

A Very Special Market

By Gabriela Neuhaus¹

An unusual and challenging meeting at SDC's administration building in Berne brought many interesting and colourful inputs for the participants. How sustainable this kind of knowledge management was – or will be – is very hard to say.



In the forefield of the event, everything seemed to become more and more chaotic. So many people were invited, so many topics on the list and so many organisational questions had to be dealt with.



But finally, one Tuesday morning end of March 2004, at SDC headquarters in Berne, everything was a little different.

There were stalls, posters and pictures everywhere on the different floors and in the corridors; somewhere in this building of concrete and glass there was even a nomad's tent to be found, the story tellers refuge.

The doors of the meeting rooms stayed open as there were different workshops for those who wished to get deeper into a topic. Everybody who wished could participate. - Soon there was a mixture of sounds and different languages as people from all over the world gathered, chatted and discussed.

Invited were more than 200 persons from all over the world, most of them working in the field of development and support for the poor. The main topic of the meeting was the exchange of ideas to improve knowledge management and skills for development. The aim was to find new

ways of sharing knowledge between partners as well as to maintain the flow of information and assure efficiency in using experience within the development institutions and organizations.

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Dare to Share

It is common sense – not only in the field of development work – that knowledge should be shared among partners: New ideas can help others, experiences have a wider impact if they are transferred and lessons learnt give important inputs for upcoming projects. – But as common as the recognition of the importance of knowledge management is the realization of how difficult it is to share what we know and to maintain it in a sustainable and effective way.

In recent years „Knowledge Management“ has become an important task within companies and organisations. Whole theories have been created how to do it best, innovative knowledge managers try to find new ways and practices. In this connection, the „Dare to Share Fair“ has become quite popular the last few years: it is a kind of market that allows the participants and visitors in a rather informal way to share whatever they have to share: The commodity „knowledge“ is presented at different stalls and with short presentations, the visitor picks out what is of interest for him, he chooses and he can stroll over the market the way he wants.

The „Dare to Share Fair“ at SDC Headquarters in March 2004 was the first such event in the Swiss Federal Administration. More than 200 persons - mainly from SDC and SDC partner organisations in the South, the East and the North – came together to share the ways they learn from experience. The focal theme of this Dare to Share Fair was „Managing Knowledge and Skills for Development“. They met for two days, on a third day the experiences and results of this first „Dare to Share Fair“ by SDC were reflected and discussed with a wider audience.

More information: <http://www.daretoshare.ch/>

Colourful presentations

Many visitors represented SDC partner organizations, they came to exchange information with SDC and other partners - others were just invited to present their proposals and programmes, hoping to become members of the big „SDC family“ and become eligible for funds for their projects.

Most of the presentations were set up very carefully. Somebody brought potatoes and potatoe chips from the Andes to introduce an innovative and promising cooperation among scientists, traders and farmers in Peru. Another organization had brought small bricks all the way from Nepal to give their visitors. Impressive was the enthusiasm with which they spoke of their approach in the field to gain acceptance for the new, more environmental friendly technology in brick production. They do not only give technological support but work also in the social field and offer assistance to entrepreneurs.

A few steps further, a discussion developed about the difficulties and challenges of introducing Information Technologies (IT) in West Africa. Although internet accessibility is increasing, there is still the problem that the main language on the internet is English. This

means a lot of translation work to get a share of the information that development people need in Mali or in Senegal – and even more translation and transformations to reach the people in the villages.

The benefits (and hope for future benefits) of the new Information Technologies and how they could be improved for development work was a main issue at different stalls and in some workshops. The introduction and use of video as an instrument in development work was another topic that was very present.

Good old story telling...

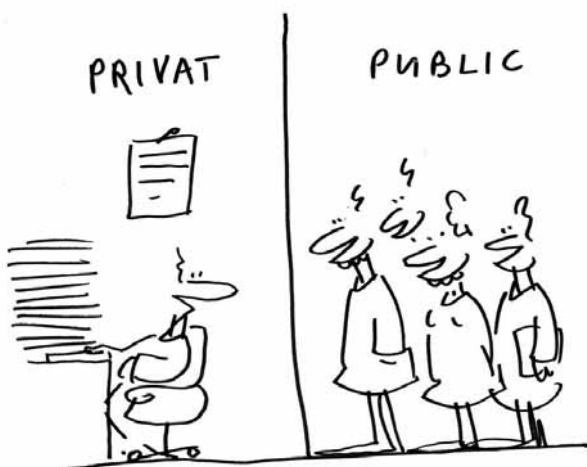
People strolled through the different stalls, shortly talking here and there, picking up flyers and brochures or could gather in classical workshops to discuss topics like e.g. „Consultancy in International Cooperation“, „Mapping by Stakeholders for Planning Choices“ or „Capitalising on Participatory Learning“. Others stopped at the Bedouins tent. While they enjoyed a cup of peppermint tea, they were invited to practice a very old way of knowledge exchange: Story telling is another popular instrument introduced by knowledge managers into business life. Visitors who took the time to slow down and sit for a while with the professional story tellers from London in the nomad's tent, redes-

covered this old method of knowledge exchange and some of them started to think about possibilities to introduce it into their work back home.

During the two days of the Fair, the three ladies from Sparknow gathered and supported the creation of stories from different people from all over the world – weaving out of this rough material a new story, the „Story of the Dare to Share Fair“. The whole story can be found under http://www.daretoshare.ch/backgroundinfo_fair.html

Rapture and disappointment

The „Dare to Share Fair“, initialised by SDC knowledge manager Manuel Flury, was a big and costly event. It was followed by a one day conference under the title „Learning across Borders“. Impressions, reflections and lessons learnt (see bin p. 3) from the two days of knowledge exchange at SDC headquarters were presented to a wider audience. Most of the participants of both events agreed: the effort was worth it. The most important thing was that this meeting allowed people, working in similar fields, to meet and to network in an informal context. „I shall try to organize the next meeting of our organization and its partners also as a fair“, said Salman Beg from the Agha Khan Cultural Service in Pakistan. „It is much more efficient than having whole days filled up with speeches to an audience that is getting more and more sleepy.“



Lessons learnt: what a fair needs

A fair in order to be a fair...

... needs to be concentrated spatially and thematically to assure the hustle and bustle of a fair and the clash of ideas. Elements such as long workshops prevent from strolling through the market and are out of place.

... needs to find a balanced presence of sellers and buyers. Organizers need to assure, that all of them assist and, for this purpose, realize their prospective benefit.

... needs to show innovations and novelties. As this is not guaranteed by itself, it's the responsibility of fair organizers to search for and find them.

... needs to provide space and ambiance for people to network and connect, in a word to live, love and laugh.

Marc Steinlin + Gabriela Neuhaus

But there were also disappointments and confusions. Some exhibitors at the carefully constructed stalls, especially those who were placed on the upper floors, had only very few visitors. During some workshops the corridors were even totally empty. „We invested so much time for our presentation – and now most of the time we are just waiting for somebody to come. By the time people arrive here, they are already exhausted – if they arrive at all...“, said a disappointed host with an interesting presentation – on the fifth floor.

Another disappointment was the very bad attention given to the fair by most of the SDC staff. „I have not seen anybody from SDC's Latin America desk at our stall, the whole day“, wondered a representative of a SDC partner organization, who had come all the way from South America to show his project to his donor. All these organizations and partners came not only to meet at SDC's – but to meet SDC and its representatives. „This fair is disturbing – it is hard to work in such a turmoil“, complained one of the staff hurrying to his office. Others regretted that their workload would not allow them to have a look at the stalls.

While knowledge was exchanged in corridors and visitors from outside and some few SDC people were networking in corridors and meeting rooms, most of the SDC staff were sitting behind closed doors, alone with computers and telephones – maybe they missed something...

Those who participated mostly enjoyed it. Although not everything was perfect. Some presentations, some workshops did not get the attention they had hoped for, or they deserved. Maybe the themes should have been more concentrated on the main topic or the SDC staff should have been embedded more actively, maybe...

There are lessons to be learnt, things that could be improved next time. But: The Dare to Share Fair was an interesting experiment. Very obviously it was a great platform for people to meet, to exchange, to network. – If it was more, if it has sustainable impacts on knowledge management with SDC and its partners is hard to say, and even harder to be measured...

