Opening up state government: Tools for increasing transparency and accountability

This case study investigates the hypothesis that knowledge management (KM) has helped to open up governance reform processes in states where SPARC is working. Evidence for the study was collected in early 2014 through a desk review, key informant interviews and a questionnaire survey in Lagos, Enugu, Kaduna, Niger and Jigawa States.

Has knowledge management helped to open up government?

KM has helped to change attitudes and practices. State governments now see moving towards open government as a priority. KM activities have also raised awareness of governance reforms among the public and have helped to develop the capacity of state government personnel. For instance:

- After a review of state government websites, they have been turned into an effective means of communicating with the public. They are also enabling the public to share information with state governments, for instance by providing information for tax purposes or by making complaints.
- State government officials, such as Public Relations Officers and Information Officers (in Lagos State), are now able to communicate the importance of reforms to their colleagues and to the public.

Challenges

There are remaining challenges which, unless they are properly managed, have the potential to undermine the gains achieved so far. The culture of secrecy in state civil services is a fundamental threat to the drive towards open government, so changing civil servants’ attitudes is critical. Also, across the states where SPARC works, there is no unified and systematic approach to processing information.

Knowledge management for open government

The State Partnership for Accountability, Responsiveness and Capability’s (SPARC’s) strategy for moving towards open government is to use KM tools to enhance transparency and accountability. This can be difficult in practice. Challenges include: overcoming political obstacles; improving the institutions needed to support transparency; and obtaining access to technology and human resources.
Lessons for the future

Stakeholders have identified several learning points:

- State Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) must be fully involved in developing state government websites from the outset, so that they reflect the state’s vision.
- Before states begin moves towards open government, key staff need to be trained.
- The MDAs and the individual staff members initiating open government processes need to assume leadership roles.
- SPARC should be more innovative in how it raises awareness, for instance by using social media.

Findings

SPARC’s strategy for using KM to promote and support open governance has taken the twin-track approach of building state partners’ capacities and at the same time raising the awareness of internal and external stakeholders. To these ends, SPARC has supported state governments to use a range of methods described below.

Formal engagement

Both SPARC and the state governments it works with have used various types of formal engagement in order to promote or practise open government. For instance in 2011, SPARC ran a workshop to assist state governments to enhance their websites, while Kaduna State has adopted town hall meetings as a way of bringing together the Bureau for Public Service Reform and public stakeholders.

Peer to peer engagement

Examples of peer to peer engagement include the Joint Annual Review process and the Communities of Practice. Joint Annual Reviews facilitate transparency and accountability between state governments and SPARC; they enable state governments to explain what they are doing and seek advice; and they enable SPARC to review progress on work streams. Communities of Practice initiatives, for instance in Lagos and Enugu States, have given participants an opportunity to document their learning and share it with their peers, thus enabling replication.

Publications

SPARC has produced publications itself, such as the Resource Centre pocket guide, and has also encouraged state governments to use publications to raise awareness of initiatives such as the Medium-Term Sector Strategies process.

Informal engagement

So far, SPARC has run two events aimed at fostering an open government ethos in a relaxed environment and encouraging stakeholders who have previously been marginalised from reform processes to contribute their insights. For instance, an informal session at the Lagos State Public Service Management retreat was useful in clarifying the roles of various agencies in the reform process.

There is a pressing need to develop a consistent and efficient system for deciding what information is to be published and when.

Contact details

SPARC has eleven offices in Nigeria.
For more information on our work:
Email: info@sparc-nigeria.com

Or
at ask@sparc-nigeria.com
Telephone: +234 (0) 8178 116303
Visit our website: www.sparc-nigeria.com

Find us on Facebook
www.facebook.com/SparcGovernanceNews