Supporting knowledge transfer in a changing sector

Earlier this year, I caught myself frantically downloading as many documents as I could; trying to save years of work from evaporating as knowledge platforms were suddenly taken offline. Perhaps you did the same? I had cross-posted, but only to sister-web sites and much of this work is still not accessible. The loss of these knowledge products is significant, but it represents only one of the emerging challenges in knowledge transfer.

At a recent AGUASAN meeting hosted by the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC), I had a chance to ask the room to reflect on emerging challenges and opportunities in knowledge transfer. How do we ensure that knowledge transfer can respond to our changing sector?

Let's begin by drawing some boundaries about my terms. Firstly, I define knowledge as a collection of information (Grieves et al. 2024). This knowledge can be explicit, implicit and tacit (Nickols 2000). Sometimes knowledge is explicit in that is formally articulated in reports, guidance or other forms of documentation. Other times knowledge is tacit, in that it is personal and experiential such as leadership skills. In between these two forms of knowledge is implicit knowledge, which is not yet codified, but can be. Much of our sector's knowledge is stored implicitly.

Next, I see knowledge transfer as the process through which knowledge is synthesised and shared from one person, group, or organization to another, often reciprocally (Ward et al. 2009). This process ensures that valuable insights, skills, and information are synthesised and can be reused or adapted in new contexts. When this process is strategically managed within entities, I refer to this as Knowledge Management. When it is strategically managed across entity boundaries, I refer to this as Knowledge Brokerage (Graham et al. 2006; Ward et al. 2009). In particular, I am interested in how knowledge is transferred and taken up by practitioners (**Figure 1**).
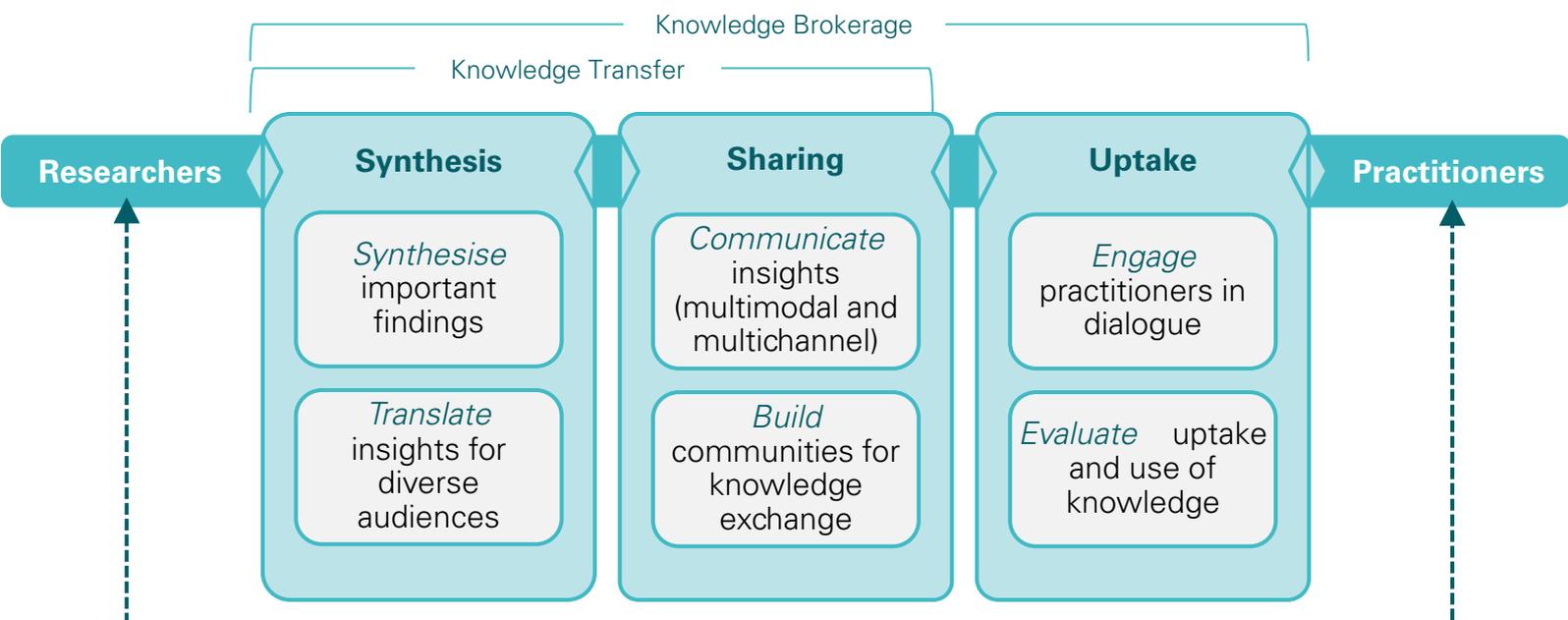

Figure 1. Working model of knowledge transfer and brokerage within Sandec

Here are the four biggest opportunities we identified for the WASH sector.

1. Respond to high turnover and impending retirements.
2. Explore different ways to strengthen capacity.
3. Think beyond projects.
4. Reflect on our need for innovation.

1 Respond to high turnover and impending retirements.	The WASH sector is plagued with high turnover of staff within government, NGOs, utilities, and research organisations (Barrington et al. 2025; Mwanza n.d.). In our discussion we identified that this is often related to low salaries, limited opportunities for growth, and a potential negative image of working in the WASH sector. Junior level staff turnover is particularly high. Additionally, many experienced researchers and practitioners are nearing retirement. This turnover and upcoming retirements surge is leading to a significant loss of explicit, implicit and tacit knowledge. → **An idea:** Strengthen purposeful mentorship and growth opportunities for WASH practitioners. The RWSN Mentoring Program, the RWSN Young Professionals Group, the Global WASH Cluster's Coaching and Mentorship Program are all great examples. How can we grow these types of programs and encourage more seasoned professionals to participate? → **An idea:** Actively promote fair salaries and encourage organisations to prioritise growth opportunities for (young) professionals in the WASH sector. → **An idea:** Consider formalizing research on this topic and supporting advocacy initiatives.
2 Explore different ways to strengthen capacity.	Capacity strengthening activities is one of the main ways that the WASH sector transfers knowledge. In our discussion we reflected on how capacity strengthening is more often than not a one-time session in a lecture style with an external 'expert'. Prioritizing hands-on practical capacity strengthening, reflecting on different styles of learning, and leveraging local capacity and knowledge is an important way to ensure that more structured knowledge transfer is applied and dynamic. → **An idea:** Amplify online courses such as Sandec's MOOCs and IRC's WASH Systems Academy that help to increase opportunities for more structured knowledge transfer. → **An idea:** Aim to align capacity strengthening activities with existing ways and structures of learning as the context demands as opposed to prescriptive one-time instances. For example, partnering with local training organisations and universities to leverage rather than duplicate learning structures. → **An idea:** Better understand the processes and challenges of capacity strengthening in the WASH sector.

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3 Think beyond projects	Within the WASH sector and international partnerships more broadly, most activities are constrained by funding and project cycles. This can reduce institutional growth and a lead to fragmentation of knowledge. Additionally, competition can lead to low incentives for knowledge sharing. Many knowledge platforms are project specific. In our brainstorming, we identified that many knowledge generation activities get stuck in projects as teams do not have time, capacity, or freedom to document and apply their learnings. → **An idea**: Explicitly budget and allocate resources for project learning, synthesis and sharing. Aim to share materials in multiple platforms for wide reach and uptake. → **An idea:** Embed local students within projects as paid interns to help ground activities and inspire the next generation.
4 Reflect on our need for innovation	It is undeniable that innovation is an important aspect of WASH work, however we also tend to reinvent the wheel. Sometimes this is done in pursuit of funding, but often this is not purposeful. It's just hard to manage all the stocks and flows of information, especially for teams who are less familiar with the sector (Kaupp 2015). The need for innovation is often in tension with fostering contextualised and grounded solutions. Perhaps we need to refine what we think of as innovation, moving away from an 'invention' style towards an evolutionary refinement style. → **An idea:** Actively use existing communities of practice such as RWSN and SuSanA to help understand what has already been done. Emerging systems such as WASH AI can also help teams to better interact with knowledge through chat functions. → **An idea:** Continue to strengthen mentorship programs and initiatives (see item 1)

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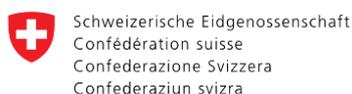
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