

Mobilizing knowledge-based assets to promote sustainable development LEARNING RESOURCE CENTER (LRC) CONCEPT

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is an integral and powerful asset to all stakeholders interested in promoting sustainable development models and practices, namely; civil society organizations (CSOs), development agencies, academic institutions and others. Knowledge is instrumental for planning and managing activities to respond to local needs or to combat a specific problem. In particular, knowledge stemming from past experiences provides a viable foundation to start on the right track, seize future opportunities, and for being understandably accountable vis a vis constituents and stakeholders.

There exists several obstacles, however, that hamper the effective and efficient use of knowledge in development. Among these are insufficient investments in knowledge dissemination, organizational cultures that are not sensitive to reflection and innovation, geographic and administrative barriers limiting access to knowledge, and high turnover in development projects leading to a loss of institutional memories. The result of such a situation leads to replication without innovation, marginalization of initiatives that emerge out of new paradigms, slow learning and knowledge mobilization process, and ultimately the compartmentalization and fragmentation of development initiatives.

In the meantime, it is recognized that that every body is born with an inherent desire to learn. Hence resident knowledge available to people, communities, and development organizations constitute individually and collectively an underutilized wealth in the region. Learning processes, experiences, practices, and knowledge, which may exist in an abstract or unconscious form, represent assets that need to be capitalized on, should sustainable development be sought. If properly utilized, knowledge alone could greatly enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of development interventions. This however is contingent on appropriate documentation, knowledge flow (information dissemination), and utilization.

This is the logic that provides the basis for initiating the Learning Resource Center (LRC) housed at CDS, as well as the driving force for seeking to sustain this assistance venue to development stakeholders. In addition to materializing knowledge-based assets, the LRC will act as a catalyst for sustained flow of knowledge among development stakeholders with vivid documented experiences and conscious learning efforts.

Having stated the above underlying premises for LRC, the goal and objectives can be articulated as follows:

Goal: Mobilize knowledge-based assets to promote sustainable development

Objectives:

- 1) Explore, consolidate, and document experiences to support conscious learning in development
- 2) Promote a participatory knowledge exchange culture among development practitioners

Services

Towards realizing the above goals and objectives, the LRC will provide a portfolio of services, which will add value to both CDS and external development partners such as academic institutions, development practitioners, CSOs, and individuals interested in development. Services will vary according to level of customization and duration. Furthermore, the LRC will strive to meet demands, which are readily recognizable and willingly paid for by development partners, whilst not ignoring long term needs of the development sector.

The following are envisioned services based on needs perceived by the LRC restructuring team. Nevertheless, it is suggested to hold a participatory workshop gathering representatives of development partners with the purpose of soliciting inputs of the ultimate users in design, which will guarantee the suitability of services to the market. The services described below will also be open to discussion at the workshop.

I. Services to CDS

- By acting as a repository of knowledge, the LRC resources will feed into the design of new projects/programs through availing of prior experiences in related fields. Meanwhile, CDS activities will continuously update the LRC as new insights are gained. However, this dynamic process depends on CDS's capitalization on monitoring and evaluation processes for reflection and the presentation of materials at the LRC in a form, which facilitates design of new programs.
- Provide a comprehensive database for actively involved development players (Donor Agencies, Government Agencies, Philanthropic Associations), their areas of expertise, and track records. This would ultimately assist in better sector engagement decisions, through prioritizing engagements on a rational basis. This database can also be used for client management by tracking progress of current client engagements.

II. Services to development partners

Dissemination services:

- Referral service to other organizations or service providers when the depth of information sought goes beyond what is available at LRC. The database mentioned above will greatly facilitate this. Such a service will also promote the concept of centers of excellence and extend recognition for organizations with best practices or special expertise.

- Act as a hub or repository for donors with regard to documented experiences generated through donor-funded interventions. This will sustain the knowledge generated through development projects, otherwise hidden through competitive tendering practices and high staff turnover. In addition to sustaining the continuity of learning, such a hub would greatly benefit the design of terms of reference and development frameworks by donors.
- Provide On-line courses. Potentials in this area include a course on resource mobilization and assets building. Knowledge generated through participants coursework will directly feed into the LRC knowledge base.

Specially Tailored Services:

- Provide customized data search upon request. Through this service, LRC personnel will provide information according to each client's need. Two levels of service provision are conceived here; one is to compile a list of material, resources, and references to other partners, and the other is to develop a report extracting information acquired from the resources at LRC catering to the information request of the client.
- Provide technical assistance services on mainstreaming learning and knowledge management for partner organizations. This service addresses the long-term need for instilling organizational cultures amenable to innovation and conducive to learning. What is suggested here is to provide capacity building on 'learning to learn' as well as assisting organizations in developing their own LRCs drawing on the CDS LRC experience.
- Depending on the LRC's housed knowledge base, embark on a research agenda of pertinent issues to development partners. This could provide the basis for the outreach-based mode described under the mode of operations section (see blue font below).
- Organize and carry out advocacy campaigns with partner organizations. Partner organizations requesting this service can capitalize on CDS's name and reputation in the region for increased credibility.

MODE OF OPERATIONS

This part will cover many important aspects to a normal reader; we need here to provide a living picture of the LRC in action. Therefore, I will suggest some points for the rest of the team to agree on. They might be better captured in a mixture of text and bullet points. These are:

- Although the LRC will be housed within the CDS premises, it will however still maintain its unique identity and resources. This is why the LRC is considered a service provider to CDS rather than a housed activity. Strategically, this separation is legitimate to portray the LRC independent image and guarantee its non-biased view and contents, which are imperative to its success.
- To the maximum extent possible, the LRC shall operate with a cost recovery approach. However, this is confronted by the lack of desire to pay any material

cost for knowledge by development practitioners, with minor exceptions. That is why the LRC is very well expected to strive for sometime to achieve partial cost recovery, especially when we think of the continuous need and cost to solicit, identify, assemble, and include new experiences in the LRC database. In short, the LRC would depend on donor seed-capital towards start-up costs and operational expenses. It is also expected that the later expenses would be covered through a restricted endowment mechanism

- In relation to the above point, the LRC will adopt a technology intensive mode of operation while maintaining the least possible management structure (minimal number of dedicated employees). This would eventually minimize initial capital requirements, especially as it relates to the endowment requirement
- In dealing with outside parties, the mode of operation will be based on:
 - Demand driven: To address specific requests from individuals and organizations through compiling information and presenting in a value added form
 - Outreach based: Through keeping clients updated on what is new at LRC and in the development arena in general, and encouraging clients to share their insights by including their knowledge resources in the LRC roster. The latter process is regarded as mechanism to spur reflection and learning within CSOs, hence addressing the need for creating organizational environments more conducive to learning.
- LRC to be based on computerized search mechanism, and gradually digitize material to be available on the web. Material to be organized by both sector and functional area.