Exploring Network Patterns with Health and Development Workers in East, Central, and Southern Africa

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Knowledge Share Fair Attendees Examine Network Patterns. Jarret Cassaniti.

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

In March 2014, the U.S. Agency for International Development's Kenya-East Africa Mission engaged the Knowledge for Health Project (K4Health) to strengthen knowledge management (KM) capacity for its intergovernmental partners: the East, Central & Southern Africa Health Community (ECSA-HC), the East African Community (EAC), and the Lake Victoria Basin Commission (LVBC). The project, which runs until December 2016, seeks to improve regional collaboration, sharing and learning, scaling up high-impact practices, the quality of health systems across countries, and reducing duplicative efforts.

As part of this work, K4Health designed and implemented a two-and-half-day Regional KM Share Fair in partnership with ECSA-HC, EAC, and LVBC. The goal of the Fair, held in Arusha, Tanzania on April 13-15, 2016, was to highlight KM tools and techniques as well as foster a **network of KM experts** to accelerate innovation through collaboration, learning, and adapting. Over 100 attendees from 12 countries came together to share implementation challenges and successes, and then returned to their home organizations with new perspectives and ideas aimed at improving health outcomes for the populations they serve.

![USAID FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE]

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To help advance the region's KM capacity, the Share Fair team aligned the meeting objectives with USAID's Vision for Health Systems Strengthening 2015-2019 priority objectives, as well as the Collaborating, Learning, & Adapting component of USAID Missions' Country Development Cooperation Strategies. Share Fair objectives also supported the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3, which focuses on ensuring healthy lives, and SDG 17.9, which focuses on in-country capacity-building through North-South, South-South, and triangular cooperation.

What was the main challenge or opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

The main opportunity that led K4Health to develop the network structure activity was the Share Fair. Our efforts to foster the development of a KM network **focused on making knowledge and information exchange more efficient and effective across the region**. This goal required the development of a strategic exercise to delve into the guests' current and preferred practices for sharing knowledge and information. We needed to learn more about attendees' perspectives and preferences about learning and sharing knowledge and information. In other words, we sought information on how they could best organize themselves to share knowledge and information and what knowledge gaps they might have depending on how and from whom they get their work-related information. Another vital component of the Fair was to build trusting relationships that attendees would want to continue to nurture after the Fair was over. In essence, the meeting was meant to inspire attendees to continue to share with and learn from each other in the most transparent, strategic, and productive manner. They were asked to build their respective KM capacity, network with each other, and develop an identity as KM champions to promote effective collaboration, learning, and adapting to ultimately improve their countries' health outcomes.

Getting the "right people in the room" meant strategically inviting representatives from governments, intergovernmental organizations, USAID Missions, and NGOs. The 102 attendees included librarians, data analysts, communication officers, project directors, and KM experts from South Africa, South Sudan, and a dozen countries in between. Within this mosaic of diverse organizations, job roles, and work countries were many different kinds of knowledge, skills, and work experiences with K4Health (ranging from non-existent to extensive). We purposefully organized this opportunity to facilitate critical discussions about the group's commonalities and differences, focusing on **common patterns of connections** between the Share Fair guests.

We also carried out this network pattern activity because it was interactive and allowed attendees to connect with and learn from each other without making those with less experience feel intimidated.

Describe the CLA approach or activity, explaining how the activity integrated collaborating, learning, adapting culture, processes, and/or resources as applicable.

To support the Share Fair's KM capacity building mandate, K4Health introduced a Net-Map exercise for attendees to learn more about networks that facilitate knowledge and information sharing across countries. Net-Map, an interview-based mapping tool, helps people understand, visualize, discuss, and improve situations in which many different actors influence outcomes. By creating influence network maps, individuals and groups can clarify their own view of a situation, foster discussion, and develop a strategic approach to their networking activities. Two days is the ideal time needed to develop and discuss Net-Maps with a group of people who have a stake in a particular topic or issue. Since we could only dedicate two hours at the Fair for this activity, we adapted it for a significantly shorter period of time while still conveying its relevant process and components. We then invited attendees

to generate their own thinking around **what constitutes an ideal network as well as the pros and cons of the established networks.**

In 10 years of analyzing how people work together, and how they form formal and informal networks, Eva Schiffer (the originator of Net-Maps) observed a number of prototypical network patterns emerging across different cultures, sectors and organizations. From these insights, she developed 10 network patterns and laid them out in ways that they might be used as a complement, supplement, or replacement for Net-Mapping. Her **guide** on the patterns inspired us to develop a short activity for the Share Fair. Each of Schiffer's 10 patterns shows a number of people (represented by circles or nodes) connected in unique ways. We consulted Schiffer about the goals and constraints of the activity and she provided excellent guidance to us during the activity's planning process.

On the first day of the Fair, after opening remarks and introductory activities, we projected the 10 patterns on a screen in the main conference room and briefly presented each one. We then explained the activity and asked attendees to think about which pattern best describe the way their organization shares knowledge and information between countries. We also asked them to consider the following three questions:
1. What is the official story of how your organization shares information? (what's supposed to be)
2. What happens in reality? (what is)
3. What would be an ideal structure for knowledge and information sharing? (what should be)

In the next step, each attendee identified the type of organization they work for based on four choices (civil society, ministry of health, intergovernmental, or bilateral donor). After self-identifying their respective organization type, attendees joined a relevant breakout group and were given Schiffer's 10 network patterns on 5x4 inch cards. Facilitators used the KM "1-2-4-All" system to stimulate discussion of the patterns. After 45 minutes, the four groups reconvened in the main conference room to share their findings and impressions of the network patterns as they relate to their own professional experience sharing knowledge and information across countries. The goal was to examine how organizations implement their knowledge sharing, what the tensions are between official, real, and ideal knowledge sharing structures, and also to explore whether perspectives differed between groups, and if so, how and why.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources, implementation challenges or obstacles, and enabling factors)?

K4Health attributes the success of this activity to its face-to-face, participatory nature, and the 1-2-4-All activity that encouraged thoughtful analysis and sharing. The network pattern exercise was something that everyone could relate to intuitively since each works within a formal structure involving other people and actors. The attendees appreciated the visual and tactile aspect of the activity, shifting the cards around, pointing at them, and holding them up to display to others. The success of the activity also had a lot to do with the selection of attendees; those who were invited had been carefully chosen to attend the Share Fair because they had a positive attitude towards learning, possessed soft skills (including the ability to communicate effectively) and had interest in developing and nurturing strong interpersonal relationships.

Challenges included attendees' inconsistent understanding of the four organizational categories we asked them to identify with at the beginning of the activity (civil society, ministry of health, intergovernmental, or bilateral donor). Several attendees who work at a research-focused organization did not identify as civil society practitioners as we expected them to. If we were to do

this again, we would pre-test our categories or assign attendees to groups ahead of time rather than expecting them to self-select a group membership.

We also found that more time was needed to allow attendees to have additional in-depth discussions with one another in the breakout groups as well as with the larger group when everyone reconvened to report out their findings. The time we devoted was sufficient enough to start conversations without exhausting the discussion. We estimate that to properly implement this activity with a group of 100 people, two hours would be a more appropriate time allotment. It could be done in a shorter amount of time with a smaller group.

Financial costs of implementing this activity included printing out four sets of large posters of the 10 patterns that were hung in the breakout rooms, and color printing 30 sets of the network structure cards on card stock. Human resources included staff time devoted to developing the concept and planning and implementing the activity. Discounting the costs of bringing attendees together from disparate countries and housing them, this activity represented roughly two-percent of the Share Fair's total budget.

With your initial challenge/opportunity in mind, what have been the most significant outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

Meeting notes showed a diversity of thought about the patterns; no pattern was a good fit for every context or need but a few patterns did stand out (see attached picture). *The Boss is the Boss* pattern elicited discussion about the disadvantages of traditional hierarchies. In this pattern, arrows go in both directions (up/down the chain of command) but this feedback loop presents problems. When knowledge moves from bottom to top, it risks distortion because of intermediary levels. Also, significant delays can occur in knowledge flows from the top to bottom for the same reason.

Everybody Holding Hands was one of the most referenced and preferred patterns. Many attendees suggested an internal node should be added in the middle to oversee what is being shared and, in the process, provide quality control. This node would also play keep the structure together if another node left.

Criticizing *Everybody Holding Hands*, one attendee said that not everyone needs to know everything, and often times, people don't *want* to know everything. For example, a research team does not need to know all the work a program team is engaged in; they just want to know about the parts that are relevant to their work. Knowledge overload poses a challenge for many and sharing knowledge based on the audience's need can help combat this challenge. Resources—time and money—are limited, so strategically choosing what knowledge to share, and how, is a budget imperative.

Another attendee highlighted the *Celebrating Diversity* pattern, noting the different colors of the nodes and comparing it to structures with nodes of only one color. According to Schiffer, colors represent different characteristics that might include people from different organizations or who have distinct philosophies. This attendee spoke to the value that interdisciplinary teams provide in creating efficiency and driving innovation.

If your project or activity is in the development phase or just recently underway (less than 1 year into implementation), how do you intend to track results and impact? What outcomes do you anticipate?

The assessment of the activity was incorporated into a generalized survey about the Share Fair at the end of the two-day event. Our formative research activities include plans to measure outcomes after three months (July 2016) using in-depth qualitative interviews, and after six months (October 2016) through an online survey. The formative research activity seeks to answer the following research questions that pertain to the network sharing exercise:

- Which social knowledge management techniques, tools, and approaches most effectively facilitated knowledge transfer and exchange during the Share Fair?
- Which social knowledge management tools were shared and adopted in practice by public health professionals after the Share Fair?
- To what extent has the knowledge (tacit and explicit) gained from the Share Fair been transferred from the participants to their contacts?
- What worked or did not work at the Share Fair, in terms of event coordination including logistics and venue, session topics, and facilitations, based on participants' perceptions and ratings of these elements?

What were the most important lessons learned?

K4Health will consider using this activity, or a variation of it, in the future when working with a large group of diverse stakeholders. It was a great way for the organizers to get a sense of attendee perceptions of possible ways of working together as well as stimulate conversation in a fun, and unique way. It also illustrates a very basic but tangible way to introduce systems thinking, which is critical for higher level KM.

While the design of the activity did not include direct discussion of how it could be implemented by attendees at   their organizations, its low-tech nature, the relatively few resources needed, and customizable nature position it as a tool that could be included in training of trainers events.

Several attendees drew their own patterns, reminding the facilitators to emphasize that patterns presented are not comprehensive. In the future, facilitators should provide an 11th (blank) card for attendees to design their own pattern(s.)

Several attendees also asked facilitators if they could keep the cards and posters to take back and use at their places of work. To empower attendees to use these patterns beyond the workshop, it would be great to add a set of the cards to each attendee's conference materials for reference and sharing with colleagues.

While the attendees of this Share Fair all came from different organizational backgrounds, the network patterns could also be very powerful when working more in-depth with intact teams or with emerging coalitions, to facilitate the clarification of how they could work together and with partners.

Any other critical information you'd like to share?

Patterns of sharing can have a significant impact on what is shared, how timely, useful, and robust the knowledge is, as well as what kind of impact it could have. Depending on which sharing pattern and process takes place, different results are possible. For example, a central hub that distributes predefined knowledge produces different results than a decentralized pattern designed to allow front-line actors to share and learn directly from each other. Since each pattern has strengths and weaknesses, facilitators should limit the discussion of each at the beginning of the exercise and be careful not to influence the discussion too much.

Attendees should be encouraged to explore the benefits and risks of each pattern so they can make more informed decisions when they design, participate in, and champion their own knowledge sharing networks. The patterns chosen, adopted, and utilized in programs that work across countries will impact efforts to achieve SDG 17.9 as it relates to North-South, South-South, and triangular cooperation.