, composed of one representative from each organization responsible for carrying out operational work. In one instance, for example, the operational work was to prepare and submit documents on previously reviewed studies of children produced in four countries. The next step was to communicate, through Skype sessions, four introductory statements from the principal investigator in each country. Following these sessions, country teams proceeded to write up the outcomes of their meetings and share their report with participants of all four countries.

Synchronous virtual meetings are conducted among members of the Cabinet from Bolivia, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Peru. Members can debate, develop proposals, organize information, plan interventions and analyze inputs.

The results are shared through virtual exhibitions by researchers and follow-up discussions for analysis and synthesis. The Cabinet then formulates policy proposals and hosts live, online events to showcase proposals in each country and with regional partners.

Outcomes:

Through the Thought Cabinet, Save the Children and partners have:

- increased the recognition of the issue of working children and adolescents in Latin America;

- identified public, private, national and international policies regarding working children in the region;
- designed public policy alternatives that address and meet the needs to fully protect children and adolescent workers; and
- proposed innovative public policies to the State.

Results & Lessons Learned: Save the Children's experience with the Thought Cabinet allowed three very different types of organizations to engage in constructive dialogue. Through the Thought Cabinet, Save the Children has supported the development of longer-term social policies that will improve the lives of working children.

In inviting members to participate, it was necessary to be persuasive, maintain customized electronic contact and change doubtful, uncertain attitudes to positive ones. Without being too rigid, the following standards were maintained:

- Defining clear objectives;
- Supporting active participation of all parties involved;
- Using technology that was easily accessible;
- Resolving problems when they appeared; and
- Providing efficient coordination.

Using an exhibitivite and conversational approach for training members has been effective in supporting collaborative learning. Through peer exchanges, those involved both taught and learned new things from others.

Tools like Skype generally worked well for synchronous virtual meetings, however, constraints were faced which were beyond the control of the organizers and participants. For example, at times there was disruption in communication when the network was congested or not operational.

Being open to collaboration not only for KM, but also innovation and discovery, is vital to support organizational learning.

An Example of the Thought Cabinet's Work: MOLACNAT's

In April and May 2011, the three member organizations and four Master's students analyzed the relevance of the Thought Cabinet concept. Together, they organized a committee to perform their first dialogue-action on the state of working children in four countries in the region, and to analyze possible public policies from the Latin America Movement of Working Children (MOLACNATs). From June to September, the group debated and proposed objectives and policies to present at the VIII encounter of *El Secretariado Latinoamericano de Colaboradores de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores* (or in English, the *Latin American Secretariat of Supporters of Children and Youth Workers*) at the end of 2011.

The coordinating committee of the Thought Cabinet worked in diverse modes, including:

- summarizing and distributing the preparatory (or background) studies to the participants;

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- meeting via Skype to discuss the results of the studies and proposals of policies in each country; and
- reviewing records after each meeting.

The University of the Externado (Colombia) provided technical and topical support (e.g. by the research group on child labor at the university).

The expected results were:

1. a recognition of the state of working children and adolescents in Latin America, and identified policies and plans at public, private, national and international levels regarding working children in the region;
2. alternative public policy proposals designed to satisfy the needs of and also integrally protect child and adolescent workers; and
3. innovative public policies proposed to governments.

The first two results were achieved. The third result was not achieved because of a lack of resources to implement in each country.

The experience with the Thought Cabinet demonstrates that it can serve as a space to generate new knowledge through concerted inter-institutional dialogue, even among diverse organizations. It can be effective as long as it focuses on proposing policies.

For the future, Save the Children recommends that the Thought Cabinet be maintained with the support of an academic institution, for example, the University of the Externado of Colombia, and that a permanent virtual classroom be created. In addition, the Thought Cabinet should promote the advancement of those public policies already recommended by the regional MOLACNATs within each country.

2) The Child Protection Working Group (CPWG)

The Child Protection Working Group (CPWG) of which Save the Children is a member, is a global level forum established in September 2005 to coordinate child protection in humanitarian settings. It brings together NGOs, UN agencies, academics and others² under the shared objective of ensuring more predictable, accountable and effective child protection responses in complex emergencies, disasters and other such situations.

CPWG supports cohesive, interagency child protection responses at the field level through global level advocacy, standards and policy setting, capacity building and tool development. CPWG members lead the majority of CPWG initiatives and drive the development of the work plan.

Expected Outcomes:

The current CPWG work plan runs from July 2010 until the end of December 2012 and calls for outcomes in the following areas: standard setting, improving technical programme quality, learning assessment, coordination, capacity building and training, advocacy, monitoring and reporting mechanism on grave violations against children in situations of armed conflict and CPWG ways of working.



² The present participants within the CPWG include: Childfund, Child Soldiers International, Child Protection In Crisis, Danish Refugee Council, Geneva Call, Heartland Alliance, International Committee of the Red Cross, Norwegian Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, International Labour Organisation, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Keeping Children Safe Coalition, Plan International, Save the Children, SOS Children's Villages, Terre des Hommes, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations, War Child Holland, War Child UK, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, and World Vision International.

Knowledge Management Strategy

The KM strategy of the current CPWG work plan includes activities to:

- advocate and raise awareness of child protection as a vital component of Humanitarian Response and a life-saving intervention in crisis. This includes ensuring that child protection is adequately represented and funded within the Humanitarian Reform Agenda and within the Cluster Approach;
- build stronger interagency child protection capacity through training, staffing and developing standards, guidelines and tools;
- collaborate to ensure that child protection is adequately mainstreamed into the broader protection agenda, other clusters' work, and within the Humanitarian Coordinator Strengthening Initiative;
- ensure appropriate links and complementarities with other interagency child protection forums and initiatives;
- develop guidance on managing effective child protection responses within the cluster approach, including how to establish and manage field level child protection working Groups and how to develop successful partnerships with other protection actors;
- receive and respond to requests from the field and the CPWG for provision of technical and policy advice on specific child protection issues, including short-term, interagency technical support missions to the field as necessary; and
- ensure connectivity to the field through maintaining the Child Protection Working Group webpage, direct field participation in global initiatives and work plan activities and annual global Child Protection Working Group meetings.

In order to enable effective collaboration member agencies submit a signed letter outlining their commitments to the group, including: active participation in field level coordination groups and use of agreed interagency tools (e.g. assessment tools) in preference to agency-specific tools in order to promote coordinated and more efficient responses.

In June 2010, the CPWG also made a decision to develop operational minimum standards for child protection in humanitarian settings. The standards are intended to improve the quality of child protection programming to achieve greater impact for children, enable better communication and advocacy about child protection needs and responses, improve accountability within the child protection in emergencies sector and ensure coordination within the sector (and with other sectors). In September 2011, the first draft of the Minimum Standards was developed and reviewed. In January 2012, a new version, translated into Arabic, French and Spanish was sent for consultations to child protection sub-clusters and working groups in 15-20 countries.

Combining Face-to-Face and Online Collaboration

Every year, CPWG holds annual planning meetings to exchange field level experiences, review current trends and gaps in the field of child protection, and develop interagency strategies to strengthen child protection responses. The annual meeting is open to field-based personnel

from CPWG member agencies, as well as consultants in the sector. It is an excellent place to get up to speed on the latest developments and discussions.

Between the annual face-to-face meetings, CPWG also maintains a VP at cpwg.net to promote learning amongst local and global practitioners. The CPWG site has seven sections:

1. **Tools and Resources**, for CPWG actors and the wider Child Protection in Emergencies (CPIE) community, includes each key category related to Child Protection in Emergencies, a search engine and useful links;
2. **Advice and Support**, for practitioners, includes a global, CPIE helpdesk with a pool of experts who can respond to private queries from the field, and a public forum with key topics related to CPIE;
3. **Country Pages** with information on the latest ongoing emergencies, summaries on the funding situation of CPIE projects and some key resources listed by country;
4. **Events and Trainings** lists all upcoming and recently completed training/events, including key packages or full reports to download, plus updates and useful links from the CPWG Capacity Building and Training focal point;
5. **Work Plan of the CPWG** is the most recently updated version with easy references to each activity;
6. **Vacancies** related to Child Protection in Emergencies including short-term consultancies, internships and other job opportunities; and
7. **Rapid Response Team** with the latest updates on deployments, missions and activities of each member.

Volunteers from different CPWG member agencies provide Help Desk and technical assistance to support interagency work at the field level and can be contacted directly.

Results to Date:

A mid-term review of the CPWG acknowledged the following as its achievements so far:

- it has established a definition of Child Protection in Emergencies, violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect;
- the group is expanding steadily;
- it is providing more explicit support to the field (e.g. Rapid Response Team);
- it has a relatively low cost and is efficient due to its collaborative way of working;
- it is advancing “high-ambition” projects (e.g. Minimum Standards Diploma) in absence of dedicated funding; and
- it has a high level of commitment as demonstrated by some sub-groups (e.g. IAWG on Unaccompanied and Separated Children).

3) Community Child Protection Exchange Forum

The child protection sector in general, and specifically the community-based child protection sub-sector, has been lagging behind other sectors like health, education and water sanitation, and hygiene that support learning and collaboration through online fora.

To address this gap, Save the Children has led the development of another VP called the [Community Child Protection Exchange Forum](#) (the Exchange Forum) to bring together participants and advance the state of knowledge, policy, and practice around community-based child protection mechanisms. Its objectives include:

- consolidate what we already know on community-based child protection mechanisms and stimulate new learning through peer-to-peer exchange;
- share the latest research on this topic and discuss the implications of this research for approaches to community-based child protection mechanisms; and
- generate constructive debate around the policy and practice of supporting community-based child protection mechanisms.

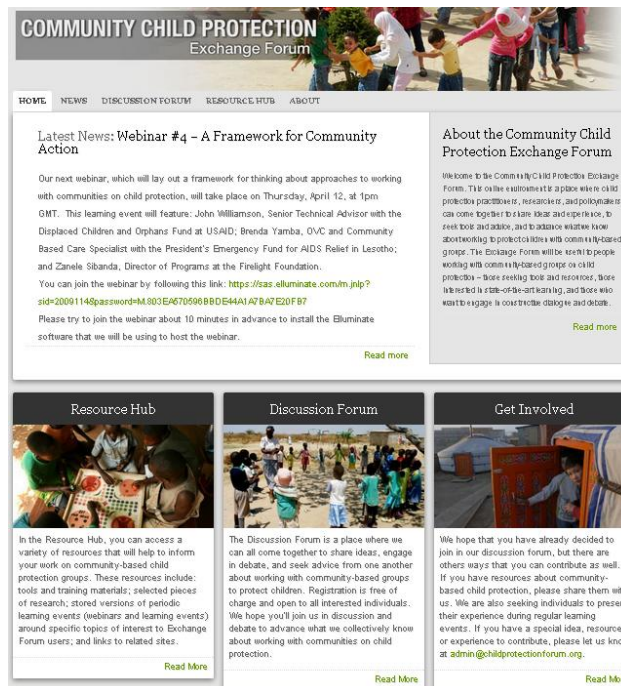
The Exchange Forum Set-Up

The Exchange Forum's access is provided free-of-charge to all interested individuals. Although many of the its resources are publicly available without registration, participation in the moderated discussion forum requires registration (also free).

Resource hub

The resource hub provides access to resources in a variety of formats that can be useful in developing work with community-based child protection mechanisms. The resources are grouped into five clusters:

- Tools and training materials includes training curricula and guidance documents for those working with community-based groups on child protection;
- Webinars, teleconferences and other learning events organized by the Exchange Forum's facilitators and similar organizations. Stored versions of past learning events can be accessed through this hub;



- [Research and evaluations](#) of the work of community-based child protection groups that are methodologically rigorous and likely to have practical implications for working with community-based groups;
- [Links](#) to and descriptions of similar websites that might be useful to Exchange Forum members; and
- [The Discussion Forum](#) (launched in February 2012) is a venue to share ideas, seek feedback, or engage in discussion and debate about working with community-based child protection mechanisms. Users can launch a new discussion thread by logging into the discussion forum and clicking on the button "new topic." They can also e-mail the discussion forum facilitators to launch a new discussion thread. There are also options to upload documents and to create polls.

To animate the Discussion Forum, the facilitators created an initial schedule for discussion topics for the first few months of the Exchange Forum. Topics included:

- links between community-based mechanisms and national systems building efforts;
- volunteer motivation – how to generate and sustain it;
- preventive work and the impact of sensitizations;
- case management by community-based groups;
- working with illiterate people in community-based groups;
- access and ways to reach populations that are typically excluded; and
- collaboration between government and non-government partners.

Evolution of the Exchange Forum

In launching the Exchange Forum, the facilitators saw the need to start small and take time to identify and engage with people who were interested in moving the state of knowledge forward. Initial recruitment efforts focused on areas where projects already linked to the initiative were underway, including:

- Sierra Leone and Kenya, where the research will be focused;
- Thailand, where a champion was identified who would help to invite core users; and
- Uganda, where similar initiatives had already started.

Other participants from other regions were, of course, welcome to participate; but the initial focus remained on these four countries.

As well, the organizers recognized the need to pair online learning with face-to-face events. As a result, they created time and space for discussing the Exchange Forum and its content during already-planned in-person meetings.

It was also recognized that the Exchange Forum would eventually require topic-, language- and/or region-specific groups but the organizers decided to allow these to develop organically as needed. In the case of the Inter-Agency Network for Education (INEE), for example, the initial online exchange forum gradually split into a number of sub-groups as participants took responsibility for fostering discussion that was specific to one topic or one language.

As some participants experienced difficulty in accessing the internet and/or had low internet capacity, it was important to ensure a low-bandwidth site with minimal design elements and few graphics. It was also important to ensure that all communications could be done via e-mail (e.g. a listserv) for users who are only likely to access the information in that format.

Post Learning Forum Reflections

When attending the IDRC Learning Forum in Winnipeg, the experience of colleagues from other international development organizations that were developing VPs for KM resonated with ours. Several common issues and realities stood out:

- VPs have to be flexible and adaptable over time as we learn what works and what does not. Starting small with a core of identified interested users allows the development of the platform to be defined and led by those who are using it (i.e. *Think Big, start small*).
- Be sure to understand what your user group/participants are looking to 'get from' the platform. Those which were most successful were consistently the ones which provided an output for the users that was new and useful to them in their work.
- Allow the platform to evolve as the user group leads. Often what was hypothesized as the primary direction of the platform will be altered by the users/participants who make the platform a living and evolving entity. By nurturing the organic nature of the platform, this remains relevant and vibrant.
- Organizing face-to-face meetings among users of a platform can have a positive effect on the health and sustainability of the platform. If this is not possible, to facilitate moderated sections can help the users to 'understand' each other in the absence of personal interaction;
- The variety of internet capacity and experience of use amongst the users/community can have a huge impact on equitable involvement. Look to offer a universally accessible and easily understood technology as a method of communication
- The geographical diversity of participants can have an impact on several fronts, such as connectivity; time zones can be a constraint if the VP uses synchronous activities/communication, and most prominently, language differences can complicate communication.

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