

## FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: LEVERAGING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH ICTs

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### ABSTRACT

Even after decades of development interventions, India continues to face challenges of extreme poverty, hunger and malnutrition. The various projects, programmes and policy initiatives undertaken over the years have lacked effective networking, collaboration and knowledge sharing among the actors to find out what really worked, to avoid duplication and learn from the successes and failures. While 'expert' knowledge is often well-documented, valuable tacit knowledge gained through practitioner's experience is typically lost or ignored. Furthermore, practitioners cannot always access knowledge they need, such as whether a particular idea was tried before or where to turn when facing a bottleneck. The United Nations country team in India initiated a knowledge management programme – now known as Solution Exchange.

It provides a neutral forum for development practitioners in India to learn, share, collaborate and discuss issues, concerns, programme strategies and policy guidelines for mutual benefit. The Food and Nutrition Security community of practice is hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations that fosters focused and constructive collaboration and facilitates live networking on topical food and nutrition security issues. As a query-based moderated mail-group, the community network picks up discussion topics from practitioners that lead to practical and specific outcomes. The community hosts more than 3,000 members and over 200 knowledge products. The efforts of community members have led to many local level initiatives such as introduction of vegetables into the midday meal scheme in the schools of New Delhi, revision of dietary

guidelines for Indians, focused and constructive discussion on the draft National Farmer's Policy, among others. The community is an example of a sustainable form of knowledge sharing where the extension agents seek online solutions to their problems from a wide sector of experts.

**KEY WORDS:** LEARN, DISCUSS, COLLABORATE, TACIT KNOWLEDGE, SOLUTION EXCHANGE, COMMUNITY

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## INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

India's social sector achievements in terms of alleviation of poverty, hunger and malnutrition and in provision of health care, have been far from satisfactory (Government of India, 2008). Amidst impressive outlays and multipronged efforts to provide food security, there has been valid concern about the efficacy of large public programmes reaching their desired goals. One of the critical gaps was the absence of a mechanism where development players could freely discuss pertinent issues, share their concerns and seek durable solutions to common problems and challenges, together. Considering the massive population (1.2 billion) and diversity of India, managing these challenges is a Herculean task and calls for close networking, collaboration and knowledge-sharing among the actors to find out what really works, avoid duplication and speed up the process.

The UN Country Team in India created a knowledge management (KM) programme known as Solution Exchange (SE) to provide a neutral forum for practitioners in India to share development experiences for their mutual benefit. Solution Exchange, through the creative use of ICT, is enabling those responsible for achieving India's development goals to leverage the collective knowledge, experience, passion and energies of the entire spectrum of front-line development workers, empowering them and producing more rapid, more sustainable and more cost-effective

impact towards eradicating poverty and attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Solution Exchange is based on an alternative vision to make better use of what we already know. Development actors from government, NGOs, the private sector, donors and academia come together as a 'Community of Practice' (CoP) – a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, and who improve their knowledge and expertise by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). CoPs are characterised by mutual learning, shared practice and joint exploration of ideas (Hearn and White, 2009). Solution Exchange hosts 13 CoPs (Figure 1) each of which brings development workers together, both virtually through a mail-group and through face-to-face interaction, towards the common objective of problem-solving.

The space created by the Food and Nutrition Security Community (FNS) hosted by the FAO is the first virtual forum of development practitioners to share knowledge, seek solutions to everyday challenges, clarify doubts, generate new ideas and provide an open discourse on the country's key developmental challenges and processes. The forum also fosters focused and constructive collaboration and facilitated live networking. Thus the unique knowledge management initiative of FNS could play a significant role in catalysing the Government of India's work towards achieving

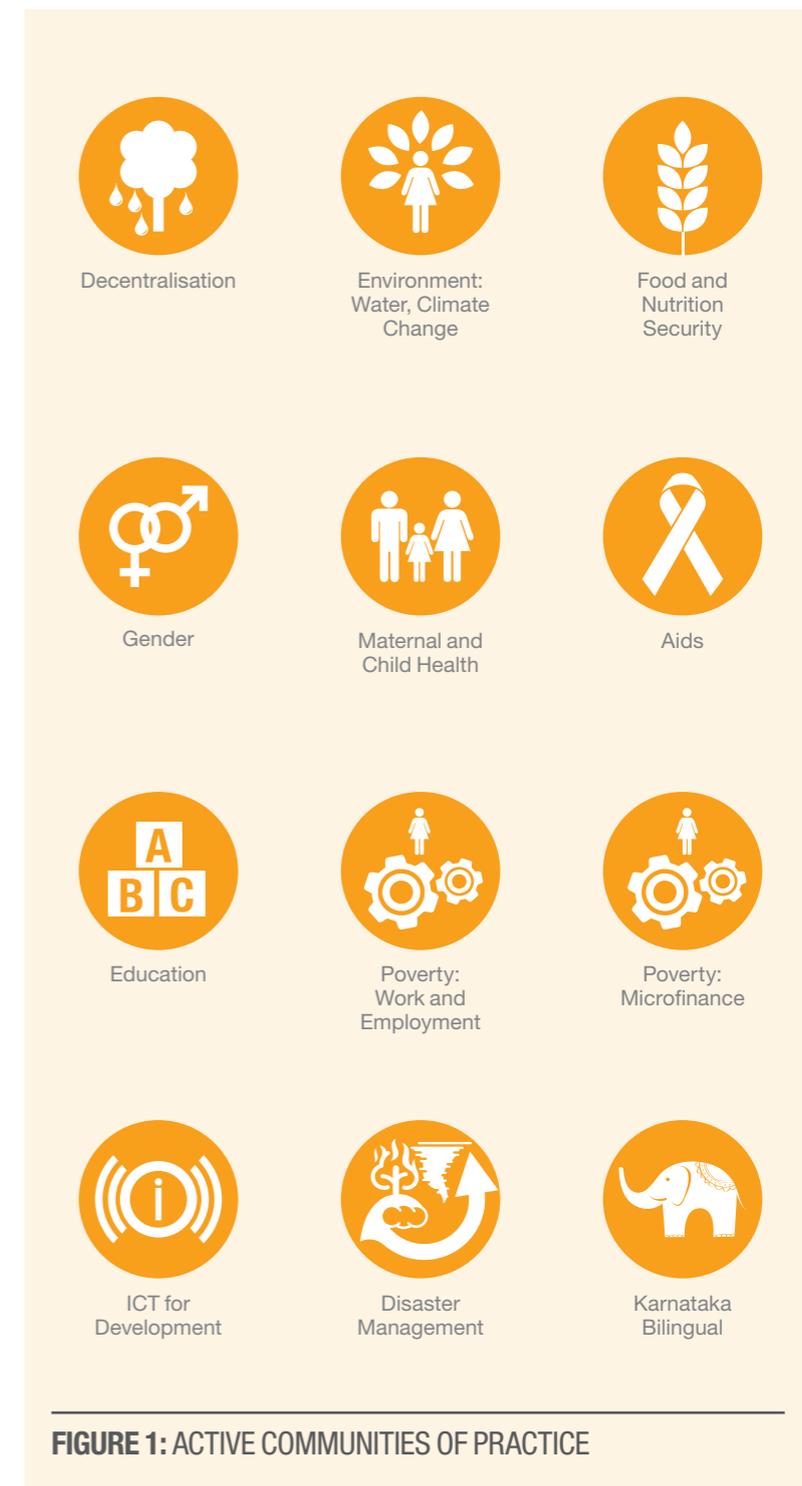


FIGURE 1: ACTIVE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE



MDG 1. The community aims to:

- become internationally acknowledged as a key forum for development practitioners to connect and collaborate;
- catalyse collaborative efforts to make a demonstrable impact on MDG and national development targets;
- establish a publicly available ‘knowledge repository’ for storing and accessing solutions for daily issues and challenges.

Key focus areas of the FNS community of practice are:

- sustainable agriculture (livestock, fisheries and aquaculture, forestry), technological innovations, livelihoods and income generation;
- food processing, food quality and safety, market linkages, value chain and institutional development;
- climate change, biodiversity, natural resource management and ecological issues
- food and nutrition security programmes and policies;
- malnutrition and undernutrition.

## MATERIALS, METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

ICT makes the FNS community possible – an e-mail mail-group is the backbone of the community, where members connect and build professional relationships. The mail-group is also where much of the community’s interaction takes place and where most community services are provided. The mail-

group concept provides an innovative package that generates valuable connections and content and then puts these into use.

Anyone with an e-mail address can participate in a mail-group forum on an equal footing with other members, irrespective of rank, location or language ability. Internet communication breaks down barriers associated with other ‘hierarchical’ forms of knowledge-sharing. Field workers in remote areas of India are now getting the attention of senior policy-makers. The traditional ‘expert working group’ has become, through the medium of the internet, a wide, democratic consultative forum. The community provides four basic services:

- *Help* offers community members solutions to questions they raise;
- *Comment* provides decision makers with feedback on draft policies, programmes and projects;
- *Discuss* seeks insights on issues of major concern to the community;
- *Collaborate* promotes small-group work to take forward members’ ideas or products.

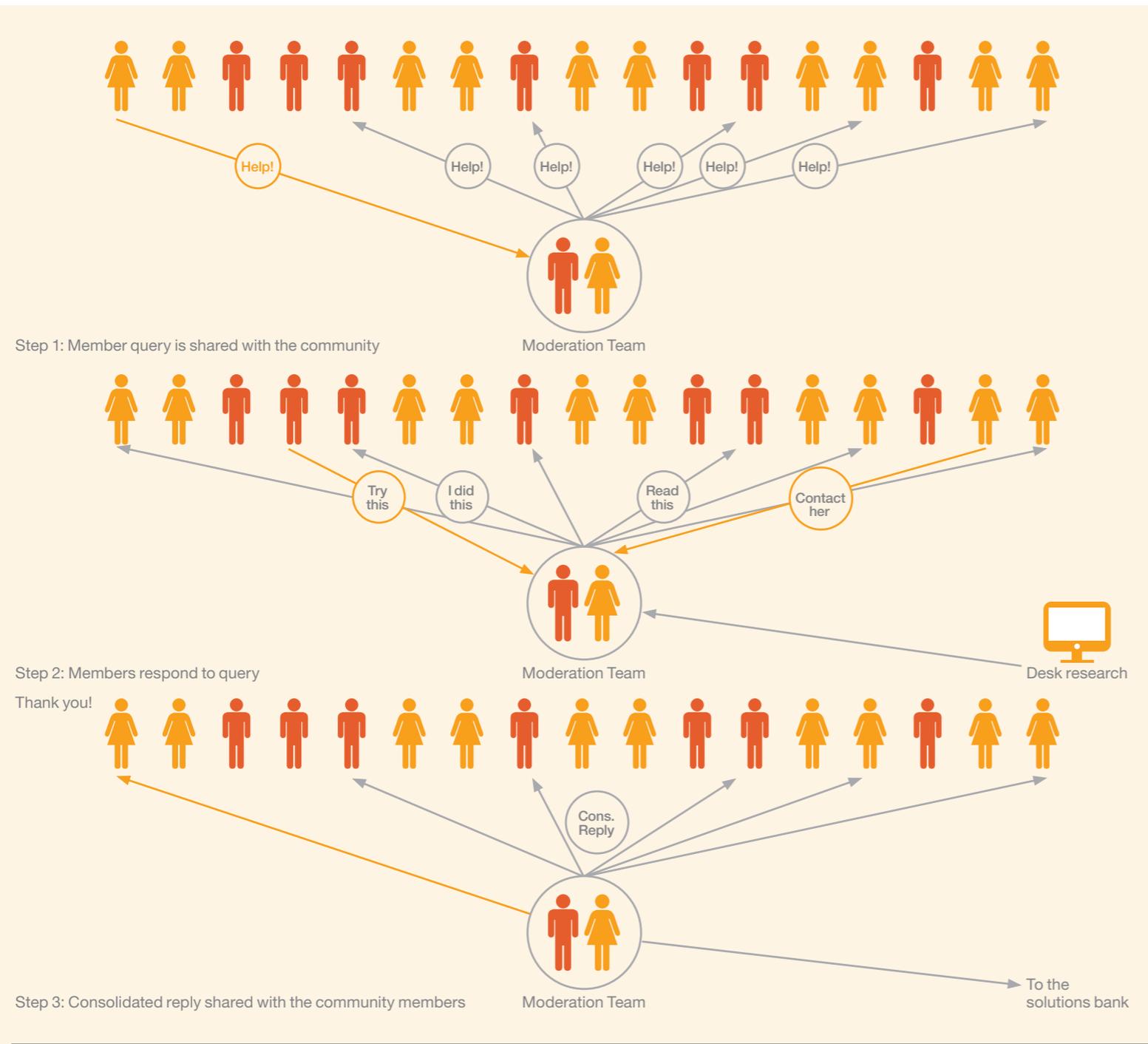
The first three services are primarily e-mail-based, with a two-person team moderating each message and researching additional material. Discussion threads are synthesised into ‘consolidated replies’, which are structured to feature the specific experiences and resources recommended by contributors or researched from



**FIGURE 2: ORGANISATION OF THE FNS COMMUNITY**

documentary material, resulting in a brief composite of all available documented and tacit knowledge on the topic. The ‘collaborate’ service currently takes place through face-to-face events, but in future will be expanded through collaboration software tools made available on community websites.

A particular feature of Solution Exchange, the



**FIGURE 3: HOW FNS COMMUNITY OPERATES**

‘cross-posted’ query, poses the same question to more than one community, offering exchanges between cross-sectoral practitioners.

**Step 1:** Member query is shared with the community

**Step 2:** Members respond to the query

**Step 3:** Consolidated reply shared with the community members

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The community facilitated the development of a new form of knowledge blending, by converting tacit, experiential knowledge into documented, reusable knowledge and capturing a wide pool of knowledge and experience that has so far been inaccessible. It has enhanced development effectiveness, promoted rapid learning on what works and connected innovators and their ideas with the people searching for them. It has helped to make sense of the proliferation of information and material, in a format that is easily digestible and targeted to the needs of the user – ‘knowledge on demand’. It has been increasingly helping decision-makers in understanding key inter-sectoral issues, with a focus on food and nutrition.

At present, there are over 3,000 members of this community including field workers, government employees, civil society, the private sector, local level administrators, leaders, activists, educators in agriculture, rural development, home science and medical



colleges, policy-makers, programme planners, researchers, scientists and other professionals interested in food and nutrition security.

The community offers various knowledge products.

**Query-consolidated reply:** A research service for members to obtain advice, experiences and reference material from their peers and from documented material. The consolidated reply is prepared in an ‘executive brief’ style, with a highly structured format so that its components can be indexed in a future ‘knowledge repository.’

**E-Consultation:** For drafters of projects, programmes, plans, policies and legislation to obtain feedback from community members as an input into finalising the materials. It provides a forum for a ‘public hearing’ on proposals, to capture new ideas and insights for the drafters to take into account.

**E-Discussion:** To address and gain insights on issues of wide concern to the community. This format is helpful to build a case for further development of policies and programmes, or to fill knowledge gaps identified by action group ‘champions’ during annual meetings.

**Action group:** Collaborative, small-group work sponsored by a community member to produce a quick, strategic deliverable such as a project proposal, strategic plan, pilot project or action research.

**Monthly updates:** This provides the members with the latest happenings in the sector –

vacancies, upcoming and recently held conferences/meetings, reading materials, latest from FAO and food for the month section (this gives insight into the nutritional benefits of different fruits/vegetables/nuts).

**News digest:** It gives a snapshot of the latest headlines on food and nutrition security, agriculture, etc. in the leading newspapers of the country. It also shares one research article published in the journal concerning the latest in the sector.

**Query update:** It is issued in the middle of the query to inform the members about the discussion so far and untouched areas of the running query. It helps to elicit responses for the untouched area and helps to focus the discussion in the right direction.

Details of the community, a selection of impact stories and testimonials, and the knowledge repository under the consolidated replies section, are available at: <http://www.solutionexchange-un.net.in/communities/food-and-nutrition-security>

### **Knowledge product outcomes**

The resource team maps the use of knowledge products by the query posers or by other members by maintaining constant contact with the community members either virtually or by any other means. The community can boast of many achievements as many of the community discussion outcomes have been incorporated into

### **TESTIMONIAL**

We would like to thank Solution Exchange for accepting and taking up our query on Biofuel plantation through Food and Nutrition Security and Water Communities. We have been able to develop better understanding of the stakes and issues involved through the debate generated and members’ experiences shared on the forum. In sequence to that, Association for Rural Advancement through Voluntary Action and Local Involvement (ARAVALI), Jaipur and Society for Wasteland Development (SPWD), Udaipur jointly organised a one-day multi-stakeholder consultation on “Allocation of Wastelands for Bio-fuel Plantation in Rajasthan” on 21 December 2007 at Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur.

national programmes and policies. Some examples are as follows.

- Introduction of vegetables into the midday meal scheme in the schools of New Delhi. This initiative involved collaboration between NGOs, the Department of Education and SAFAL (a fruit and vegetable project) on the provision of vegetables, which ultimately helped improve the nutritional content of the cooked food served to school children in government schools. Evaluation of FAO cooperation with India 2003–2008 had specially noted this critical impact.



- The National Institute of Nutrition which has recently released the dietary guidelines for Indians, has acknowledged Solution Exchange for providing critical comments and constructive inputs to the formulation of the guidelines.
- The biofuel discussion initiative led to support of a community by the Rajasthan Government for a biofuel plantation.
- The World Bank-funded National Agricultural Innovation Project project sought to introduce and expand the consortium mode of research collaboration through this network.
- The MS Swaminathan Research Foundation discussed the draft National Farmer's Policy in the network before finalisation.
- Firming up national nutritional guidelines, providing inputs to the newly created Food Safety Standards Authority of India, deliberating on critical and contemporary issues such as Bt cotton, biofuels and climate change are useful to civil society, the public authorities and many others who are interested in neutral and balanced perspectives on these issues.
- Discussions on Bihar Nutrition Policy, the Assam State Dairy Policy and Orissa Fisheries Policy are examples of effectiveness of the network in bringing grass root inputs from stakeholders from across the nation and strengthening government policies and programmes through such positive collaboration. Several queries in the community emanated from organisations such as the Indian Council of

Agricultural Research, the National Centre for Agricultural Economics and Policy Research, the National Academy of Agricultural Research Management, the National Institute of Nutrition, the Indian Council of Medical Research, the Indian Institute of Management – Ahmedabad, the Central Food Technological Research Institute and various universities. Scores of national and international organisations such as: Micronutrient Initiative, DFID, MS Swaminathan Research Foundation, Nutrition Foundation of India, Toxic Links, CARE India, USAID, Development Alternatives, etc. actively sought solutions from this knowledge exchange. Many queries emerged from organisations such as FAO, ADB, World Bank, UNDP, ILO, ICRISAT, IFPRI, Poverty Action Lab of the MIT and Columbia University – amply testifying to the professional standards and practical utility of the discussions in the community.

## **CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Developing a culture of sharing and learning is a significant achievement in a country where people tend to keep knowledge to themselves. Although it is often talked about now, at the early stages it was very difficult to see how effective knowledge could happen easily. There have been many challenges: uniting two groups – food and nutrition – to a common point; getting them actively engaged; making the final product focused and useful by

### **TESTIMONIALS IN BRIEF**

**Better understanding of contentious issues by practitioners**

*Bt cotton Debdatta Sengupta, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington DC*

**Members' inputs helped initiate fully fledged millet programme in Andhra Pradesh**

*Ashis Pande, Timbaktu Collective, Anantpur, Andhra Pradesh*

**Frontline information on demand – Indian experience helps the USA**

*Daniel Gustafson, FAO, Washington DC, USA*

deft moderation; collating diverse inputs and experience from members; and finally churning out a qualitative, interdisciplinary and useful product through copious research inputs. Solution Exchange has proved to be a successful example of a knowledge sharing platform which overcame these operational difficulties.

People who belong to CoPs freely share their knowledge, challenging the assumption that people prefer to protect their knowledge. Experiential knowledge is as valued as expert knowledge, challenging the assumption that the



### TESTIMONIAL

I enrolled into Solution Exchange back in 2006. However, my predominant impression of it was that of just another token exercise which fades out with time. I have seen web sites and forums dedicated to different issues remaining non-updated and terribly out of date and sync. However, the sheer volume of queries and suggestions that I received in my mail astounded me and finally, a few months back I decided to get involved actively. I must say, it changed my life. It inspired me so much that I have now become an ardent and passionate campaigner for issues advocated by Solution Exchange. I am an activist for food security, sustainable development and environment now, much of the credit belongs to UN SE. It is truly an exchange of ideas and I have myself witnessed tangible solutions emerging from the discussions. However, I must reiterate the fact that UN SE (food & nutrition) is being very well moderated. Hats off to the moderators for the momentum they maintain and the services they render. This whole exercise is very fruitful and enriching and will lead to a positive transformation at the ground level.

*Shuja ul Rehman, Development Practitioner & Environmental Activist, Srinagar, Kashmir*

‘experts’ have all the knowledge. By capturing this ‘tacit’ knowledge and turning it into documented knowledge, Solution Exchange opened up a large, previously untapped source of experience and expertise to practitioners at all levels, from front-line workers to national policy-makers. It has a simple, straightforward operating formula: a resource team of two professional staff – a moderator and a research associate – working from a UN agency office, connecting members through a mail-group.

The FNS community demonstrates that communities of practice are a new organisational frontier, and that people will take advantage of this kind of platform to connect and collaborate to support national development efforts. Front-line workers are happy in the knowledge that they are not ‘reinventing the wheel.’ Programme sponsors are using it to identify new partners for project design and implementation. Researchers are using it to find knowledge gaps to work on. Private sector organisations now have a platform for market surveys and product development. Government decision-makers are using it to gain new insights into the implementation of their policies, plans and programmes. Successful practitioners can now multiply the value of their contributions and get more recognition through this forum. In offering wider choices and producing ‘smarter development’, as its tag line says, Solution Exchange is putting knowledge to work, taking forward the agendas of development practitioners

in India, individually and collectively.

The impact of Solution Exchange is best measured by its continued ability to provide front-line workers, donors and government authorities with insights and innovative approaches for effective delivery of services, efficient implementation of development programmes, and responsive policies and plans. With so much riding on the success of the MDGs, the people committed to making them happen deserve no less.

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