

## Revisiting, Rather than Reinventing, the Wheel: Interviews with Online Community Managers

*Background Information for*  
Development of a Barefoot Guide Online Learning Community

*By Jennifer Lentfer, on behalf of the*  
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### Introduction

A key first step in the Barefoot Guide Online Learning Community's inception was to explore other online communities and connect with the people who run them. Rather than reinventing the wheel, the development of the concept and proposal for the Barefoot Guide Online Learning Community will be informed and influenced by the ideas, challenges and insights of experienced colleagues engaged in similar pursuits.



The consultant, Jennifer Lentfer, conducted interviews with nine individuals involved in seven established online communities related to international development in September and October 2010, which are each summarized in this report. She also compiled a comprehensive list of over 80 online communities related to international development work, including learning communities, wikis and LinkedIn groups. (See Appendix for this list.) She also participated in many of them to further understand the available features, content, and “feel” for the Barefoot Collective's consideration.

### Summary of Key Insights

#### *Moderators help create “buzz”*

In the beginning stages, many of the moderators shared that they played a key role in creating interest and prompting participation, especially from the “core group,” (see below) in order to help the community become active. HIFA2015, WiserEarth, km4dev and the Outcome Mapping Learning Community intentionally devoted time and financial resources to this aspect of establishing their online communities. Appropedia and the Peace and Collaborative Development Network have done this as well, though largely on a volunteer basis.

### ***A handshake still matters***

The combination of face-to-face and virtual interactions is highlighted as a key aspect of online community building, as these personal connections provide energy and cohesion. Wibowo Sulistio of WiserEarth shared that they sponsors and encourages meet-ups on various issues and in various locations around the world and would like to do more because of their value to the community. Both Km4dev and the Outcome Mapping Learning Community also sponsor meetings and events for its members.

### ***The “keepers” of the community***

Most of the interviewees also highlighted the key function of a “core group” of community members who serve as the shapers and the drivers of the online community. Simon Hearn of the Outcome Mapping Learning Community says that a key aspect of his role as moderator is to shepherd this core group as leaders and ambassadors of the community’s goals, activities and direction. This core group is often rooted in the individuals that participated in the communities’ “pilot” online discussions, many of which took place on others’ sites before the community’s own site came into existence.

Most of the interviewees differentiated between types of members among their community’s participants. For example, some have key functions in terms of connecting members, monitoring content, or providing summaries of online discussions. Within HIFA2015, these groups represent the different kinds of stakeholders involved in their advocacy campaign. Within km4dev, members also have different preferences for how they participate, be it via email listserve, social networking, or wiki contributions.

### ***What are our goals? And later on...what are they again?***

The importance of clarity on the online community’s goals and functions was very apparent throughout the interviews. Dr. Neil Pakenham-Walsh shared that he felt it was important for new efforts to distinguish between being a “community of practice” and a “community of purpose,” which in the case of HIFA2015 is a shared advocacy goal. While Chris Watkins of Appropedia shared that he would like to incorporate more overall goal planning into his day-to-day work, the nature of wikis is to encourage the fluidity and wisdom of the community.

The importance of continuing to revisit a community’s goals was also highlighted. As the number of members grows, large numbers of people participating can “water down” or compete with the community’s original aims. Both the Outcome Mapping Learning Community and km4dev are struggling right now about how to communicate its core principles and still allow for “organic growth.” Craig Zelizer of the Peace and Collaborative Development Network highlights his struggle with deciding how “open” to be on his site. Lucie Lamoureux of km4dev also shared that they have struggled with “bad online personalities” and people misrepresenting the community’s brand.

### ***Aims first, tools second***

An online community's choice of tools and features should be grounded in the community's purpose. New technological advances such as "tagging" content and opensource software are becoming readily available to enhance online collaboration. Thus it is important to find a platform that will allow for new features to be added, tweaked and integrated in the community so that they be utilized to facilitate linkages between members, in the case of WiserEarth, or to help catalog discussion outcomes, in the case of HIFA2015. Tori Hogan shares that in the case of Beyond Good Intentions, the "look" of the website was favored before usability and thus the potential for participation was diminished.

### ***Try and try again***

Ongoing experimentation and adaptation are a key part of an online community's strength and robustness. WiserEarth and Appropedia highlighted this as a key aspect of their overall philosophies. In the case of km4dev and the Outcome Mapping Learning Community, this is related directly to their respective disciplines/approaches.

*In times of change, the learners will inherit the earth, while the knowers will find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.*

~Eric Hoffer

Collaborative partnerships feed many of the online communities' growth and learning. Both HIFA2015 and Appropedia are engaged in partnerships that are expanding their reach and utilizing technological advances. Nancy White at ODI, dgroups coordinator, has been an important mentor for three of the networks discussed (HIFA, km4dev and Outcome Mapping).

Steady funding remains a challenge for many of the online communities. Beyond Good Intentions, HIFA, Appropedia and km4dev all highlighted this hurdle. Therefore, a key aspect of online communities is to continue to educate donors about their potential, true costs, and significance and usefulness for its members.

**1) Dr. Neil Pakenham-Walsh** MB, BS, DCH, DRCOG, Coordinator of HIFA2015 & Child2015 and Co-director of the Global Healthcare Information Network (GHI-net)

**Website:** <http://www.hifa2015.org>

**Contact email:** [neil.pakenham-walsh@ghi-net.org](mailto:neil.pakenham-walsh@ghi-net.org)

**Background:** Healthcare Information for All by 2015, HIFA2015, is a global email forum promoting the availability and use of relevant, reliable healthcare information for providers in low-income settings. It was launched in Kenya in 2006 at the 10th Congress of the Association for Health Information and Libraries in Africa. HIFA aims to facilitate communication, understanding and advocacy among all stakeholders; it does not itself act as a provider of healthcare information. HIFA2015 and its accompanying community focused on children's health information, [CHILD2015](#), have more than 4,000 professional members in 150+ countries worldwide.



### **1. What inspired the start of HIFA2015 and CHILD2015?**

Neil shares that it was a combination of his personal interest going back a long time and an increasing number of people he was connected with over the years who shared this interest. The catalyst for the HIFA2015 campaign was a Lancet article he wrote in 2004 with Fiona Godlee of [BMJ](#) and others asking the question, "[Can we achieve health information for all by 2015?](#)"

In 1980, as a medical student, Neil visited his mother in Algeria who was teaching English in a secondary school in Djelfa, about 150 miles south of Algiers. Neil's first experience in a low-resource health center occurred during that visit when he made an appointment to spend the day with local hospital staff. His deepest impression was the complete lack of reference and learning materials.

In 1986 and 1987, Neil served as a medical officer in rural Ecuador and Peru. He relayed that it was a scary experience to be in an isolated setting where he felt ill equipped information-wise. He had only two medical reference books with him and he personally and strongly lived the experience of being professionally isolated. In 1988-1990, Neil returned to the UK to work as a hospital doctor in the National Health Service. He also did voluntary work for an environmental charity, where he recognized the lack of communication and cooperation among the various groups in the UK and worldwide.

Neil worked as an editor of printed and electronic publications for health workers in developing countries with the World Health Organization, Wellcome Trust and Medicine Digest and became interested in the challenge of understanding the information needs of various cadres of healthcare provider and how their needs might be more effectively addressed worldwide. He participated in a conference at the British Medical Association in 1994

highlighting the diversity of approaches required and the lack of communication and collaboration among organizations working to meet the information needs of health workers in developing countries. The conference concluded that it was imperative for donors to realize the importance of lack of information as a major development issue, together with much better communication among all the groups involved in the production, exchange and application of health knowledge: researchers, policymakers, publishers, librarians, health workers, and citizens.

## **2. What are the aspects of the site/group that have been the most successful in terms of 1) particular types of content and 2) features?**

HIFA's role is to offer a virtual conference space to explore the information needs from the ground and share this among multi-level efforts. Neil describes HIFA2015 and CHILD2015 as an online "community of purpose" with aims that are evolving from *forum* -> *knowledge base* -> *advocacy*. The aim is to provide a neutral space for everyone with an interest in health information to come together, to exchange experience and expertise, and to find ways to achieve our common goal. HIFA2015 members include leading international health executives, rural primary health workers, publishers, librarians, researchers, policymakers, non-government organizations, WHO, governments, professional associations, private sector, and academia from 158 countries worldwide.

HIFA uses a [dgroups](#) email platform, which is also used by [km4dev](#). A unique feature and "best practice" that HIFA utilizes is reader-focused moderation, which is best explained in this [article in the km4dev journal](#) as a method for the moderator to "to provide maximum added value for all members."

## **3. What are the greatest challenges, both those you have overcome or those that you still face in administering HIFA2015?**

The biggest current operational challenge is to harness the key points from ongoing forum discussions, in a way that is systematic and readily usable for all. The aim is to build an evolving picture of information needs and how to meet them - as expressed by frontline health workers and health information providers. Neil has found that discussion summaries can be problematic as they are time-consuming to prepare, lose timeliness and nuance; they also involve paraphrasing, bringing a high risk of inadvertent misrepresentation.

Another challenge is to find the time to engage meaningfully, off-list, with the ever-increasing number of people and organizations that are committing in principle to work towards the HIFA2015 goal. For example, almost 100 leading health organizations worldwide have declared their support. Neil hopes to bring some of these organizations together for a first HIFA2015 conference in 2011.

A challenge also remains with funding. The rollout planned for HIFA2015 and CHILD2015 really needs three staff people, from one currently. Neil has been disappointed at how funding agencies are not picking up on the potential of online communities of practice but feels it's starting to happen slowly.

#### **4. What are some of your future goals with the site/group?**

In the second phase of creating a knowledge base, HIFA has decided to extract quotes verbatim, a new approach HIFA is developing with WHO in which they will be tagging quotations and entering them into a database. They hope to launch this in the next couple of months, using an opensource software called [Drupal](#) in collaboration with University of Toronto colleagues.

Another exciting development is that GHI-net is collaborating with the World Health Organization to implement HIFA-Portuguese, which was launched in Maputo, Mozambique in late 2009 and already has over 1000 members worldwide. Neil hopes to launch HIFA-French as soon as funding becomes available. GHI-net has also recently launched another global forum, HIFA-EVIPNet-French, which is a collaboration with the Evidence for Informed Policy Network at WHO and is looking at the information needs of health policymakers in French-speaking Africa.

The Rockefeller Foundation is funding an external evaluation of HIFA2015 in 2011. This will provide recommendations on how HIFA2015 can be further improved to progressively realize its goal: a world where people are no longer dying for lack of knowledge.

**2 & 3) Wibowo Sulistio, Online Community Manager and Peggy Duvette, Executive Director of WiserEarth**

**Website:** <http://www.wiserearth.org/>  
**Contact email:** [bowo@wiserearth.org](mailto:bowo@wiserearth.org),  
[peggy@wiserearth.org](mailto:peggy@wiserearth.org)



**Background:** The [WiserEarth Community](#) is the online community of the [WiserEarth Directory](#), the world's largest free and editable international directory and social network of over 110,000 non-governmental organizations and socially responsible organizations in 243 countries, territories, and sovereign islands. The site was publicly launched in 2007, initially focused on the directory alone until the organization reflected, "Why not connect these people and organizations?" The community is made up of 46,000+ members. Community activities include sharing resources, solutions, jobs, and events, as well as groups, social movement taxonomy development and local face-to-face gatherings.

**1. What are the aspects of the site/group that have been the most successful in terms of 1) particular types of content and 2) features?**

An important aspect of the community is to encourage visitors to learn about with and engage with the number and diversity of social change organizations around the world. Event listings have been the easiest way for most people to join *the movement* [note: this refers to collective efforts of grassroots social change organizations] and to connect on particular issues and with colleagues. Job listings have also been popular and WiserEarth is thinking about how to leverage this further.

Bowo describes three types of key users on WiserEarth the site:

- 1) *Group Administrators* create and nurture communities within the larger community. They invite people to join and connect them with activities.
- 2) *Network connectors* invite their large networks to join and connect them to the site. These are most often members from partner organizations who are stewards of content for a specific language or country.
- 3) *Volunteer editors* include about 30 frequent visitors who act as moderators. Based on trust of the organization that these folks know the "feel" of the community, they monitor content and keep it in line with guidelines, as well as nurture the community. These are usually people who can see the potential of the site, are comfortable using online tools, and have a good knowledge of social change issues in order to connect other people.

The community also contains elements of social networking and groupware, e.g. wiki, Facebook, Ning. (WiserEarth shares its [tech updates here](#).) Bowo has found that the groupware has been most successful. However, he also shares that the resources and solutions sections of the WiserEarth community have lots of potential but need more moderation and effort. Skilled "translators" are needed to learn the features and share them within their smaller groups in the community. A group in Rio is using the solutions space as the platform for their

efforts, which will be instructive.

## **2. In what ways does your team attempt to weave together and connect such diverse participants given the size of WiserEarth's online community?**

Bowo describes the various features of the online community that they have developed within the last year to do this:

- WiserTuesdays, face-to-face meetings in various locations which have used different formats and topics
- Specific groups built to connect members (issue or [location-based](#)), including one for [new members](#).
- [Weversity](#) group to tap collective intelligence of members. People post questions and ask for suggestions.
- [WiserActions](#) helps people share their activities and inspire others.
- RSS feed on new features
- Watchlist, settings which individual users can control to inform them of new content
- Monthly highlights of interesting content and people

WiserEarth is always exploring better ways to connect relevant content and like-minded people, and to increase the value and impact of sharing one's knowledge/work and one's self.

## **3. What are the greatest challenges, both those you have overcome or those that you still face in administering the community?**

Both Peggy and Bowo stress that it is easy to set up the technology, but building the community is the real work. Bowo highlights that time and the size of their community is a constant challenge. Thus, WiserEarth's philosophy is grounded in an approach of constant experimentation, to see what's working and "feel where the energy is coming from in the community and where it wants to flow." For example, the WiserActions group was born out of a group of people who wanted to "get beyond talking."

WiserEarth is currently measuring statistics on the number of members, content posted, most active members, messages exchanged and it's working on relating these indicators with the site's growth goals, which are also focused on quality of interactions between members and outcomes of collaboration. [Stories](#) have been gathered about how the site has helped member organizations and a report is forthcoming.

## **4. What are some of your future goals with the site/group?**

- Planning to add the status update feature, mirroring Facebook.
- Want to start WiserTuesdays in more locations.
- Considering creating mobile version of site and making it more email friendly.



## **5. Any other advice for new online communities? (shared by Peggy Duvette)**

- Learn first about the people you want to connect and build the technology based on their needs. When people come online, their attention time is very short, so it's important to be clear on how the online community helps them fulfill their needs.
- Identify "the problem" your solving by creating this space. This will help you develop one or two clear goals.
- Be clear about what success looks like in two years from now. Five, ten years?
- Identify the time/resources you want to invest in nurturing the community. If you're going to put money anywhere, put it in the people who will moderate and build the community, because responsiveness to new members is key.
- Nurture and rely on your "hard core group" who will be creating the most content and identifying best practices.
- Consider using a free tool (such as group features on other sites such as WiserEarth) to first play around with the concept in the core group. You can then transfer to your own site, rather than wasting resources during the trial and error period.
- Ensure the technological "architecture" of your site allows the community to evolve.
- Spend some time developing the "public face of the network" and how you will market the group.
- Create feedback mechanisms throughout all phases of planning and once off and running.

**4 & 5) Chris Watkins, Co-founder and Administrator of Appropedia and Curt Beckmann, Co-founder and Board Member of Appropedia Foundation**

**Website:** <http://www.appropedia.org/>

**Contact email:** [chriswaterguy@appropedia.org](mailto:chriswaterguy@appropedia.org),  
[curtbeckmann@gmail.com](mailto:curtbeckmann@gmail.com)



**Background:** Appropedia is a wiki site for collaborative approaches to sustainability, poverty reduction and international development. Appropedia has existed and grown for 4.5 years based on open knowledge as a powerful tool to create a better world.

Appropedia contributors have created a resource of about 5000 pages on a budget of not far from US\$10,000. So far, contributors have also made 140,291 edits and uploaded 11,859 files. The site receives a million hits per month.

**1. What are the aspects of the site that have been the most successful in terms of 1) particular types of content and/or 2) features?**

Chris shares that service learning projects carried out by students has been very successful in terms of adding and developing the site's content. Linking with universities, instructors, and students are a great fit because they are doing the work wherever their instructor tells them to and the teacher can remove substandard work. Curt also highlights travel internships and partnerships with MIT, VillageEarth at the University of Colorado at Fort Collins, and [Akvopedia](#).

In specific topic areas, Appropedia has been able to seed content from quality open licensed sources, such as ported blog content, e.g. [Principles of Development](#) on the site has made a quick and substantial start in an important area. However, Chris considers this as semi-successful so far, in that people have not yet come in large numbers to improve these articles beyond the original content.

Only a tiny fraction of students maintain a connection to the wiki, but this is generally consistent with viewing versus editing ratios on Wikipedia. The nature of wikis is that a tiny fraction of viewers actually contribute. Chris shares, as "Alanna Shaikh [a blogger] says, she's not unique in what she knows—it's just that she chooses to write it down. She does have a lot of important wisdom to share, but it's in writing it down that it becomes so much more valuable." [Alanna is an Appropedia contributor in that her open licensed blog content is reused to make Appropedia pages.] Wikis are built by the kind of people who want to record their knowledge. They may or may not be particularly wise, but the self-correcting nature of a healthy wiki is a form of the "wisdom of crowds" (and it really works).

Chris shares that Appropedia is "taking the strategy of building something amazing," which the search engines love more and more as their site grows, and expanding the web of relationships and engaging with a broader community by providing "something that really makes an impression." If it touches a chord, it will spread.

## **2. What are the greatest challenges, both those you have overcome or those that you still face in administering the site?**

Curt and Chris highlight funding, which would help the site add some more technical features to solicit input and interaction among users. Curt highlights funding as key to adapt the site for use via mobile devices, translation, spam blocks, page ratings, and widgets to help embed Appropedia on other websites.

Curt also highlights the change in mindset needed to embrace open collaboration. He sees the need for grantmakers to fund documentation and favor organizations that operate in an open source manner.

Chris shares that he would like Appropedia to be more effective in communicating what they do to donors. The budget of \$10,000 is “ridiculously small,” but has a lot to do with the temperament of the most active people in Appropedia. He says they are much more inclined to work on solving problems than to ask for money.

Chris also shares that linking users is a weak area of the site. Appropedia has some shared, common spaces, such as the email list and the "[Village Pump](#)" discussion page. Appropedia is just now arranging a weekly online open chat forum, which will provide a standard place to facilitate general discussion about broad topics, something that doesn't “pop out” in the wiki structure. Targeted topical discussion pages might help as well.

## **3. What are some of your future goals with the site/group?**

Curt shares the growing number of hits each month and more and more pages point to the site's relevance in the field. Chris shares that despite the site's continued growth, he sees an unfulfilled potential for much greater growth and more robust and quality information.

Appropedia is starting to take a more proactive approach to improve pages and contributions beyond the original content. Chris hopes that the upcoming forum invites participation from the kinds of people who have knowledge but don't normally edit wiki pages. Through the permissions statement on the forum, Appropedia would ensure that all contributions can be reused on the wiki. He sees it as a great way to get specific content for the wiki, to fill in gaps, or seed new topic areas.

Appropedia is also planning to set up an email newsletter and would be interested in learning more about the profile of Appropedia users and if/how it's changing.

## **4. Any other advice for new online communities?**

Chris says: “Plan much more. Then again, I'm not a planner by nature, and that's one appeal of a wiki, that it lets you dive in anywhere you're comfortable, any time...I'd tell someone to lock me in my room without internet and not let me out till I had some funding proposals written.”

6 & 7) Simon Hearn, Coordinator of the Outcome Mapping Learning Community and Ben Ramalingam, Co-founder and former Coordinator



**Website:** <http://www.outcomemapping.ca/>

**Contact email:** [S.Hearn@odi.org.uk](mailto:S.Hearn@odi.org.uk), [b.ramalingam@odi.org.uk](mailto:b.ramalingam@odi.org.uk)

**Background:** The Outcome Mapping Learning Community is a virtual hub for practitioners using the Outcome Mapping methodology to contact other users and share experiences. Activities to serve members in a “community of practice” are centered on stimulating relationships, exploring a body of knowledge, and development of practices for further learning. It has approximately 2,000 registered members.

### 1. What inspired the start of the Outcome Mapping Learning Community?

[Outcome mapping](#) was developed as a measurement methodology for development outcomes by [IDRC](#) over a number of years. Ben shares that Barry Kibbel developed ‘outcome engineering’ doing work in community development, and IDRC brought the key concepts into their work. Ben suggested bringing in knowledge management tools to support a networking and learning function for users of OM around the world. Two closed [dgroups](#) of around 15 people were set up – one by Ben and one a parallel group - to experiment with the online community idea through linking up users, introductions, online ‘learn and share’ processes and small facilitated discussions, thereby building up a way of working for the online community.

These pilot groups merged, generating more energy and enthusiasm. Ben was working with IDRC and ODI colleagues to develop a formal proposal, based on research undertaken with OM users, including from the online community. The first tranche of funding came in March 2006. In April, the group was opened up by invitation to other related communities, and a steady influx of members began. A community stewards group was established to help guide on how the community of practice would be set up. The formal website development, especially the design, was used as a community building activity in its own right, to give the members greater ownership of the platform. Other activities such as getting suggestions for and voting for a community slogan, and member profile competitions created a sense of community among a dispersed and growing group.

Ben’s role as coordinator was initially about identifying the “bright sparks” and prompting members to participate, and supporting discussions. Ben moved on to [ALNAP](#) in 2007 and his view is that Simon’s leadership has transformed the emerging community “into an institution.”

## **2. What are the aspects of the site/group that have been the most successful in terms of 1) particular types of content and 2) features?**

Simon shares that in terms of content, posts and contributions where members share resource links or writings sharing their own outcome maps make up the core of content. Discussion summaries are the most popular content, including their annual syntheses of “what community is saying” (1500 downloads) and bi-annual [newsletters](#) that include stories and articles from members presenting new tools or case studies (700-800 downloads). Ben shares that they also published a book of summaries of these discussions, [Making Outcome Mapping Work](#).

One content initiative was to go through the outcome mapping methodology step-by-step, including a three-week discussion on each step with examples of adaptations that lasted approximately nine months in total. Though Simon shares it was perhaps too “slow moving” for people who were not new to the methodology, the summaries of questions and postings gave insight into what people are interested in order to obtain ideas for next topics.

In terms of features, Simon shares that the predominant way that members interact is email. There is also a [resource library](#) to browse and download and an interactive map (used by ¼ of members) that allows people to upload their outcome maps and identify “who’s in your neighborhood.” Simon sees that this feature could be more useful if teams working on outcome mapping projects could use it as a secure webspace while their work is in process and then use it to share with wider community once the work is completed. Simon has also introduced [Delicious](#) and a box on the site’s front page with RSS feed using the “outcome mapping” tag. So far, these are used mostly internally.

Simon as the moderator is supported by seven volunteers who act as community stewards and take responsibility for the long-term strategy of the community. They also support Simon’s daily decisions. He shares, “It’s this core group that I like to think of as the camp fire at the heart of the community.”

Both Ben and Simon highlight that a key part of the Outcome Mapping Learning Community’s success is rooted that users of the outcome mapping methodology are largely incredibly welcoming of adaptation and learning. As a social tool and open project, this ethos and tangibility has lended itself well to a robust community of practice. To gauge this success, they examine the quality of the discussions and solicit feedback from members, from both inside the core group and outside.

## **3. What are the greatest challenges, both those you have overcome or those that you still face in administering the learning community?**

Simon shares that the Outcome Mapping Learning Community has been consistently growing because of its committed core group and funding from IDRC. However, challenges arise in unifying the community and they are questioning whether 2,000 members might be too big for a community of

practice. They are also exploring the question of whether they should become a “community of purpose” to influence the donor community to more readily and widely utilize outcome mapping in development initiatives.

Simon also shares that the website is quite static so it becomes difficult to highlight other tools. For example, a small group of members put together a [wiki on developing a software for outcome mapping](#) and presented it to the community. However, it didn’t get much response from the wider community, though Simon could have helped link it earlier on.

#### **4. What are some of your future goals with the site/group?**

Simon would like to focus on clarifying the group’s vision and sharing with members specifics on 1) why they would join, 2) what to expect to see, and 3) how they can engage and contribute. Part of this process would also be making the governance structure more clear. He will encourage the group’s current advisory group to take on board role to help the online community transform from a project to a non-governmental organization.

The community has also conducted two surveys of members to establish people’s interests and Simon would like to use these to get a better grip on members and their interests in order to stimulate smaller groups and further collaboration.

Simon plans to recreate a regular diary of events/projects for the community and they are also exploring collaboration and web conferencing software such as [Elluminate](#) and [Skype](#) that could create regular interactive opportunities for presentations or “Open Door” Q&A sessions among members.

#### **5. Any other advice for new online communities?**

- Simon: Start simple and start by engaging with a core group. Make sure they’re bought into the vision of the community and embed the idea into their day-to-day practice. Tools should be a secondary focus after this base has been established. (See also this [podcast of an interview with Simon Hearn](#) on online community facilitation, conducted by Nancy White of Full Circle Associates in June of 2009.)
- Ben: Communities are emergent. They cannot be managed into being; rather members’ reasons to communicate must outweigh their reasons not to communicate. Nancy White of Full Circle Associates advised them not to go too big too fast, which was really important advice.

## 8) Lucie Lamoureux, Moderator, Knowledge Management for Development Online Community (km4dev)



**Website:** <http://www.km4dev.org/>

**Contact email:** [llamoureux@bellanet.org](mailto:llamoureux@bellanet.org)

**Background:** Km4dev is a community of international development practitioners who are interested in knowledge management and knowledge sharing issues and approaches. The community traces its origins back to two face-to-face workshops held in 2000. Participants from the two workshops wanted to continue discussing among themselves and asked [Bellanet](#) and [IDRC](#) to create an electronic forum where this could take place. The KM4Dev **mailing list** came to be in the summer of 2000, and a website and wiki have been added. A **volunteer Core Group** was created in May 2004 to further support the community and help respond to its needs. Km4dev now has approximately 1,200 registered members, 20 small groups based on events or geographic interests. The group also sponsors projects, workshops, and a journal.

### 1. What are the aspects of the site/group that have been the most successful in terms of 1) particular types of content and 2) features?

Lucie shares that the most common and popular aspect of the community is when members asks a question to the group via email, e.g. “Has someone ever tried X?” This prompts people to share what they’re doing and the discussions take off from there. Some members (currently about 5%) voluntarily take these discussion threads and summarize it for the [km4dev wiki](#).

Lucie shares that people feel a sense of urgency about practical challenges and questions. This has rooted km4dev in its niche as a space for practitioners’ “problem-solving” endeavors. She sees content moving in “waves” as these questions arise as projects are in process, tools are being used, and philosophical/cultural issues come up. Part of her role is often directing people to previous conversations.

Lucie’s role as moderator was full time for two years before “things really took off on their own” and she could step back. Initially she was engaged in lots of background nudging/cajoling, coming up with ideas/questions if the community was too quiet, and sharing resources. She now reads more than adds content and serves more administrative functions such as approving/rejecting members, researching people on Ning site, combating spammers, resetting passwords, and creating wiki accounts.

Part of km4dev's success has been its linking of face-to-face and online interactions. Lucie share that before/after a meeting, the dynamic energy invigorates the community.

## **2. What are the greatest challenges, both those you have overcome or those that you still face in administering the learning community?**

Currently, km4dev's financial situation is their biggest challenge, which results in pressure on the core group, all of whom have full-time jobs. Lucie shares that they "don't need a lot of money" but have to pay for facilitators, yearly meeting, and the website. (The website uses [Ning](#), which used to be free but is now \$200/year. Lucie shares that it has not been good for content management and [Drupal](#) might have been better.) Thus, km4dev is relooking at its business model.

Km4dev has also doubled in size over last 2-3 years through word of mouth. Students and young people in the developing world are a key part of this growth. Thus they are facing how to integrate new members and groups into the "old" community, realizing that the new folks have different needs. Km4dev wants to remain as informal/forthright as possible to ensure the community's fluid nature, while at the same time, not diluting its key principles.

This has especially been a problem in face-to-face meetings. Lucie share that km4dev signifies something to original members but some event coordinators were not promoting the same ideas. Thus they had to create event guidelines in order for people to be able to use the km4dev "brand." They also see the need to brief every new member on these key principles. They have had experiences now of having to "kick out" bad online personalities with a three-strikes-and-you're-out rule.

With the website coming on board after the email listserve was established, and now the wiki, the pieces are not integrated and members on main site and email list may not be connected. However, Lucie observes different types of users (email-focused, those who love the social networking interactions, wiki contributors, or just plain "readers" of what's going on) as akin to the different kinds of learning, an issue relevant to the practice of knowledge management in general.



## 9) Tori Hogan, Founder of Beyond Good Intentions



**Website:** <http://www.beyondgoodintentions.org/index.php>

**Contact email:** [torihogan@gmail.com](mailto:torihogan@gmail.com)

**Background:** Beyond Good Intentions is an organization committed to uncovering more innovative and effective approaches to international aid worldwide. Through its ten-part film series and educational programs at U.S. high schools and colleges, they work to catalyze a much-needed dialogue about aid effectiveness and volunteerism in hopes of transforming the current system.

## 10) Tech Change Interview with Dr. Craig Zelizer, Founder and Moderator of the Peace and Collaborative Development Network

Website: <http://www.internationalpeaceandconflict.org/>



[Lessons from a decade of online social networking: How to build a high impact site](#)

By [Nick Martin](#), August 25, 2010

Earlier this month I sat down with Dr. Craig Zelizer, Associate Director of the [Conflict Resolution](#) MA Program at Georgetown University and TechChange Advisor, to talk about the online professional network that he created in 2008 called the Peace and Collaborative Development Network (PCDN). PCDN has grown to over 16,000 members, 250,000 hits a month and is one of the most well respected and utilized sites in the field of peace and conflict studies. The aim of the site is “to foster dialogue and sharing of resources in international development, conflict resolution, gender mainstreaming, human rights, social entrepreneurship and related fields.” I was eager to learn about the network’s origins, successes, challenges and future plans. Highlights from our conversation are featured below.

### **Nick: What inspired you to start Peace and Collaborative Network?**

**Craig:** I’ve always been a networker and been interested in finding innovative ways to connect people and democratize access to information. When I was an undergrad I started an informal newsletter to inform people about social change activities on campus at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. After the Cold War ended, I had the opportunity to study and work in Eastern Europe. While there, I found that information was generally kept in close circles and not shared widely. So I started an informal listserve through Yahoo Groups to distribute information about professional opportunities and events related to the field of peace and conflict. This list grew over time, to about 15,000 people. I was also part of an effort to start a fee-for-service job site with the [Alliance for Conflict Transformation](#). We made enough money to support the project but encountered a number of frustrations with the design and web development process.

So with PCDN, I wasn’t starting from scratch, I had been engaged in similar efforts for ten years or so and had a base of several thousand users. It did however take many years to find the right technology. PCDN runs using the Ning Platform. What Ning does is what I had always been seeking in a web-based social networking platform. There are some problems with platform but the company is committed to innovation, democratizing information, and is very responsive to feedback from users. And I don’t need to be a programmer to manage and maintain it.

### **What are the aspects of the site that have been the most successful?**

There are hundreds of social networking sites that have a lot of value—my vision was to try to fill a gap in the field and create horizontal networking and

information sharing. When I first set out, I knew that to attract people to the site, there had to be a base of information so I invested significant time in creating core content. This helped to build a following. The social networking component is essential but people often come to the site for the other features like scholarship, fellowship and grant information, resource guides, conference and training announcements, and many other opportunities.

I think one of the most successful aspects of the site is its horizontalness—there is no hierarchy. It's moderated to some degree but anyone can post. From graduate students to experts with 30 years experience, people of all different skill levels participate.

### **What are the greatest challenges, both those you have overcome or those that you still face in administering PCDN?**

One basic question I struggle with is should the site be open or not? It used to be open but there were a number of spammers who joined and posted inappropriate content. As a consequence, the site is still public (meaning everyone can see the postings) but users can only post if they are registered. If someone doesn't provide adequate information in their profile when registering they are not accepted in the network.

Deciding what content to moderate and how to moderate it is also a challenge given that my time is limited. For instance, early on I decided that fundraising requests are not permitted, as the site would be deluged. Additionally, there have been arguments in some the network subgroups that have been a challenge. I don't have time to moderate these forums and have encountered situations where users have held me responsible as the site administrator for other users' comments. I do have a few people helping me with the site, but it's at the point where I need to develop a core group of people who are committed to administration and promotion of the network so that it doesn't take too much time for me since I do this as a volunteer.

Another significant challenge is trying to measure the impact of the network. There is a space on the site where over 300 members have posted clear feedback about the direct benefits they have received from their membership. But it is challenging to be able to develop indicators, and even more so the time to find an accurate measure. I do have a strong interest in exploring this question on a larger level, regarding how can the field more effectively measure the positive impact (and challenges) of sites that promote social networking and dialogue.

I think a final challenge is achieving the right balance for disseminating information. Some users have said that the email alerts are too frequent while others have said that they would like more.

### **What are some of your future goals with the site?**

I'd like PCDN to be one the premier social networking sites for sharing information in the field of peace and conflict studies. I'd like to grow the network to 50,000 to 100,000 members. The membership has been doubling every year.

Businesswise, it's a social venture and right now it makes very little money (from the ads), not nearly enough to support my time in administration. If it ever got the point where the site was generating more revenue than it took to run, then half would go towards supporting the administration and half would be used to fund projects in the field of peace and conflict studies.

## **Appendix - List of Online Communities related to International Development**

In September 2010, the consultant compiled a list of online communities related to international development. The following list gives a glimpse of the growing variety of opportunities available online to connect with others and gain exposure to the various contexts and complexities of international assistance and foreign aid.

For the purposes of this exercise, online communities are defined as “websites where people congregate online to discuss the topic of international assistance or to identify themselves for possible networking or information-sharing purposes.” Online communities that are locality-specific, such as the Boston Network for International Development, or institution-specific, such as the MIT International Development Network, were not included in this list.

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### **International Development Online Communities (general)**

1. [Aid Workers Network](#)
2. [The Aspen Network of Development Entrepreneurs](#), a global network of organizations that propel entrepreneurship in emerging markets. The network's members provide critical financing and business support services to small and growing businesses that create significant economic, environmental and social impacts in developing countries.
3. [Beyond Good Intentions](#), pioneering a major on-line dialogue about international aid effectiveness in an effort to bring about change
4. [The Center for Sustainable Development \(CSDi\) Development Community](#), sharing ‘What Works’ between development professionals worldwide.
5. CIVICUS’ [Civil Society Watch](#), a central hub for monitoring and tracking threats to civil society
6. [The Communication Initiative](#) Network, an online space for sharing the experiences of, and building bridges between, the people and organisations engaged in or supporting communication as a fundamental strategy for economic and social development and change
7. [Community Life Competence](#), sharing our experience with local responses to AIDS and other life concerns.
8. [Conversations for a Better World](#), a social platform for raising global issues and finding solutions.
9. [Dadamac](#), Integrating Education and Development in Africa and Online

10. [The Development Café](#), a global network and interactive website for development professionals and social scientists
11. [DevelopmentCrossing.com](#), Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainable Development
12. [Development Practitioners Forum](#)
13. [DevelopmentProfessionals.org](#), an online community of individuals working for the welfare and betterment of our society (~2,800 members)
14. [Devex](#), a global community of 500,000 development professionals and one thousand donors, companies, and NGOs
15. [Disasters Emergency Committee](#)
16. [The Eldis Community](#) site, a free-to-use online community where you can meet others involved in international development, discuss issues that are important to you and share useful resources
17. [Galway One World Centre](#), Education for Global Justice, working towards raising awareness and changing attitudes of people in Ireland regarding global development and justice issues
18. [GenARDIS](#) – Gender, Agriculture and Rural Development in the Information Society (in English and French)
19. [Global Focus Aotearoa](#), a specialist provider of information and education on global and development issues
20. [Global Humanitarian Assistance](#), designed to provide impartial and unedited access to data and information relating to humanitarian aid around the world
21. The Guardian UK's [Global Development Talk Point](#), a space to connect with other users and share your knowledge of development issues
22. Healthcare Information for All, [HIFA2015](#), a global email forum promoting the availability and use of relevant, reliable healthcare information for providers in low-income settings. HIFA2015 has more than 3,000 professional members in 157 countries worldwide.
23. [Hivos Knowledge Platform Communities](#), aims to debate, inspire, rethink and critically reflect on international cooperation in transition.
24. The Huffington Post's feed on [International Development](#)

25. [Humanitarian Dating](#), meet the world in one place
26. [International Council of Voluntary Agencies](#)
27. [INTernational DEvelopment NETwork](#) (Beta site), a professional networking site for students, scholars, professionals, academics, practitioners and activists dedicated to constructive change and development
28. [The Knowledge Brokers Forum](#), a collaborative space to promote knowledge sharing and dissemination around intermediary work in international development. It aims to foster a dynamic community for topical discussions, peer advice, and posting knowledge-related blogs.
29. [learningforsustainability.net](#), a practical resource for those who work with communities (in the wider sense of the term) to help them identify and adopt more sustainable practices
30. [Mary's Pence Making Connections](#), interactive website that allows people to deepen their involvement with the grassroots social justice movement throughout the Americas
31. [MobileActive.org](#), a global network of people using mobile technology for social impact
32. [Monitoring and Evaluation NEWS](#), a blog style website, news service, and [email list](#) focusing on developments in M&E methods relevant to development programmes with social development objectives. Managed by Rick Davies, since 1997, established in 2004 and now having 2600+ members worldwide.
33. [MojaLink](#) (Beta site), a professional and organizational network, international altruistic and development directory, and philanthropic communication platform, built to provide collaborative solutions to users and organizations
34. [New Tactics](#) in Human Rights, an online community of more than 2,500 human rights practitioners in more than 130 countries. Users have access to a database of over 190 specific and successfully-implemented human rights tactics. The website hosts peer-to-peer exchange through monthly Tactical Dialogues, forming an online global community of human rights advocacy.
35. [Organization Development Network](#), an OD International Professional Association
36. [Partos Plaza](#) – Netwerken Voor Internationale Samenwerking (in Dutch)

37. [Peace and Collaborative Development Network](#), a free professional networking site (with over 17,000 members from around the world) to foster dialogue and sharing of resources in international development, conflict resolution, gender mainstreaming, human rights, social entrepreneurship and related fields
38. [People in Aid Interactive](#), an online network for people management in the aid and development sector
39. [Practitioners' Network for European Development Cooperation](#)
40. [The Reality of Aid Network](#) – A pre-eminent Southern-led North/South Network on reforming aid policies and practices
41. [Silver Lining Creation Ry](#) is a not-for-profit social media organization based in Finland consisting of independent documentary makers, script writers, development activists, freelance writers and students.
42. [Sociologists Without Borders Think Tank](#), a global platform for reflection and discussion among sociologists, other social scientists, students, activists, journalists and others who aim to promote human rights, equality, and global and local justice.
43. [Sportanddev.org](#), an international platform and an online resource and communication tool for all those with an interest in Sport and Development
44. [Society for International Development Forum](#)
45. [Ubuntu Toolbox](#), a meeting place for those engaged in cross-border understanding, conflict resolution and promotion of diversity
46. [Water for People's Tap Portal](#), a social networking site to allow collaborative groups to have deeper conversations on relevant topics regarding water and sanitation
47. [WiserEarth.org](#), the social network for sustainability
  - a. [The WiserEarth Directory](#) - The world's largest free and editable international directory of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and socially responsible organizations (over 110,000 in 243 countries, territories, and sovereign islands).
  - b. [WiserEarth Community](#) - A vibrant community of 41,000+ members making connections, sharing resources, solutions, jobs, and events. (Also includes groups, social movement taxonomy and local face-to-face gatherings.)



48. [Zunia.org](#), an online network for knowledge-sharing among development professionals worldwide. It has 60,000+ members and nearly 100,000 publications on a wide range of development issues. It is an information service provided by the [Development Gateway](#).

### **Learning Communities**

49. [Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action](#) (ALNAP), a sector-wide network which brings together the major actors involved in international responses to conflicts and natural disasters
50. [Evidence Based Policy in Development Network](#), a worldwide community of practice for think tanks, policy research institutes and similar organisations working in international development, to promote more evidence-based, pro-poor development policies.
51. [Knowledge Management for Development](#), a community of international development practitioners who are interested in knowledge management and knowledge sharing issues and approaches
52. [Learning in NGOs \(LINGOs\)](#), a consortium of over 55 international humanitarian relief, development, conservation and health organizations. LINGOs provides the latest learning technologies and courses from partners so non profits can increase the skill levels of their employees.
53. [Most Significant Change](#), a networking portal and clearing house for all Most Significant Change related information for the global community of practice. Supported by UNICEF India.
54. [North South Observatory \(IHP+Results\)](#), network for mutual monitoring and evaluation, analysis and debate of the International Health Partnership and Related Initiatives (IHP+)
55. [Outcome Mapping Learning Community](#), a virtual hub for you to share experiences, contact other users of Outcome Mapping, and have fun!
56. [Pelican Initiative](#): Platform for Evidence-based Learning & Communication for Social Change, this space seeks to bring together development practitioners from different disciplines, specialists and policy makers to explore: 1) evidence and learning for policy change, 2) learning in organisations and among partners, 3) society-wide learning among a multitude of stakeholders. The central question is: "How can we learn more from what we do while at the same time having the biggest possible impact on the social change processes in which we engage?"
57. ReliefWeb [Communities of Practice](#) (various topics offered)

58. [The SEEP Network](#), connecting global microfinance practitioners in a global learning community
59. [Socialbrite](#) a learning hub and sharing community that brings together top experts in social media, causes and online philanthropy to share insights about tools and best practices that advance the social good.
60. [Solution Exchange](#) is an initiative of the United Nations Country Team in India that offers communities of development practitioners a UN-sponsored space where they can provide and benefit from each other's solutions to the day-to-day challenges they face. We are connecting people who share similar concerns and interests, bringing them together virtually and face-to-face towards the common objective of problem-solving. As a member of one of our communities [in various sectors], you can proceed with the confidence that you are not reinventing the wheel.

### **Wikis**

61. [Akvopedia](#), the open water and sanitation resource
62. [Appropedia](#), a wiki site for collaborative approaches to sustainability, poverty reduction and international development. So far contributors have made 140,291 edits and uploaded 11,859 files.
63. [Global Scale](#), aiming to create a wiki resource for NGO practitioners where guidelines, lessons learned, tips, links and other help for 'scaling up' effective programs can be found
64. [My M&E](#), a wiki platform to share knowledge on country-led M&E systems worldwide. In addition to being a learning resource, My M&E facilitates the strengthening of a global community, while identifying good practices and lessons learned about program monitoring and evaluation in general, and on country-led M&E systems in particular.

### **Various LinkedIn Groups**

65. [Sustainable Development International Network](#) - MojaLink™ connects professionals around the world for collaboration. Non Government Organization, NGO, ONG, IGO, economic, community, poverty, social, non profit, sustainability, fair trade, co-op, microfinance, social public policy, green, change, health, environment, empowerment (~4,000 members)
66. [International Development](#) (~1,900 members)
67. [Base of the Pyramid](#) (~1,500 members)
68. [Monitoring & Evaluation Professionals](#) (~1,300 members)
69. [End Poverty](#) (~1,300 members)
70. [Inclusive Development Professionals](#) (~1,000 members)
71. [The NGO World](#) (~900 members)
72. [International Development Professionals](#) (~700 members, focused on growth of markets)

73. [Society of International Development](#) (~600 members)
74. [Sustainable Development Africa](#) (~500 members)
75. [Africa NGO Network](#) (~400 members)
76. [Rural Development Group](#) (~400 members)
77. [Aid Transparency](#) (~300 members)
78. [Development Marketplace](#) (~140 members)
79. [PMI International Development Community of Practice](#) (~110 members)

### **Research-Focused Networks**

80. [Global Development Network](#), a leading International Organization of developing and transition country researchers, policy and research institutes promoting the generation, sharing, and application to policy of multidisciplinary knowledge for the purpose of development (~8,000 members)
81. [Hii Dunia](#) aims to give everyone with knowledge or experience in the Development sector the opportunity to share their work in the form of academic research, papers or dissertations. Hii Dunia welcomes submissions from non-professional, semi-professional or wholly professional collaborations or projects.