

ITTO's knowledge management strategy

The improved management of its vast accumulated knowledge will help ITTO achieve its mission

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Tree of knowledge: ITTO's many outputs will form a key component of its knowledge management strategy. *Graphic: ITTO*

ITTO's project teams and project partners have accumulated immense knowledge on, for example, forest management and conservation, forest industry, the trade of timber and non-timber forest products, and issues linked to community development, biodiversity conservation, poverty alleviation and the development of small and medium-sized enterprises. In recognition of the need to make best use of this knowledge and to increase knowledge generation, exchange and learning among ITTO stakeholders, the ITTO Strategic Action Plan 2013–2018 identifies, as a priority, the development of a strategy on knowledge management (KM), as well as guidelines on KM. This article looks at the development of such a strategy for ITTO.

The KM development approach

The methodology for developing a KM strategy combined the authors' familiarity and engagement with ITTO, a deep understanding of the evolution of and prevailing wisdom on KM for development, and an approach that strove to engage the ITTO secretariat and other stakeholders in reflections on ITTO's mandate and working modalities and their significance in the development of a KM strategy. The purpose was to derive a multidimensional appreciation of the ITTO context and to begin a longer-term process of KM development that ultimately would be driven by the people and institutions most crucial to its success.

The main elements of the work were: developing a research agenda in consultation with ITTO's Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Officer; gathering feedback on KM-related issues from key ITTO stakeholders; and drafting a KM

strategy action plan based on this feedback and on the state of the art in KM for development.¹

The three-phase KM strategy action plan, described in more detail below, aims to ensure the effective development and implementation of ITTO's KM strategy. It was developed on the basis of wide consultation both within and outside ITTO, an assessment of ITTO's current KM context, and an understanding of the kinds of learning taking place among ITTO members and partners. The implementation of the KM strategy, through the action plan, should ensure that such learning is shared effectively, and it should assist ITTO in incorporating guidance on KM obtained from its stakeholders.

What is knowledge management?

There are numerous possible definitions of the term "knowledge management". Knowledge is understood to reside mostly in the minds of people and in their individual and collective practices (in institutions, networks and communities). It can only readily be observed in its application (i.e. in physical or mental activity), and it can best be shared through action (e.g. collaborative work, on-the-job learning and training).²

KM is the organization of relevant information, knowledge and knowledge processes to fulfil core institutional goals. As an institutional pursuit, KM is not the creation or sharing of knowledge itself; rather, it is the management of a conducive environment in which such creation and sharing can occur among individuals and groups in the course of their work.

1 The main sources for current thinking on KM for development are listed in the references at the end of this article.

2 See Fullan (2010) for a fuller consideration of the nature of knowledge.

ITTO's current KM areas

ITTO undertakes a range of KM-related activities, such as:

- managing the production of documentation (in terms of both inputs and outputs) and implementing decisions and reporting related to the deliberations of the International Tropical Timber Council (ITTC);
- managing processes related to contracting, monitoring, evaluation and reporting on projects and activities conducted as part of the regular ITTO project cycle and the more recent thematic programs (as well as fellowships awarded to individuals);
- producing outputs on a regular basis related to sustainable forest management and the trade of tropical timber, including the *Tropical Forest Update*, the biweekly Market Information Service, and the *Annual Review and Assessment of the World Timber Situation* (now biennial); and
- undertaking various additional activities identified in the Biennial Work Programme.

Although ITTO has not previously had an explicit KM strategy, a great deal of its day-to-day work can be considered to be KM. This work has two basic components: processes, and technical infrastructure. The most significant processes in place are those that manage workflows around the deliberations of the ITTC, the production of ITTO publications, and transactions related to ITTO-supported projects and activities. The ITTO secretariat has put a number of information technology tools and platforms in place to support its work; because the various tools were created at different times and for different purposes, the overall level of interconnectedness (and technical compatibility) is limited or—in some cases—non-existent.

The main challenges to be addressed in ITTO's KM strategy are: 1) the management of information and workflows related to projects and activities; 2) the effective capitalization of experiences and learning that occur in the implementation of ITTO projects and activities; 3) making the large variety of ITTO information outputs readily accessible online; and 4) the need to develop a strategic approach to KM. The ITTO KM strategy is aimed at meeting these challenges.

Developing the ITTO KM strategy

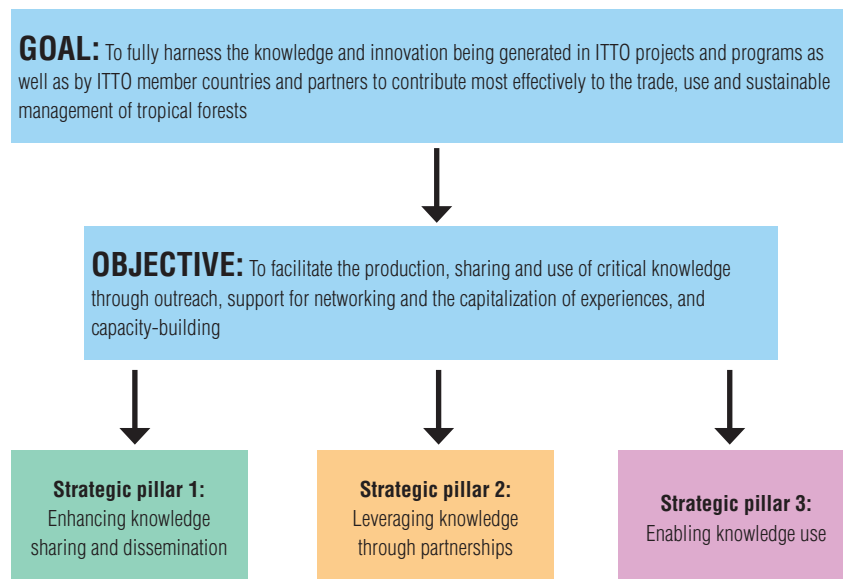
The ITTO KM strategy will make knowledge a key deliverable by which ITTO can improve its effectiveness in achieving its mission. The overall goal of the strategy is:

To fully harness the knowledge and innovation being generated in ITTO projects and programs as well as by ITTO member countries and partners to contribute most effectively to the trade, use and sustainable management of tropical forests.

The strategy's more specific objective is to facilitate the production, sharing and use of critical knowledge through outreach, support for networking and the capitalization of experiences, and capacity-building.

The achievement of the overall goal and specific objective is supported by three strategic pillars: enhancing knowledge sharing and dissemination; leveraging knowledge through partnerships; and enabling knowledge use (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Approach to developing the ITTO KM strategy



The ITTO KM strategy action plan comprises an iterative, phased approach designed to provide opportunities for reflection and adjustment and to enable the strategy to evolve through the incorporation of new insights. The three phases are designed to culminate in a mature KM strategy spanning 2015–2018. Within this iterative approach, the main recommended actions focus on the three strategic pillars.

- **Strategic pillar 1: enhancing knowledge sharing and dissemination.** The ITTO website is by far the most significant vehicle for sharing ITTO knowledge and learning and it receives the most attention in the KM strategy action plan, followed by the creation of a wide range of ITTO knowledge outputs.
- **Strategic pillar 2: leveraging knowledge through partnerships.** This is the most underexploited area of ITTO influence. ITTO's engagement in a variety of global-level partnerships, as well as with many national and regional partners, provides a foundation on which the Organization could play a significantly stronger knowledge-brokering role, especially by facilitating, supporting and building capacity in networks and communities of practice.

- **Strategic pillar 3: enabling knowledge use.** This pillar is aimed at building appropriate knowledge capacities and institutional structures to fully realize ITTO's potential.

The full implementation of the activities of pillars 1 and 2 requires a level of capacity within ITTO that only partly exists currently and is in need of development. Pillar 3 exists to ensure that such capacities are ready to be deployed as needed.

Taken together, the recommended actions to be implemented over the three phases of the action plan will progressively anchor the KM strategy in the practices, people and institutions that constitute ITTO. They will also ensure that ITTO's KM continues to benefit from a built-in flexibility and responsiveness in the face of likely ongoing change in the institutional environment.

Putting the ITTO KM strategy into action

The ITTO KM strategy action plan comprises three phases, as follows:

Phase 1. With a duration of about four months, Phase 1 is aimed at delivering immediate benefits through activities that can be undertaken without further planning or consultation. The focus is mostly on achievables at the level of the ITTO secretariat and on creating conditions for the effective implementation of phases 1 and 2. Phase 1 involves a re-examination of the Organization's information infrastructure and related processes (strategic pillar 1) to:

- create a requirements specification for the management of core ITTO information through its website;
- identify the main additional process-related barriers to improving the flow of content to the website; and
- explore the possibilities for the online engagement of partners, members and other interested parties in dialogues and information exchange around key topics of interest to ITTO.

Phase 1 also includes actions to strengthen the knowledge-related capacities of the secretariat (strategic pillar 3), with two components: creating a mechanism for maximizing the retention of institutional memory, beginning with the secretariat; and taking a proactive approach to building the capacity of staff.

Phase 1 also involves improving the ITTO working environment by, for example, breaking down divisional "silos", enhancing the physical layout of ITTO offices, and exploring the streamlining of institutional processes and structures (strategic pillar 3). Two structural issues should be examined (together) with a view to improving links between ITTO committees, panels and the secretariat, as well as the management of information and workflow

related to these entities: merging the thematic program advisory committees and the Expert Panel for Project Appraisal; and aligning the committees of the ITTC with the new secretariat structure.

Phase 2. The second phase of the KM strategy action plan is envisaged as an 8-month process that begins to tackle longer-term KM challenges that require sustained effort and the engagement of various partners. The goals of Phase 2 are to consolidate early gains, reflect on planning and experience so far, and put the main planks of Phase 3 together. It involves three sets of activities: redeveloping the ITTO website; planning targeted interventions to strengthen learning; and validating and extending the KM strategy for the remainder of the ITTO Strategic Action Plan (2015–2018). The redevelopment of the ITTO website (strategic pillar 1) in Phase 2 will build on the requirements specification created in the first phase (re-examination of information infrastructure and related processes). Targeted interventions to strengthen learning (strategic pillars 2 and 3) will include measures to emphasize the learning elements of project planning, monitoring and evaluation³ and the identification of broader learning opportunities.

The validation and extension of the ITTO KM strategy for the remaining period of the ITTO Strategic Action Plan (supporting all three strategic pillars) are crucial for its overall development. To be robust, the KM strategy must build on earlier experiences: the secretariat, the ITTC and ITTO's partners, therefore, will need to review progress on the actions undertaken in Phase 1 and the early stages of Phase 2 in order to customize the resulting Phase 3 strategy to the Organization's needs.

Phase 3. The specific goals and activities of Phase 3 will be identified through the validation of phases 1 and 2 to generate a KM strategy for the period 2015–2018. The KM strategy should be linked closely to the ITTO Biennial Work Programme 2015–2016, the specific activities of which will provide many opportunities for implementing the KM strategy.

In general, the KM strategy should focus on facilitating collaborative learning and knowledge-sharing processes at the field, regional and global levels in 2015–2018. At the field level, ITTO-funded projects will remain the core sources of knowledge relevant to ITTO's activities; at the regional level, opportunities for consolidation are expected to arise through, for example, the development of manuals and guidelines and the sharing of project results. At the global level, ITTO's role as a facilitator of dialogue and international cooperation among tropical timber producers and consumers on the sustainable management of tropical forests and a sustainable tropical timber trade will be strengthened through its improved KM practices

³ See Simula et al. (2001) for specific recommendations related to project planning, monitoring and evaluation.

at all levels. Activities started in previous phases, such as improved website management, the retention of institutional memory and the training of staff in KM, will continue.

Conclusion

ITTO supports a wide variety of projects and activities and manages a substantial volume of information related to the conservation and sustainable management, use and trade of tropical forest resources. It also plays an important role in linking producer and consumer countries and promoting international collaboration.

In many ways, knowledge and learning are the life-blood of ITTO. To maximize the impact of its work, therefore, it is crucial that ITTO takes a strategic approach to KM and learning. ITTO has a great deal of experience, expertise and dedication in building knowledge and learning, and the immediate challenge is to channel and build on existing knowledge resources in strategic ways. This is the aim of the ITTO KM strategy.

Rather than attempting to tackle all challenges, big and small, simultaneously and with the same level of energy and resources, the plan is to break down the required actions into a manageable and logical sequence. The actions start with the smallest and most immediate challenges and build to address the more complex and longer-term, and they are designed to bolster each other and to create what will eventually be self-sustaining momentum.

The fundamental aim is to move from providing support for traditional dialogues, project/activity collaboration and information provision towards a more networked way of working. This will move knowledge and learning to a

central position in the Organization's structure and place responsibility for their generation and use in the hands of the people and institutions best placed to accomplish this.

The draft report of the ITTO knowledge management strategy and action plan (with executive summaries in French and Spanish) can be downloaded at: www.itto.int/council_documents

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Readers write

Dears Sirs,

The ITTO Tropical Forest Update, Vol. 22(2), focused on keeping track in order to monitor wood flows to mills and ports and for marketing of forest products. I would like to congratulate such efforts and I noted excellent works, as for example, the "tracking system proposed for community forests in Cameroon" (Fig. 1, p. 7) and "tracking methodology used for saw timber originating from community forests" (Fig. 2, p. 8) both figures presented in the article "Tracking Cameroon's FLEGT timber". However, I have some concern regarding such efforts which they raise some questions to me that I would like to share with you.

1. How much does it cost to implement and carried out such tracking systems?
2. Can people, particularly, communities afford such costs?
3. Do the community and the countries have the necessary expertise and resources to implement and carry out such systems? These complex systems generate a great opportunity to consultant companies.
4. Is the market willing to pay for the wood and forest products harvested applying these tracking systems?

5. Are agricultural products subject to such tracking systems? Why just forest activity should be submitted to such systems?

6. It seems to me that such systems lead to generate an unfavorable environment to the development of economic forest activities and, although indirectly, such efforts, by the end, contribute to conversion of forest covered areas to agricultural activities, including pasture once these activities are not subject to such bureaucratic and restrictive systems.

7. Why not to develop systems that can fit the real world? Systems that can be implemented and carried out according to actual local context and that generate and lead to a friendly environment to the development of forest economic activities?

8. Forestry activities are per se a long term activity and as such they require among other things legal stability that can assure to the entrepreneur that his activity will not become unviable due to a restriction imposed by legislation.

Regards,

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Editor's note: ITTO has undertaken significant work on the issues raised in this letter, some of which may be reported in future TFUs. In the meantime, the TFU welcomes reader input (including name/email address) on this or other issues for possible publication.