IISDCOMMENTARY

Staying Afloat in a Sea of Information: Are online platforms throwing users a lifeline?

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"You know what we need? An online platform that brings it all together." This has become an all-too-familiar refrain at discussions about managing information and knowledge to address climate change. It is often followed by descriptions of utopian web spaces where people can access and use the latest science, analytical tools, news and rosters of experts to make better decisions that support climate compatible development (CCD). Awareness will be raised, communities of practice built and meaningful action taken.

The allure is understandable and the drive is real—at least 50 climate knowledge brokering (CKB) platforms have come online since 2009. This **Portal Proliferation Syndrome** (PPS) prompted a group of climate and development web initiatives to come together and explore the risks and opportunities involved in PPS. Among the key concerns highlighted by this **CKB group** is the supply-driven nature of PPS, that platforms are being established by eager researchers and donors without a solid understanding of who actually uses them and why.

With the support of the **Climate and Development Knowledge Network**, the International Institute for Sustainable Development (**IISD**) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) analyzed over 200 CKB platform users' needs, preferences and online information-seeking and knowledge-sharing behaviour to help answer these questions. **This is what we learned**: CKB platform users are largely research-oriented actors. They start their online searches for climate-related information at search engines or institutional websites (e.g., United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change, World Bank.) When they land on a CKB platform, they tend to look for documents so they can prepare their own documents. They also do not really use CKB platforms to share knowledge, at least not regularly.

And guess what? CKB platforms are generally doing a good job of addressing these relatively modest needs and expectations.

Now, these findings might feel a bit anti-climactic, especially when we think about the huge potential of information and communications technology (ICT) in managing information and knowledge. What about the searchable databases, visualization tools and video testimonials?

Surely there is an appetite for social networking? The answer is that they can be useful, but it depends. There is nuance to our findings and CKB platform managers and funders alike should take note:

- **Targeting and tailoring may breed more sharing**. If you step away from this compulsion to establish the definitive mother-of-all online platforms, then you can really think about who exactly you want using your platform and why. When we asked platform managers to identify their target audience, we got some variation of this list: "researchers, policy-makers, media groups, civil society and vulnerable communities." That list represents diverse interests and needs, and chances are you won't serve them all. We found that users who feel a platform is targeted to their expectations and lived experiences may be more likely to rely on its resources and share their knowledge. So get to know your users.

- **The promise of new technologies should not detract from the critical infomediary and knowledge-management roles of platforms**. Let's get back to the problem that led to PPS: the glut of information and knowledge related to climate change. Helping people find their way through the chaos by offering things like searchable databases, archives and bookmarks is important. The absence of interactive maps or a lively discussion board doesn't mean you don't have a lot to offer.

- **User interactivity requires resources.** If you want users to interact with each other, then be prepared to invest. Don't set up discussion groups then sit back and wait for the magic to happen. In our research, users who were reluctant to share knowledge online mentioned inhibiting factors like not seeing the value of online knowledge sharing, not feeling like enough of an expert or not wanting to burden others. You will likely have to seed and facilitate interactions consistently to help users overcome such reservations.

- **Platforms don't replace people—look at your offline functions.** Knowledge brokering is first and foremost a human undertaking and ICTs are there to merely facilitate it. This may seem like an obvious point, but every now and then we seem to lose sight of this fact. Our case studies found that offline interactions enhanced online functions. Face-to-face meetings were opportunities to advertise a platform (attract users), build user trust in what you have to offer (attract and keep users) and the facilitate co-production of knowledge (get users to generate content). Indeed, the more you want to move from hosting to tailoring, sharing and creating information and knowledge, the more important the offline functions.

- **Remember that CKB platforms are used by a small subset of CCD actors.** The digital divide is alive and well, both in terms of Internet access and the benefits derived from access (i.e., availability of appropriate applications.) Those actors who stand to lose the most with climate change, who are critical in crafting appropriate responses to the challenge—poor, marginalized communities, people living in remote areas—are not well represented or served by CKB platforms. If you genuinely want to target and engage with such actors, you will need to emphasize the use of tools and services such as radio, mobile phones and offline interactions.

This research was a first step at trying to understand the demand for CKB platforms so that it can be better addressed as part of the treatment for PPS. As we try to unpack the user landscape further, here are a few questions that we didn't address in this research but asked ourselves a number of times:

1) **Should platforms drive or respond to demand for online knowledge brokering?** We may caution against offering tools and features that outpace demand, but we also don't want to stifle innovation. After all, sometimes we don't know what exactly we want. What is a good balance between responding to existing demand and stimulating new types of it?

2) **How can we measure impact?** What are users learning by using CKB platforms? Are they leading to better decisions that support CCD? We need to get better at articulating how a platform will lead to CCD outcomes, moving beyond assumptions that "throwing it all online" will lead to action. What's a CKB platform's theory of change?

3) **What's climate change got to do with it?** PPS could apply to a wide range of topics, not just climate change. But are there peculiarities associated with addressing climate change that make the challenge of aligning platform supply and demand different?

We are going to see even more CKB platforms come online in the coming months and years – portal proliferation shows no signs of abating. The least we can do, then, is to help people **navigate** this expanding universe and make sure these platforms offer them the resources they actually need to take action.

Download the report, *Understanding Needs, Meeting Demands: A user-oriented analysis of online knowledge broker platforms for climate change and development*, at http://www.iisd.org/publications/pub.aspx?pno=2805.

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