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Knowledge Management and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the United Nations Context

Gestión del Conocimiento y la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible en el Contexto de la Organización de Naciones Unidas

Resumen

The United Nations constitutes the global framework for most of the international activities on our planet, and it has been progressively exposed to more significant challenges involving an increasing demand for knowledge to accomplish its mission. Hence, from an analytical perspective, this work presents some reflections on the state of knowledge management in the UN and its impact on the fulfillment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The latter may be the biggest challenge in terms of knowledge that the United Nations has ever faced since its foundation. The importance of this study lies in the fact that it explores and provides information on a subject that has not been widely studied. The main conclusion is that, although some progress has been made in this field within this organization, the results have not reached the expected levels yet mainly due to the absence of a joint and integrated knowledge management strategy.

Key words: 2030 agenda for sustainable development; knowledge management; United Nations.

Abstract

La Organización de Naciones Unidas constituye el marco global para la mayor parte de las actividades internacionales de nuestro planeta y cada vez más está expuesta a mayores retos que implican una demanda creciente de conocimientos para cumplir con su misión. Es por ello que este trabajo presenta, desde una perspectiva analítica, algunas reflexiones acerca del estado de la gestión del conocimiento en esta organización y su impacto en el cumplimiento de la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible, posiblemente el mayor desafío en términos de conocimientos que ha enfrentado la Organización de Naciones Unidas desde su fundación. La importancia de este estudio radica en el hecho de que explora y aporta información sobre una temática que ha sido poco estudiada y su principal conclusión es que, aunque en la institución se han logrado avances en este campo, los resultados aún no alcanzan los niveles esperados debido principalmente a la ausencia de una estrategia común e integrada para la gestión del conocimiento.

Palabras claves: agenda 2030 para el desarrollo sostenible; gestión del conocimiento; Organización de Naciones Unidas.

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Introduction

If the current world can somehow be described, it is due to the profound, complex, and diverse changes which constitute a source of increasing levels of uncertainty in all areas.

The organizational context is not an exception, and the demands of the environment in which organizations operate are growing, forcing them to move rapidly in search of change methods in order to survive.

Phenomena such as globalization and the information and communications technologies (ITC) revolution have mainly changed the game rules on how to manage organizations, causing that the traditional management, which focused on tangible factors of an economic nature has been displaced by the management of the intangible assets, i.e., primarily staff knowledge and experience, as a form of organizational survival.

Therefore, how to create, share, and use knowledge most effectively has become a critical strategic goal for most organizations worldwide. As Ikujiro Nonaka (1991) put it: "In an economy where the only certainty is uncertainty, the one sure source of lasting competitive advantage is knowledge" (p.1).

As a discipline, knowledge management has established itself as a valuable tool for increasing business competition out of effective usage of knowledge despite being less than three decades old. It emerged in the academic field during the nineties. It is based on the symbiosis of two approaches —eastern and western— and it involves technological and economic variables in the management process.

The eastern approach took into account theoretical principles of sociology, pedagogy, and psychology, and framed its postulates of tacit or implicit knowledge (practice) and the pathways for its creation. It consisted of a vision of knowledge "as a process". On the other hand, the western approach was aligned with the theoretical principles underpinning the acquisition, treatment, and dissemination of information, to lay the foundations of explicit knowledge management (theory), from a perspective of knowledge "as an object".

There are countless definitions of the term "knowledge management", but it is, in short, as Mario Ricardo (2005) expressed:

A management philosophy focused on how to integrate and coordinate the processes of acquisition, creation, storage, dissemination and use of knowledge, constituting an optimal tool for reaching higher levels of organizational performance and, at the same time, for the effective management of potential threats that undermine the scope of the organization's objectives. (p.17)

The United Nations Organization (UN) is a complex and multidimensional institution with a worldwide presence. It is the largest international organization currently in existence and, precisely, its extensive scope implies that it is continually exposed to more significant challenges, which demand up-to-date knowledge to accomplish its mission.

One of the biggest challenges in terms of knowledge that the UN is currently facing is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Hence, the importance of analyzing the state of knowledge management at the UN and its contribution to reaching a global effort constitutes the main objective of this essay.

Methodology

There are few studies in the field of knowledge management in the context of the UN. The information publicly available, both from internal and external sources of the UN, is limited. Specifically, there is no information on the Internet regarding the relationship between knowledge management and the 2030 Agenda. That is why this study aims to shed some light on this matter.

This essay is a theoretical reflection. To achieve its objective, analysis and synthesis as theoretical research methods were used, based on bibliographic and documentary sources on web platforms, research journals, books, and postgraduate thesis, both general and specialized in knowledge management.

Regarding what Enrique Benjamin Franklin (1997) said, "Those writings that contain data of interest related to the study must be selected and analyzed" (p.12), a bibliographic search was performed in the databases consulted, with keywords such as knowledge management, United Nations, Millennium Summit Declaration, and 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Although the information available in the field of knowledge management is mostly framed in the period between the nineties and present time, the search focused on the last five years since

the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was signed in 2015.

Discussion

Knowledge Management In The United Nations

On October 24, 1945, the UN was established to contribute to consolidating international peace and security after the end of World War II. Over time, the organization incorporated new economic, political, and social objectives related to the spreading democracy, international law compliance, conflict resolution, human rights acknowledgment and protection in all its forms, medical research, poverty alleviation and economic development, environmental protection, disaster assistance and peaceful use of atomic energy, among others.

It is made up of 193 countries or member states, and it constitutes a global government association, which is currently led by Mr. António Manuel de Oliveira Guterres from Portugal, the organization's ninth secretary since its foundation.

The UN operates as a system of agencies, funds, and programs, and its presence and scopes of action cover the entire planet. Alongside the breadth of its objectives and regulations, it aims to achieve positive results in all work areas and evolve due to our world's changing needs.

For this reason, some years ago, the UN started a process of organizational reforms of different nature to strengthen its role and global impact. Specifically, during the 1997-2006 period, Mr. Kofi Annan, serving as UN Secretary-General, considered as one of his priorities the renewal of the organization through a comprehensive reform program, which began discussing knowledge management within the UN.

Juan Luis Larrabure developed one of the first works in this line (2007), belonging to the UN Joint Inspection Unit (JUI), which focused on analyzing the mechanisms for exchanging knowledge of 17 organizations of the UN system, both internally and among them. However, the exchange with external counterparts and managing knowledge of the UN member states were not included in the study.

The main conclusions of his work were:

• Knowledge management in the UN system is in its early stages. The concept of

"knowledge" is not uniform. There are different levels of knowledge management understanding, its role, and its importance.

• The existing disparity in knowledge management definition demonstrates the need for a standard definition of the concept throughout the UN system.

• Knowledge is confused with information. In fact, for most organizations in the system, knowledge management is only part of its overall strategy for using information and communications technologies, and knowledge management activities consist mainly of spreading information.

• There is no official knowledge management strategy. Although all organizations in the system create and disseminate knowledge in one way or another, they generally do not perform it in a coordinated, detailed manner and with a defined purpose.

This essay mentions that one of the essential objectives of applying knowledge management in the UN is to modify people's behavior, that is, to establish an appropriate culture or organizational attitude, providing and encouraging the exchange of knowledge. It also mainly recommends creating a knowledge management strategy at the system-level that provides and guides the exchange of knowledge both internally and externally.

From that moment on, several organizations in the system launched different knowledge management initiatives, even though, from an integrated and coordinated perspective, in many cases, they were not closely linked or aligned to each other for knowledge management. This fragmentary approach reflects the early stages of its implementation in any organization.

The publicly available information corresponding to the implementation of knowledge management at the UN in later years, is scarce. However, a study developed by Dimitriu (2016), also belonging to the JUI, states:

Knowledge management is not yet a strategic priority for all the organizations in the United Nations system, and there are no practices jointly accepted or shared throughout the system. However, some organizations, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the International

Labor Organization (ILO), apply broad practices that have overcome time. And knowledge management is part of their operational reality. Existing knowledge management strategies are amended and drafted continuously in the light of experience gained during their application. (p.5)

Another study later developed by Glovinsky (2017) expresses that, although most organizations belonging to the UN call themselves "knowledge organizations", there are very few examples of effective knowledge management within the system. It also mentions that the UN's knowledge acquired over 70 years, if effectively gained and shared, could contribute to improving the organization's effectiveness.

On the other hand, Bruce Boyes (2017) emphasizes that not recognizing the need for links and partnerships with communities beyond the UN system continues —a situation contrary to the principles underpinning knowledge management. He highlights that there is not enough attention to evidence-based knowledge management. This aspect could be improved by establishing links and partnerships with universities, research centers, and individual researchers, participating in knowledge management research.

Consequently, and although the UN has been making progress in knowledge management, there is still a wide gap between the current and desired state. The absence of a global strategy for knowledge management continues to be a limitation. A radical change in the system's organizational culture can also be a trigger that contributes to further progress in this matter.

The Millennium Summit Declaration

The United Nations Millennium Summit was held in New York from September 6 to September 8, 2000. At this meeting, the Millennium Summit Declaration was adopted, in which the UN member states defined eight goals, known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and committed themselves to achieve their compliance by 2015. The MDGs were the following:

MDG 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.

MDG 2: Achieve universal primary education.

MDG 3: Promote gender equality and empower women.

MDG 4: Reduce child mortality.

MDG 5: Improve maternal health.

MDG 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.

MDG 7: Ensure environmental sustainability.

MDG 8: Develop a global partnership for development.

The global crusade that generated the scope of the MDGs has no precedents in history. Regarding compliance, fifteen years later, it showed that it was possible to advance globally in some of the established goals. However, in other goals, much remained to be done internationally, and poverty remains a severe predicament for humanity in many regions of the world.

Among the achievements, we can mention the reduction of infant mortality, despite not being at the desired levels, and the progress made in access to education, and preventing and treating AIDS, having a considerable reduction in neonatal HIV infection.

In this regard, Ban Ki-Moon (2015), former UN Secretary-General, said, "the MDGs helped more than one billion people escape extreme poverty, fight hunger, facilitate attending school for more girls than ever before, and protect our planet"(p.2). Still, he also noted, "yet for all the remarkable gains, I am keenly aware that inequalities persist and that progress has been uneven. The world's poor remains overwhelmingly concentrated in some parts of the world" (p.3).

The 2030 Agenda For Sustainable Development

Considering the different results achieved by this global initiative and the still long way to improve our world, on September 25, 2015, the 193 UN member states approved the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This Agenda constitutes "a plan of action in favor of people, planet, and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace and access to justice" (United Nations, 2015, p.1).

The 2030 Agenda includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets, which integrate the economic, social, and environmental dimensions. The SDGs were:

SDG 1: No poverty.

SDG 2: Zero hunger.

SDG 3: Good health and well-being.

SDG 4: Quality education.

SDG 5: Gender equality.

SDG 6: Clean water and sanitation.

SDG 7: Affordable and clean energy.

SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth.

SDG 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure.

SDG 10: Reduced inequality.

SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities.

SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production.

SDG 13: Climate action.

SDG 14: Life below water.

SDG 15: Life on land.

SDG 16: Peace and justice strong institutions.

SDG 17: Partnerships to achieve the goal.

In terms of knowledge, the SDGs are probably the most significant challenge the UN has faced since its foundation, considering its depth, diversity, and global reach. Reaching these goals has become an imperative strategic objective for all member states and organizations making up the UN system.

It has involved linking national strategies and development plans of the UN member states with the SDGs and orienting critical activities of all the organizations that make up the UN system regarding the SDGs.

There are 11 years left for the 2030 Agenda. The compliance balance until 2018 shows excellent progress, but it also shows that it is not enough in some areas to meet the targets and the SDGs. In this regard, António Guterres (2018) has expressed:

Achieving the 2030 Agenda requires immediate and accelerated action by countries and collaborative partnerships among governments and stakeholders at all levels. This ambitious Agenda necessitates a profound change that goes beyond business as usual. In doing its part, the United Nations has launched reform initiatives to reposition the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda. (p. 3)

In that process, effective knowledge management plays a crucial role. Organizations should align their strategies with their human capital, enhance their skills and abilities in a learning environment, and have a positive attitude towards the need to share knowledge. Only then will it be possible to give an adequate response to the SDGs

through organizational strengthening. In the same way, strengthening its relational capital through the consolidation of all kinds of ties, among all system organizations and member states, will guarantee the knowledge flow demanded by the SDGs.

Conclusions

For some years, the UN began to undertake actions aiming at implementing knowledge management as part of an organizational reform process. Although progress has been made in this matter, results have not reached the expected levels yet due to, mainly, the absence of a joint and comprehensive strategy for knowledge management.

One challenge the UN has faced with its member states, and perhaps the greatest in terms of demand for knowledge, is the 2030 Agenda, its targets, and the SDGs. The world urgently needs and demands a more significant impact on the UN in achieving the SDGs. Effective knowledge management could accomplish that.

In general, if the invaluable volume of knowledge that the UN has been gaining for more than 70 years is managed correctly, it could significantly improve the organization's effectiveness and sustainability.

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