

Making South-South Happen

Ten years of knowledge exchange through the Global Development Learning Network

**BY STEFFEN SOULEJMAN JANUS
AND MOR SECK**

"AS BUSINESSWOMEN, we want to find how we can network cost effectively. We have a better future, because when you network, you get markets, you get experience, you get success stories from different places." These were the comments made by Dina Bina, a small flower shop owner in Dar es Salaam and the Chair of the Tanzania Women's Chamber of Commerce. Two years prior, Dina and a number of fellow businesswomen in Tanzania had learned from their peers in Kenya and South Africa how to organize a business chamber. Through a videoconference-facilitated South-South knowledge exchange program, the local women connected with their peers from other African countries,

providing both knowledge and inspiration. As one participant remarked "I was there... I could see people from different countries. I could talk. I could share my experience." Today the women's business chamber of Tanzania is a well established and active organization with more women joining every day.

This is just one of many examples of South-South knowledge exchange where practitioners from different parts of the world were able to share their experiences with peers who may have faced and overcome similar challenges. It is this powerful notion of learning from those who "have been there" that makes the South-South approach so attractive.

But making South-South happen is also hard work. Rarely does everything turn out as planned. On top of this, ensuring that practical learning takes place can be even more difficult.



A Global Development Learning Network Studio.

That is where the Global Development Learning Network (GDLN) plays a key role as an instrument for the design and implementation of South-South exchanges.

Established in 2000 by then-World Bank president James Wolfensohn to help bridge the knowledge divide by linking distance learning centers in selected countries, the network has since matured into an active, independent global player with a secretariat housed at the World Bank Institute (WBI). Today GDLN provides access to thousands of learning venues through a network of 120 affiliates in more than 80 countries. Many GDLN affiliates can also connect to additional in-country networks. In Indonesia for example, the network can link to 350 videoconferencing sites across the country through the national educational INHERENT Network.

Affiliates include the Asian Institute of Management, the Ethiopian Civil Service College, the Islamic Development Bank, and Pontificia Universidad Católica de Peru. Each year, they put together about 1,500 learning and knowledge exchange activities—more than two thirds of which can be characterized as South-South engagements. Every affiliate is capable of providing standard knowledge exchange services such as videoconferencing facilities and multimedia distance learning rooms, but they also possess other capabilities.

The network operates on three levels. First, there is the physical infrastructure (videoconferencing venues, computer, and multimedia facilities and internet access) that provides safe havens for learning and knowledge sharing in capitals and in remote sites. Second, the network offers a broad set of advisory and implementation services: from needs assessments to the design, implementation, and evaluation of learning activities and products. On a third level, GDLN has access to a wealth of know-how and sector expertise through its renowned university and civil service education members. Many national and multilateral development players such as the World Bank, regional Development Banks, the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the United Nations Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) use GDLN's services and its well-established linkages to policy makers, practitioners, academia, and civil society. Increasingly, entities from the South are also using the network. Innovation Environnement Développement Afrique (IED) in Senegal, the Higher Education Commission in Pakistan, and the Ministry for Family Affairs in Nicaragua use the network for knowledge exchange and capacity development programs linking up with other Southern partners in their regions and around the world.

While GDLN has made enormous advances in connecting people globally, the network still faces considerable challenges. On a global level, these include providing adequate coordination of activities, setting standards and ensuring quality, ensuring good communications between affiliates across regions, and fostering business development. Regionally, the governance structures are heterogeneous and rely on business models that have yet to be proven effective. At the country level, the vastly diverse sizes, missions, capacities and geographic locations of the affiliate institutions can militate against a seamless multi-

site delivery. The network's biggest asset, its diversity, carries with it an inherent management challenge.

There is a need for common standards to facilitate planning and manage expectations. The network is currently addressing these issues by developing a global governance mechanism comprised of a network board, representing each region and important partners, and a global secretariat that will serve as its executive arm.

Constrained by these challenges, how can a global, independent mechanism such as the GDLN still be an asset for South-South knowledge exchange? What has worked and what remains a challenge? Here are some takeaways after ten years of operation.

- 1) Get the audience right.** For knowledge exchange activities to result in useable knowledge transfer and follow-up actions, it is critical to invite the right stakeholders to the table. A case in point is a dialogue between widowed women in Indonesia who shared their experiences on revenue-generating activities and education programs with peers in Vietnam, India, Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka. For this program, key change agents in the respective countries were identified. They were either women who themselves already had significant experience with similar projects, or organizations that were about to embark on a project to empower widows in their country.
- 2) Plan medium to long term instead of one-off.** A good example is the Affiliated Network for Social Accountability—Africa (ANSA). It brings together individuals and civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations, local academics, and the media for joint knowledge exchange and learning activities both at the country level and in regionwide dialogues. The program has established itself as an effective mechanism to foster demand for good governance from the bottom up. All participating country actors engage with their audiences and hold regular meetings and activities. This powerful combination of mutual trust, active participation, capacity building, and strong personal linkages between people helps achieve lasting development impact.
- 3) Design for local ownership.** Local buy-in to programs is critical for long-term success. That is the case for the Africa Local Government Action Forum, in which participants from all levels of society in seven African nations participate in monthly knowledge exchanges by videoconferencing. Since 2000, they have been sharing their personal experiences on participatory budgeting and local economic development. The program has yielded a strong community of practitioners who have, over time, built trust and a sense of community that goes beyond national borders. Critical to its success was a long-term vision to hold regularly scheduled monthly meetings by videoconferencing to help keep down costs. A francophone chapter has been added to the program, now linking 18 countries in the region.

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of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is less than 6 percent. Apart from policy impediments and political hurdles to regional cooperation, South Asia is also hamstrung by the fact that the overall trade-to-GDP ratio for the subregion is 41.5 percent, compared with 63.2 percent for the whole of Asia. However, SAARC has launched a series of iconic projects and initiatives, such as the South Asian University, that have a broad impact on civil society and can also raise popular appeal for regional cooperation.

The central Asian region has also taken some impressive strides in regional cooperation. The Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program, which brings together eight central Asian countries, is advancing regional cooperation through transport and trade connectivity. CAREC partners are set to mark a decade of successful operations in 2011, with close to \$15 billion in investments that contribute to sustainable economic growth and improved living standards in the subregion.

However, indicators suggest that regionalism has advanced unevenly. It has been mainly focused on production integration in East Asia, with other subregions and sectors much less integrated. Asia has to move forward and look beyond integrated trade and production networks. In doing so, it cannot solely rely on market forces. Building the right institutional framework for Asian integration is crucial to cement the existing gains, and support the next steps for regional cooperation and integration.

Asia does not lack institutions for regionalism. It possesses a dense web of institutions, yet the institutional structure is "lite" as most organizations lack a strong secretariat, agenda-setting powers, and a stronger mandate from national governments.


Consolidation and strengthening of existing subregional and regional institutions is perhaps the first step toward creating more effective institutions to support Asian regionalism. The next logical step will be to link subregional institutions to tap existing synergies as well as explore other potential areas of cooperation.

Developing institutions to exploit compelling functional opportunities and creating new pan-Asian forums and institutions are some of the key requirements for comprehensive Asian integration.

Our long-term vision is that of a strong, prosperous, outward-looking Asian Economic Community that might eventually evolve into a single regional market connected seamlessly by world-class infrastructure, where goods and services move freely across borders, and capital can similarly be transferred to efficiently allocate resources for investment.

Asia's model of open regionalism combines national, regional, and global responsibilities. It has yielded dividends to individual countries, the region as a whole, and the rest of the world. Asia's economic influence has increased significantly as the region continues to help pull the global economy out of the recent crisis with its strong domestic investment, effective macroeconomic stimulus, and robust intraregional trade.

Despite all the accolades about emerging Asia's achievements, the future presents huge challenges and requires

thinking globally, coordinating regionally, and—most importantly—acting nationally for the common good. 

Rajat M. Nag is the Managing Director General of the Asian Development Bank.

Endnotes

- 1 Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.
- 2 Brunei Darussalam joined in 1984, Viet Nam in 1995, Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar in 1997, and Cambodia in 1999.
- 3 ASEAN+3 plus Australia, India, and New Zealand.

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- 4) **Mix and blend delivery methods to respond to existing constraints.** Although face-to-face activities still make up most of the knowledge exchanges and learning interventions, other methods such as online delivery or videoconferencing are also being used. Program designers mix and match delivery modalities to suit time, budget, participants' geographic dispersion, political stability, and safety needs. A recently developed knowledge exchange program on Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), for example, allows practitioners worldwide to discuss experiences and emerging trends in various sectors using traditional conference-type events, videoconference-enabled knowledge exchange workshops, e-discussions, blogs, and chats on a dedicated online platform.
- 5) **Ensure adequate planning and follow-up.** Carefully planning and design is critical to the success of any learning activity. Agendas or curricula need to support the achievement of desired outcomes. Roles and responsibilities need to be clearly defined and activities properly structured, providing a good balance between content delivery, interactive dialogue, and reflection. Similarly, follow-up activities to monitor agreed milestones are a critical factor in the quest for results.

While this is by no means a comprehensive list, it can serve as a starting point for thinking about the "how to" of planning, design, and implementation of South-South Knowledge exchange. Global mechanisms such as the GDLN will continue to learn by doing as they respond to the changing requirements of a multipolar world.

Steffen Soulejman Janus is Head of the Global Development Learning Network (GDLN) Secretariat.

Mor Seck is Director of the Senegal Distance Learning Center and President of the African Association of Distance Learning Centers (AADLC).