

Knowledge Management Maturity Analysis in a Finnish NGO's International Programme

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Abstract: While knowledge management (KM) and KM maturity have been widely studied in the private sector, literature on nonprofits remains limited. Consequently, literature on KM maturity in this sector remains limited. In nonprofits, including child rights NGOs, effective KM plays, however, a crucial role in maximizing impact, ensuring accountability and improving programme outcomes. This study assesses KM maturity in a Finnish child rights NGO's International Programme (IP). Objectives include measuring KM maturity, identifying existing practices and challenges, and exploring management's perspectives on improvement needs. A KM Maturity Model developed for the public sector was modified for this study. Interviews were conducted with four IP senior management team members, who rated KM-related statements on a five-point Likert scale and answered open-ended questions related to the statement themes. Responses were transcribed and analysed using thematic grouping, with frequency and median used for quantitative analysis. Findings show that while KM was a relatively new concept for the respondents, several KM practices were already in place. Identified strengths include strategic alignment of indicators with organisational goals, a positive attitude toward KM, and the use of extensive data products from the NGO's international headquarters. Key challenges include limited time for deeper KM integration and a lack of structured knowledge-sharing processes. Respondents emphasised the need to strengthen team-wide KM understanding and proposed improvements like increasing transparency in decision-making, fostering collaborative learning, and systematically developing KM structures. This study provides a foundation for advancing KM within the studied NGO in order to enhance organisational performance. Next steps include developing a detailed KM improvement plan and potentially extending the maturity analysis organisation-wide. The study demonstrates that the use of a suitable KM maturity model can be useful for NGOs and nonprofits. Beyond its implications for the studied NGO, the findings can help other nonprofits to take the step to assess KM processes and implement improvements, ultimately enhancing effectiveness and impact across the sector.

Keywords: Knowledge management, Maturity models, Nonprofits, NGOs

1. Introduction

In today's knowledge-intensive society, knowledge management (KM) plays an increasingly important role in the success of organisations, whether private, governmental or nonprofit. Although often used interchangeably, in this paper, the term nonprofit is used as a wider term referring to any organisation whose purpose is not tied with financial gain, such as those in the sectors of education, social welfare, research or similar. NGO (non-governmental organisation), on the other hand, is used for referring to nonprofits that work independently of governments nationally and often internationally on issues including development, humanitarian and social work. From this follows that all NGOs are nonprofit, but not all nonprofits are NGOs. In NGOs, knowledge management can often be considered quite narrowly to only focus on the access to information for enhanced efficiency and quality of work of employees.

The objective of this study was to assess the KM maturity level in a Finnish non-governmental organisation's (NGO) International Programme (IP). The organisation under study is a politically independent organisation that promotes children's rights in Finland and around the world and is accountable for its effectiveness and impact to both its donors and the children and adults whose lives it seeks to improve. As an organisation working in the development sector, the NGO has a long tradition of monitoring performance, but no actual assessment of knowledge management maturity level had been done prior to this. Assessing KM maturity in the context of child rights NGOs is highly relevant, as these organisations operate in complex and resource-constrained environments, where evidence-based decisions, and effective knowledge use and sharing are critical for improving accountability and achieving and following up long-term impact.

Knowledge management can be defined in different ways depending on the source and context. In literature related to KM in the context of nonprofits, KM is defined, for example, as a set of strategies designed to enable employees to efficiently access essential information, enhance productivity, and minimize errors (Harper and Trees, 2020). In other sources related to organisations' KM generally, KM is defined, for example, as the practice of utilizing an organization's shared knowledge to enhance its competitiveness (Teah, Pee and Kankanhalli, 2006)

and involving at least the processes of generating, storing/retrieving, sharing, and utilizing knowledge (Alavi and Leidner, 2001.)

For the purposes of this paper, KM is defined as a process that comprises two main components as illustrated in Figure 1. First, management with knowledge covers decision-making based on knowledge and presentation of information and conclusions based on data. The second component, management of knowledge, includes the collection, categorisation, sharing and storage of data as well as systems and recording practices.

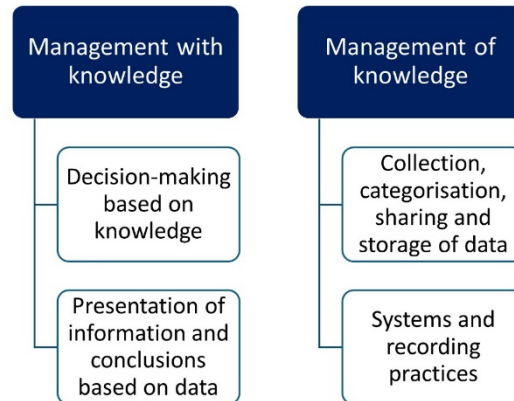


Figure 1: The concept of knowledge management. Adapted from Leskelä et al. 2019

The focus of KM in this paper is on the utilization of knowledge for decision-making and the structures and processes that facilitate this. Knowledge management is seen as a strategic approach to enhance organisations' possibilities of success. Khatibian, Hasan ghohoi pour and Abedi Jafari (2010) define KM maturity models (KMMMs) as frameworks that outline the levels of growth an organization undergoes while improving its knowledge management structures and processes. KMMMs offer organisations a tool to systematically document the knowledge management development process by evaluating how it is defined, managed, and regulated (Khatibian, Hasan ghohoi pour and Abedi Jafari, 2010, see also Jääskeläinen et al., 2022). Different KMMMs have been proposed, but no one established model exists for assessing an organisation's KM maturity (ibid.) By carrying out a KM maturity analysis, organizations can comprehensively evaluate and understand their KM status quo and obtain an insight into KM areas needing improvement (Akhavan and Philsoophian, 2018).

For NGOs, maturity models can offer a structured approach to identify gaps, enhance learning across programmes and locations, and systematise the use of knowledge for both operational and strategic decision-making. Literature around KM maturity models and analyses in the nonprofit sector or in child rights organisations in particular, is, however, scarce. Gunning (2014) studies information process maturity in the NGO sector from grant writers' perspective, while Mikovic et al. (2019) explore the impact of social capital in NGOs' knowledge and propose a mathematical neural network approach for assessing their KM maturity. Hume and Hume (2008, 2016) suggest that KM frameworks for nonprofits need to be tailored to their unique missions and operational structures as well as to take into account the size of the nonprofit. Akhavan and Philsoophian (2018) report an empirical KM maturity evaluation on a research centre in the electronics sector, while Harper and Trees (2020) explain the benefits of effective knowledge management for nonprofits and offer tools and guidance how nonprofits can start to leverage KM. Cultural and organizational readiness are reported to affect achieving higher KM maturity both in NGOs and corporate-like nonprofit entities (Moreno-Monsalve and Delgado-Ortiz, 2021). Besides the KM maturity analyses mentioned above, the literature review did not reveal any empirical KM maturity analyses focused specifically on child rights NGOs or addressing how KM maturity influences strategic decision-making in nonprofit contexts. This highlights a clear gap that this study seeks to address. In sum, the limited empirical research on KM maturity in nonprofits, and especially in child rights NGOs, demonstrates the need for context-specific insights. By assessing KM maturity in a child rights NGO's International Programme, this study supports evidence-based development of KM practices in a sector, where effective knowledge use can significantly enhance organisational impact.

2. Objectives

The study aimed to assess the current state of KM maturity within the NGO's International Programme team's work. The IP team has 21 members, including four members of the IP management team. The objective was to obtain a numerical assessment of KM across various KM areas, identify existing structures and practices

supporting KM within the IP team, examine challenges in KM, and explore potential improvements proposed by the IP management team. This analysis is intended to provide a basis on which the IP team can further develop its KM practices and to facilitate regular monitoring of the progress within the IP team.

3. Methods

The assessment employed the shorter version of the Information and Knowledge Management Maturity Model published by Finland's State Council in 2019 (Leskelä et al., 2019). Leskelä et al. (2019) consider that their maturity model, compared to previous ones, is a more comprehensive and holistic one and specifically designed for use in the public sector. The model was thus selected for this study due to it being a holistic, tested approach designed for use in public sector-like environments. It offered a structured yet adaptable framework suitable for assessing the KM practices of a child rights NGO. The original, full version of the model assesses KM maturity by means of 102 statements. The full version also includes statements relating to the satisfaction experienced for each area of assessment based on subjective evaluation. As in the original measurement of KM maturity with this model, the statements were designed so as to be rated on a five-point Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) with "Not able to answer" also provided as an answering option. The shorter version of the analysis model evaluates KM across ten key areas and features twenty statements covering each area. It does not include statements related to satisfaction. (Leskelä et al., 2019.)

The components of KM assessed in the maturity analysis were the following, as described in the shorter version of the maturity model (Jääskeläinen et al., 2019):

- Vision and strategy (3 statements)
- Governance and organisation (3 statements)
- Information needs (2 statements)
- Information acquisition (1 statement)
- Information organisation and storage (3 statements)
- Information products (1 statement)
- Knowledge sharing (1 statement)
- Knowledge usage (2 statements)
- Measures (3 statements)
- Outcomes (1 statement)

The individual statements were tailored to align with the NGO's IP team's operations and tested by conducting one interview, after which the statements were slightly modified further. Data were collected through interviews with all four members of the IP senior management team. The selected four participants collectively oversee the International Programme team's different work streams: Programme Development and Quality, Institutional Portfolio and Institutional Partnerships. The participants were chosen for their comprehensive oversight and direct responsibility for strategic and knowledge-based decisions within the programme. In preparatory discussions with the IP team management, it was assessed that interviews, together with a numerical assessment, would be able to generate a more thorough understanding of the team's KM maturity level compared to a numerical assessment alone. At the same time, the management wanted to limit the interviews to the senior management team, as it was assessed that they would be the ones with sufficient and most relevant knowledge around KM for the purposes of the study. The IP senior management team members interviewed represented different domains of the IP team functions providing equal representation of the different functional domains. It was also considered that carrying out interviews with all team members would have been too time consuming for the purposes of the study. Due to a lack of a common understanding of KM in the organisation, it was felt that having all team members take the numerical assessment might also have been of little value added.

During the interviews, carried out via MS Teams, the researcher read out each KM-related statement. The respondents verbally rated the statements on a five-point Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), and "Don't know" was also an answering option. Only one "Don't know" response was received, and it was excluded from the calculation of the median values. While the Likert scale allows for capturing participants' attitudes toward KM structures and practices, it is recognised that this method reflects perceptions rather than objective reality. Results should therefore be interpreted as indicative of perceived maturity and used primarily as a basis for qualitative analysis and for identifying areas for developing implications for future development.

During the interviews the respondents also verbally answered open-ended questions, which asked the respondents for their justifications for each rating they had given, as well as for examples of good or bad practice and suggestions for improvement. The responses to the open-ended questions were used for gathering examples of knowledge management practices, challenges, and areas for improvement. The duration of the interviews was between 40 and 53 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic grouping. For quantitative data analysis of the rating scores, frequency and median scores were used. Given the small sample size, the numerical data primarily serves as a supplementary reference to qualitative insights, providing a concrete baseline against which the organization can track its future progress in KM.

4. Results

The assessment revealed both areas of strength and weaknesses in the organisation's KM structures and practices. Figure 2. shows that the components of *Measures* and *Outcomes* both scored the highest possible median (5), indicating a mature level of KM in those areas. The areas of *Governance and organisation* as well as *Information products* were the ones with the lowest median (2), indicating a relatively weak rating compared with the other areas of assessment. The medians for the rest of the components were between these two extreme ends situated fairly close to each other with the medians being either 3.5 or 4 for all the other KM components.

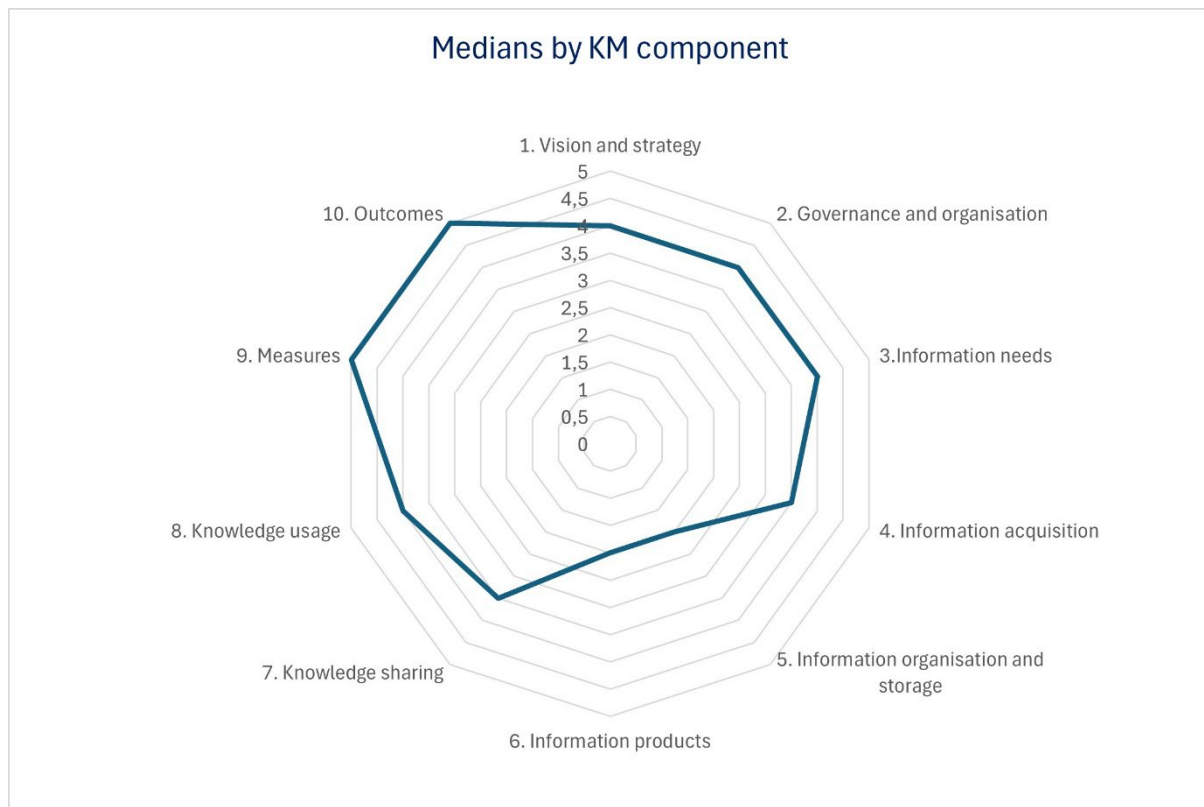


Figure 2: Medians by each KM component assessed

When examining individual statements, there were three statements that were rated unanimously by the respondents with the highest score, 5, see Table 1. below. The statements were related to the positive attitude towards KM in the IP team, indicators being directly linked with the strategy and KM practices increasing the effectiveness of the International Programme.

Table 1: Individual statements with the highest medians.

KM Component	2. Governance and organisation		9. Measures		10. Outcomes	
Statement	There is a positive attitude towards KM in the IP team		Our indicators are directly linked with the strategy as it is linked to the International Programme		KM practices increase the effectiveness of the International Programme	
Median	5		5		5	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Strongly agree	4	100	4	100	4	100
All	4	100	4	100	4	100

The statements with the lowest median were found under the KM components with the lowest overall medians, see Table 2. All respondents somewhat disagreed with the statement that the IP team has a platform or system in use that integrates KM. The second statement with the lowest median was related to the IP management having a dashboard solution adaptable to its needs. This statement divided the respondents' opinions receiving ratings from somewhat agree to somewhat disagree.

Table 2: Individual statements with the lowest medians

KM Component	5. Information organisation and storage		6. Information products	
Statement	The IP team has a platform or system in use that integrates knowledge management		The IP team has a management dashboard solution adaptable to its needs	
Median	2		2	
	n	%	n	%
Strongly disagree	0	0	2	50
Somewhat disagree	4	100	0	0
Neither agree or disagree	0	0	1	25
Somewhat agree	0	0	1	25
Strongly agree	0	0	0	0
All	4	100	4	100

In open-ended questions interviewees highlighted as key structures supporting KM the availability of the various information products and systems of the organisation's international headquarters and accessible to the Finnish NGO under study. Additionally, interviewees identified as a strength the collection and utilisation of robust data on the effectiveness of different thematic approaches, for example, child protection and child-sensitive social protection. This aligns with the high ratings given by the respondents to the statement assessing the connection between indicators and strategy.

"As in many other organisations that work in development cooperation [...] there is a very long tradition of firstly, collecting data on the effectiveness of our work and the results we achieve, and then trying to take it into account in the redefinition of the objectives of our work..." (Translated from Finnish), Respondent 2

Challenges were identified, for example, in the areas of information sharing and general knowledge and understanding around KM.

"Maybe we don't really know, maybe haven't fully internalized [...] that [...] knowledge management, how could it improve our work. We have never discussed this topic, the potential it has." (Translated from Finnish), Respondent 3

The interviewees also recognised insufficient time available for KM-related tasks as well as the integration of information from different sources as challenging.

The respondents identified several areas for development, including enhancing understanding of KM's possibilities, improving information-sharing processes, and fostering a culture of shared learning. More effective use of the various data products provided by the NGO's international headquarters was also mentioned as a quick and easy way to improve knowledge sharing and use.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The assessment of KM-related statements from the maturity analysis, along with qualitative data, indicate that KM is still a relatively new concept within the organisation's IP team. The interviewees themselves highlighted this both before and during the discussions. However, while the term "knowledge management" may not be widely used, the IP team already has structures and practices that support KM. One key development need identified by the respondents was to enhance understanding of KM and explore its potential within the team. The respondents also welcomed the topic being addressed through the KM maturity analysis and expressed interest in further efforts to advance KM practices in the organisation.

A comprehensive report detailing the findings of the analysis was prepared for the NGO's IP team to support the continued development and monitoring of KM. The report provides a foundation for creating a concrete action plan to enhance KM practices. Next steps proposed for the NGO include discussing the report findings and recommendations in detail and organising a workshop with the relevant team members for prioritising the KM improvement actions, responsibilities and timelines together with the team. A joint workshop would provide the possibility for the whole team to participate and take ownership of the actions agreed. The recommendations also include setting clear indicators and a monitoring framework for the KM action plan. Key indicators for the organisation to follow up in the implementation of the action plan could include assessing awareness and understanding of KM through periodic pulse surveys, tracking the number and quality of knowledge-sharing activities and events, monitoring relevant user statistics of the key dashboards from the NGO's international headquarters, where possible, and regularly checking in on the perceived value of the KM improvements through team reflections.

The variation in maturity levels across measured KM components suggests that targeted interventions are needed. For instance, the low scores in *information organisation and storage* point to the need for clearer responsibilities, ownership structures, and coordination mechanisms in KM-related processes. Likewise, the low maturity in *information products* reflects a need to enhance the accessibility, integration, and usability of data products to better support decision-making. Concrete first actions could include setting up a process and responsibilities for the analysis, sharing and use of the data products provided by the NGO's international headquarters. Actions could also involve, for example, appointing a KM focal point or integrating KM roles more explicitly into team responsibilities. In order to improve on the *information products*, the organisation could consider taking into use an application or software such as Power BI or other business intelligence application that would allow building meaningful data dashboards. This would require investments in product licences, training and staff time, but would bring with it a potential for highly improved management decision-making.

The emerging awareness of the importance of KM in the organisation can be transformed into tangible actions to strengthen KM practices. The action plan should address gaps in understanding through training and capacity-building activities tailored to the organisation's context. Organisation of trainings and information sessions on KM could help to achieve a common understanding of KM in the team and the organisation as a whole. Short orientation sessions, peer learning, and examples from similar organisations can support the internalisation of KM concepts and practical tools and help to clearly define the benefits of KM for the organisation's daily work. Identifying practical use cases of KM and linking KM activities directly to the team's objectives could help bring KM from the conceptual level to concrete actions in the team.

Fostering a culture that values shared learning is critical to long-term KM success. Encouraging open dialogue about lessons learned, creating regular spaces for exchange, and highlighting examples of good practice within the team are key starting points. Concrete practices may include allocating time in team meetings for reflection, establishing informal "learning hubs" around common themes, or documenting and sharing insights from key projects. Leadership also plays an essential role in modelling knowledge-sharing behaviours and acknowledging contributions that advance organisational learning. By embedding shared learning as a routine part of team practices and reinforcing its value, the organisation can build a more collaborative and adaptive KM culture over time.

Additionally, the maturity model tested in this study could be used in the future for a more extensive baseline analysis of the organisation's overall KM maturity status, serving as a basis for broader improvement efforts.

Much like for this study, which focused on the IP team, the questions can be adapted to suit the different units of the organisation, including projects and development, service provision, and different support functions such as communications, marketing, fund-raising, IT, and HR. Each unit could assess its own KM practices based on relevant dimensions, enabling decentralised yet consistent evaluations across the organisation. By repeating the maturity analysis regularly, teams could track their own development, identify persistent gaps, and reflect on the effects of KM interventions. The results of the analysis could also be used for cross-team benchmarking and could help prioritise organisation-wide support, such as training or system improvements. When embedded into organisational review and planning cycles, the maturity analysis could become a structured feedback mechanism that enables strategic learning, adaptation, and performance improvement across the whole NGO.

The approach used as well as the findings and recommendations of the KM maturity analysis in the IP team could thus serve as a kick-start for an organisation-wide process, leading to the development of a comprehensive organisational KM strategy aligned with the organisation's overall strategy. KM should not be a parallel or separate function, but rather embedded into strategic planning, resource allocation, job descriptions, and objectives setting at the organisational, team and staff member levels. When KM is derived from strategy and integrated in this way, it will directly support the achievement of strategic goals.

Previous research suggests that KM maturity analyses can enhance organisational performance by outlining optimal operational characteristics, which often result in improved satisfaction and performance at the workplace (Jääskeläinen et al., 2022). In the context of the NGO studied, improvements in KM could support clearer coordination of existing knowledge flows, enhanced accessibility of data products, and more consistent application of insights across teams to respond effectively to changing partner or community needs. These changes, in turn, can contribute to more effective programming and increased impact for children and families. Furthermore, having clearly defined knowledge-sharing processes and easier access to relevant information can increase staff motivation, role clarity and team cohesion, which can lead to improved staff satisfaction and retention. Better KM can also reduce duplication of effort, streamline workflows, and improve accountability.

Beyond its implications for the studied NGO, the findings of this study can serve as an example that can encourage other nonprofits to assess their own KM processes, recognise potential gaps, and implement strategies for improvement. It also illustrates that the KMMM used in this study, although targeted towards the public sector, is also suitable and can be adapted for other contexts, such as use in NGOs, encouraging similar organisations to assess their KM practices and begin structured improvements. Sharing these insights more broadly could contribute to a culture of knowledge sharing within the nonprofit sector itself. Ultimately, these insights can contribute to improved effectiveness and greater impact in the nonprofit sector.

Ethics declaration: This study involved human participants but did not require ethical clearance, as it did not involve sensitive data, personal risk, or ethically sensitive topics. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, and participation was entirely voluntary.

AI declaration: After the study and results were ready, an AI tool (ChatGPT 4o) was used to generate ideas for recommendations for the NGO for further developing KM in the organisation. The ideas suggested by the AI were used only as inspiration for formulating the final recommendations presented in the Discussion and conclusions section of the paper. AI was also used for the purposes of language refinement, and to ensure coherence in academic writing. AI was not used for other purposes. All AI-generated content was critically evaluated, revised, and validated by the author to ensure accuracy, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives.

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