**The role of knowledge integration in shaping the capabilities and success of a charity:**

**An in-depth case study analysis**

## **1. Introduction**

According to the knowledge-based view (Nonaka, Toyama, & Hirata, 2015; Takeuchi, 2013), the strategic use of the distinctive knowledge available to an organisation is critical to its success and sustainability. Numerous scholars contend that this increasingly applies to charities and other third sector organizations ([Bushouse & Sowa, 2012](#_ENREF_3" \o "Bushouse, 2012 #921); Hume & Hume, 2008; Lettieri, Borga & Savodelli, 2004), with many of these organizations seeking to better achieve their charitable goals and compete for public support ([Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2014](#_ENREF_35); Ragsdell, 2016). Unlike firms, charities do not seek to manage the knowledge available to them to enhance the interests of firm owners or shareholders, but instead those of their supporters and the needs of their beneficiaries (Hansen, Kergozou, Knowles & Thorsnes, 2014), who focus on very different outcomes (Haslam, Schafer & Beaudet, 2017). However, we continue to know relatively little about the management of knowledge in charities or how a charity’s workforce integrates and uses the knowledge available to them to support the strategic success of the charity (Samoff & Stromquist, 2001), which we urgently need to rectify if we are to aid in the realization of their worthy goals and the interests of their stakeholders ([Rasula, Vuksic, & Stemberger, 2012](#_ENREF_46" \o "Rasula, 2012 #922)), particularly given the rapid emergence of successive crises.

Thus, we explore how knowledge integration (KI) influences the capabilities of a charity and its workforce and the outcomes of their interventions. We do this by investigating the following research questions. How does the integration and application of knowledge contribute to the capabilities of the charity and its workforce? And, how do these capabilities enhance the strategic effectiveness of their interventions?

To address these questions, we conducted an in-depth case study of a large international development charity actively embracing knowledge management. Rich original data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews (n=42), organizational documentation, and participant observation. The interview and documentary data were analysed using a template-based approach and triangulated with insights from participant observation.

The findings enable important contributions to the strategic management and effective use of knowledge in charitable organisations by empirically uncovering how a more coherent and structured approach knowledge management could enhance the focus, efficiency, flexibility and relevance of its actions and those of its members. Accordingly, we advance a new integrated schema to meet the goals of charities and their stakeholders for broader application and testing by charities and future researchers.

The paper is structured as follows. Relevant literature examining the integration of knowledge and its role in supporting the strategic effectiveness of charitable and third sector organizations is reviewed in the next section, which provides the basis for the key research questions investigated in the study presented. The research design is then explained and justified. After which, the novel findings and model generated from the case study are presented and discussed, followed by propositions stemming from the research findings and then our conclusions.

### **2. Integrating and applying knowledge through practices and behaviours**

As argued by [Hadjimichael and Tsoukas (2019)](#_ENREF_50), the knowledge used by an organization is dispersed between its members and systems. The diffuse nature of this knowledge can mean that organizations incur huge costs and effort in locating, selecting, and applying knowledge to create value ([Govender & Perumal, 2011](#_ENREF_18)). Despite this, knowledge from various sources and locations has to be disseminated and applied in a coordinated way to accomplish organizational tasks ([Grant, 2013](#_ENREF_19)), because this integration contributes to the achievement of strategic objectives ([Fugate et al., 2009](#_ENREF_15)).

Recent research findings demonstrate that the exploitation of knowledge positively contributes to the organizational effectiveness and economic sustainability of SMEs, which like charities, experience resource scarcity, particularly when this relationship is managed in a structured manner to achieve coherent performance goals (Cardoni, Zanin, Corazza & Paradisi, 2020; [Centobelli, Cerchione, & Esposito, 2019](#_ENREF_2); Zia, 2020) This builds on the arguments of scholars adopting a knowledge-based view (KBV), who contend that an organization’s capabilities depend on its ability to integrate individuals’ specialized knowledge to achieve sustainable success (Grant [2013](#_ENREF_21)).

Different terms are used to describe KI (see Best et al., 2008), but they encompass similar activities. Following Haddad and Bozdogan (2009: 11), KI is defined here as “the process of absorbing and combining shared knowledge with existing knowledge to develop organizational capabilities and apply this knowledge and capabilities to organizational tasks”. This involves the willingness and ability of individuals to share their knowledge (Gibbert & Krause, 2002 as cited in McNeish & Mann, 2010: 20), their recognition of the value of new knowledge and its absorption and combination with their existing knowledge ([Cohen & Levinthal, 1990](#_ENREF_7)), which in turn enhances their problem solving capabilities ([Grant, 2013](#_ENREF_25)).

The knowledge-based view (KBV) literature has provided important insights into KI processes. However, the focus has primarily been on knowledge integration at an organizational level, but this cannot be separated from integration at a micro level. This reinforced by the knowledge integration and translation processes identified in Nonaka’s (1990) SECI model and McElroy’s framework (2003). However, we need to gain greater deeper empirical insight into how knowledge integration and application contributes to the strategic effectiveness of an organization and its interventions, particularly outside business settings.

Some proponents of the KBV view KI as a process in which the effective use of mechanisms leads to successful KI and application ([Moreno-Luzón & Begoña Lloria, 2008](#_ENREF_38); [Felin & Foss, 2009](#_ENREF_11)). Such mechanisms include *directions* such aswritten regulations, procedures, and instructions for work and *organizational* *routines* likerepetitive patterns of interdependent actions in an organization. However, a variety of factors complicate KI, including the integration of individual behaviours, organizational practices, and informal interactions.

Hence, we see KI by an organisation and its workforce as a process that incorporates an interdependent and complementary sequence of steps with knowledge translation taking place throughout (Sjödin, Frishammar & Thorgren, 2019): (i) knowledge sharing; (ii) knowledge absorption; and (iii) knowledge (re)combination. As the first step in the KI process, knowledge sharing (KS) refers to the willingness and ability of individuals to articulate, share and translate their knowledge (Gibbert & Krause, 2002 as cited in McNeish & Mann, 2010: 20). Previous research suggests that the propensity to share knowledge is influenced by the relationships between individual and organizational interests and behaviours. For individuals, this includes the degree to which they demonstrate competitive behaviours, self-interest or opportunism (Seba & Rowley, 2010). Organizations typically encourage KS by fostering common visions and mutual trust and action (Ng, 2020; Politis, 2003), and/or using incentives (Bock, 2005) and ICT tools (Zhang & Ng 2013). However, formal hierarchical and bureaucratic relations and structures can impede the success of these efforts (Bloice & Burnett, 2016; Ragsdell, 2009).

Knowledge sharing take places within organizations, but also permeates organizational boundaries and can include external stakeholders who have different cultures and communicate in varied ways, requiring the translation of knowledge (Annosi, Marchegiani & Vincentini, *forthcoming*; Major & Cordey-Hayes, 2000). This may be done formally and/or informally through Communities of Practice, which can play an important role in facilitating broader knowledge sharing and exploitation ([Wenger, 2011](#_ENREF_6)).

Knowledge absorption refers to the willingness and capacity of individuals to assimilate and use the translated knowledge shared with them (Argote, 2013; Balle, Olivera & Curado, 2020). Absorptive capacity is defined as *‘*the ability to recognize the value of new external information, assimilate it and apply it to commercial ends*’* (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990: 128). This is likely to be influenced by an individual’s prior knowledge and an organization’s communication structures, systems and routines (Jansens et al, 2005).

Knowledge combinationand recombinationcentres on the creation or development of fresh insights and understandings to generate new meanings or capabilities in performing organizational tasks ([Grant, 2013](#_ENREF_17)). Knowledge receivers combine new and existing translated knowledge to gain improved insight and understanding, which is then translated and applied to organizational goals to enhance performance and effectiveness (Mills & Smith, 2011). This includes the success of aid and development interventions (Samoff & Stromquist, 2001).

Some KI scholars assume that organizational capabilities are created when individual knowledge is integrated using KS mechanisms ([Grant, 2013](#_ENREF_19); [Wang & Wang, 2012](#_ENREF_52)). However, [Moreno- Luzón and Begona Lloria (2008)](#_ENREF_3) found an insignificant relationship between the standardization of work processes and knowledge creation and application.

### **2.1 Individual and organizational knowledge capabilities**

“Knowledge capabilities” (KC) are defined here as the ability of organizations and their members to realize value from the knowledge resources available to them ([Gold & Malhotra, 2001)](#_ENREF_17). KBV and organizational capability researchers such as Freeze and Kulkarni (2007) argue that there are strong bi-directional causal relationships between KI and KC at individual and organizational levels. KI leads to KC, and KC leads to KI. Based on this, it is likely that an organization’s knowledge creation and usage capabilities depend on how well its members absorb and use pertinent knowledge ([Smith, Collins, & Clark, 2005](#_ENREF_47)). In turn, this can influence the measured and/or perceived effectiveness of organizational outcomes (Mills & Smith, 2011).

### **2.2 The effectiveness of charitable organizations and their interventions**

Like all managers, those working for charities need to deliver strategic effectiveness (SE), due to the importance of this to its stakeholders including its patrons, volunteers and beneficiaries ([Maier et al., 2014](#_ENREF_35); [Mitchell, 2012](#_ENREF_37)). Although progress has been made in discerning the outcomes of organizational learning in firms (Argote, 2013), definitions of effectiveness for charities are not clear, as they have broad charitable goals, which are distinct from those of businesses ([Fowler, 2013](#_ENREF_13)).

Numerous scholars underscore the need for different criteria in the case of the SE of charities and third sector organizations. For example, [Lusthaus and Adrien (1998)](#_ENREF_32) argue that effectiveness refers to how well a charity can meet the requirements set down in its mission, goal, or purpose statements. [Edwards (1999)](#_ENREF_10) focuses on thebest possible use of NGOs’ limited resources to achieve the greatest impact. More recently, SE scholars have focused on a goal attainment model, with charitable effectiveness used as a conceptual anchor ([Lecy et al., 2012](#_ENREF_31" \o "Lecy, 2012 #906); [Mitchell, 2012](#_ENREF_37)). However, charitable goals often reflect negotiated values and priorities that are subjective and political, and so they can be difficult to specify and measure.

Many charities embrace multiple and competing goals that can be synergistic ([Alberti Fernando & Varon Garrido Mario, 2017](#_ENREF_1)). However, a common understanding of outcome accountability for charities includes achieving specific goals, accounting for the efficient stewardship and use of the resources endowed to them. Realizing value for their stakeholders entails meeting their needs with the limited resources available to them ([Sinclair, Hooper, & Ayoub, 2013](#_ENREF_5)). Indeed, influential stakeholders such as large donors can exert pressure on charities to focus on the efficient use of the resources extended to a charity and their accountabilities ([Sinclair et al., 2013](#_ENREF_5))

We adopt Mitchell’s (2012) charitable goals attainment model and view strategic effectiveness as perceived progress toward or the achievement of specific outcomes. Outcome accountability for charities includes achieving measurable goals, accounting for the resources endowed to them (efficiency or stewardship), being flexible so that they can meet changing needs, and remaining relevant to their stakeholders. This is in keeping with the criteria for evaluating development assistance adopted by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development ([Chianca, 2008](#_ENREF_5" \o "Chianca, 2008 #948)).

Although the SE of charities and third sector organizations has been examined from different perspectives ([Gold & Malhotra, 2001](#_ENREF_17)), how KI contributes to SE from the perspective of a charity’s workforce still requires further elucidation ([Kalling, 2003](#_ENREF_27" \o "Kalling, 2003 #425)). The study presented in this paper explores how knowledge integration and application processes connect with workforce and organizational knowledge capabilities and how knowledge capabilities contribute to the SE of their interventions.

## **3. Methodology**

An exploratory case study methodology was adopted to investigate KI and application processes in their natural setting from the perspective of practitioners themselves. A case study is an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon with its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2018). As KI and application are complex processes a case study provided the most appropriate fit for this research (Yin, 1981).

Six aid and development organizations were approached in the UK to participate in the study. We targeted well-established large charities because they typically engage with a wider range of stakeholders and types of expertise than smaller charities and they are more likely to have the capacity and resources to engage with formalized knowledge management systems (Perreira & Rankin, 2015), so would provide a rich context for the research. The findings are also likely to benefit smaller charities when adapted to reflect their circumstances.

Access was granted to one of the organizations based in London, which is an international development charity. It seeks to assist communities worldwide facing life-threatening emergencies due poverty, disease and climate change. It has been in operation for >50 years, works in >40 countries, and supports >400 partners who work with communities in developing countries across Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. In 2015–2016, it raised >£50 million and had >450 full-time employees and nearly 6000 volunteers (Annual Report 2016). The charity’s workforce included a wide age range, so enabled the inclusion of younger and older workers in the sample.

The case study organization provided an interesting and illuminating context for the research, because its strategy for success included the development of learning and KI programs. In 2004, it adopted a learning organizational model and in 2008 it set up a Program Learning Team within its Program Effectiveness Unit in the International Division to strengthen learning across its international programs. To improve KI, it subsequently made significant investments in its IT connectivity, tools, and associated databases. As one director said, “While our organization is half the size of X (X is a similar international development NGO), our learning and KM budget is twice that of X”.

Access to the research setting was obtained through a formal request made to the organizational director. The main focus of the empirical analysis was the in-depth study of informants’ perceptions of knowledge and how this knowledge was being applied at different levels and sub-units of the organization.

### **3.1 Data collection**

The primary data source was semi-structured interviews with personnel from relevant divisions occupying a range of hierarchical levels and responsibilities (see Table 1). A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select informants to enable us to fulfil our research objectives and questions ([Teddlie & Yu, 2007](#_ENREF_48)). This helped us to gain rich and in-depth insights into individuals’ perceptions of KI and SE. The first author conducted 42 interviews lasting an average of 54 minutes each. Of 42 participants, 35 were from the headquarters in London (26 from the International Division, six from the Organizational Development and People Division, five from the Communities and Supporters Division, three from the Director’s office, and two from the Advocacy and Policy Division). The other seven informants were from three regional offices (three from Africa, three from Asia and the Middle East, and one from Latin America and the Caribbean). All of the interviews took place at the organization’s headquarters in London, except for two interviews conducted via Skype with notes taken. Interview labels are used to protect the participants’ anonymity.

[Table 1 here]

The interviews thoroughly explored KI, KC, and SE. The participants were asked to elaborate on what knowledge meant to them and why and how knowledge sharing and integration took place in the organization. Following this, they were asked to explain how organizational hierarchies, management initiatives, and informal social interactions within the organization impacted knowledge flows across the organization’s operations. They were then asked to explain how they absorbed and unified shared knowledge with their existing knowledge to enhance their development knowledge and capabilities. Lastly, they were asked what effectiveness meant to them and how KI and KC influenced different aspects of SE. Please see Appendix 1 for the interview schedule. All of the interviews were recorded with the informed consent of the participants.

Twenty-one organizational documents were examined to contextualize and triangulate the interview data ([Creswell, 2018](#_ENREF_8)). They were included as part of the data collection and analysis to validate the information from the semi-structured interviews. They provided additional evidence and confirmed and explained the systems in place ([Jick, 1979](#_ENREF_26" \o "Jick, 1979 #209); Yin, 1981). In each interview, the informants referred to one or more of the documents, corroborating the relevance of these documents to their actions and understandings.

The first author participated in six staff briefings and two International Development briefings. This enabled the researcher to observe actual practices and increase the understanding developed, as the participants could be observed when they were involved in actual KI and application practices. The participant observation continued for two years, with progress monitored through regular visits twice per week as a volunteer. This provided valuable long-term insights into the organization’s KI practices and SE.

### **3.2 Data analysis**

A thematic template-based analysis of the entire data set was undertaken (King, 2012). Template analysis involves developing a coding template that summarizes important themes identified in a data set and organizes them in a meaningful and useful manner. The list of themes or codes developed provided a flexible structure, which reflected the study’s aims and research questions, and the concepts identified in the literature review.

Four steps were followed as part of this rigorous process. First, preliminary coding was carried out.Recurring words, themes, and core meanings in the textual data were examined and classified into categories ([Patton, 2002](#_ENREF_40)). The analysis revealed fresh constructs identified in the data ([Mabey & Finch-Lees, 2008](#_ENREF_33)).

Second, this initial template was applied to 11 of the interview transcripts to code the participants’ responses and to identify gaps and patterns. This involved clustering preliminary codes by reordering and recategorizing the themes in the emerging data structure, which was reviewed by the second author to enhance the inter-rater reliability of the analysis. Third, the template was then applied to all of the interview transcripts and refined as part of an iterative process of adding new codes, deleting redundant codes, merging codes, and changing code levels. The examination of the organisational documentation and observational notes aided in crosschecking the analysis and interpretation of the interview data. The analysis was deemed complete when no new themes were discerned, and all sections of the individual accounts related to the research questions were coded and categorized in sufficient detail. Please see figure 1 for a graphic depiction of the coding structure and process. Fourthly, the frequency of the themes in the participants’ accounts was enumerated to indicate the consistency of a particular theme.

[Figure 1 here]

Great care was taken in the data analysis to ensure full engagement with the informants’ accounts and the adoption of a systematic approach to limit bias and subjectivity. This was supported by the triangulation of the entire data set drawn from multiple sources (interviews, organizational documents, and observation). The findings are presented in line with the themes identified using data from these sources to exemplify each of the main themes ([King, 2012](#_ENREF_28)).

## **4. Findings**

Three main findings emerged from the integrated template analysis. First, in line with existing understanding, the integration of development-focused knowledge occurred across three stages: (i) knowledge sharing, (ii) knowledge absorption, and (iii) knowledge (re)combination. Second, knowledge abilities were developed across the charity’s operating sites through these stages. Drawing on the participants’ accounts, these abilities included appropriately interpreting knowledge, synthesizing and incorporating relevant past learning, and contextually applying this to specific organizational activities. The phrase “knowledge capabilities” encapsulate these abilities, because the participants’ accounts revealed that they related to the abilities and skills of individuals to interpret and use knowledge in conscious, effective, and sustainable ways to improve SE. According to the participants, various aspects of KI led to improved knowledge capabilities. Third, KC influenced the organization’s SE with respect to the focus[[1]](#footnote-1), efficiency, flexibility, and relevance of its aid and development interventions.

The case study findings are divided into three sections in line with the literature review and the interrelationship between KI, KC, and SE discerned in the qualitative data analysis. The first section explains the process of KI and its application. The second, how this contributes to knowledge capabilities. The third section then connects this to the strategic effectiveness of the charity based on the interview, documentary and observational data.

### **4.1 KI across three stages**

The participants accounts reflected the attributes of knowledge identified in the literature reviewed,which are that knowledge is processed, interpreted, and applied information that is deeply understood and dynamically applied to accomplish individual and organizational objectives. For example, this included knowledge of successful local approaches to management and the fundraising challenges faced by the charity, as well as technical knowledge to facilitate the effective delivery of aid and development projects (i.e. environmental management and water development knowledge). The data underscored the importance of integrating these different types of knowledge by sharing, translating, absorbing and combining this knowledge through the channels used by the charity, its members and its external stakeholders. For example, the case organisation had a well-established HIV Community of Practice, where HIV-related knowledge was translated and shared across the charity and beyond. It also used surveys and informal interactions to capture external knowledge, particularly when seeking local knowledge in the range of different communities and cultures in which it operated.

The process of KI began when individuals willingly shared their expertise and knowledge (Ragsdell, Ortoll-Espinet & Norris, 2014). The participant observations and interviews revealed that the propensity to engage in knowledge-sharing behaviourswas influenced by individuals’ motives, perceptions, and characteristics. The motives identified in the case study data included recognition and positive feedback for knowledge sharing, which reinforced individuals’ self-confidence through triangulation and the constructive use of shared knowledge and the power and influence afforded to them.

Some of the participants were motivated to share their knowledge by the scope for feedback, recognition and constructive use of their knowledge. If they thought that their knowledge would be disregarded or used against their interests, they indicated that they were more likely to hoard it. This is because reciprocity influenced their knowledge sharing behaviours.

Individuals also shared their knowledge to triangulate the accuracy of their knowledge. If sharers received positive feedback from receivers, this encouraged them to continue sharing their knowledge with confidence. If they received negative feedback, they may seek more information before sharing their knowledge or decide to withhold it.

The ownership of development knowledge provided a source of power and sharing or retaining it offered influence over others. If a member of the organization was competitive or they perceived colleagues and the working environment to be competitive, they were less likely to share certain components of their knowledge.

Knowledge that was shared was disseminated internationally through formal knowledge governance practices, including working and management styles. Ways of working included shared norms, beliefs and local working practices that emerged from previous experience and guided the actions of organizational members in seeking to achieve organizational goals. For example, due to its significant growth, the organization had set out to devolve its decision-making processes. This was rooted in the principle of subsidiarity—where authority was delegated to lower organizational levels, giving individuals at these levels the autonomy to make decisions ([Marshall, 2008](#_ENREF_171)):

Centralized decision making at the Director or Senior Managers levels is no longer appropriate for a growing organization like ours. So, the authority has to be exercised in such a way that workers have sufficient liberty to use their capabilities to do whatever they can to achieve common goals. (Strategic Change Paper)

This devolved decision-making changed approaches to working and improved communication, consultation and collaboration between staff and managers at different levels*.* “Currently, knowledge is shared widely . . . and the way the organization works is much more [as a] partnership. Knowledge sharing is built in [to the] processes and procedures of the organization” (D1).

Such communicative, consultative, and collaborative ways of working were built into the organization’s processes and facilitated international knowledge sharing. An excerpt from one of the organizational documents is featured below.

Decentralizing the programme management, by opening overseas offices, has significantly improved the partners’ capacity to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate their work (Evaluation Report of the Partnership Programme Arrangement 2008-2011).

Given the geographical spread of the organization and its hierarchical nature, the flow of knowledge may have been affected by these various levels. However, the observation of staff interactions and analysis of the interviewees’ accounts and its strategic change document revealed that this was offset by the approaches adopted by managers:

Although our organization’s hierarchy seems to hinder knowledge sharing by blocking open communication between people at different levels in the organization, the control of knowledge depends on individuals managing the initiatives. The organization encourages networking and interaction outside line managers. (TA8)

Drawing on the accounts of the participants and the observation undertaken, a range of different management approaches was evident, fitting either a predominantly supportive or restrictive characterization.A supportive style facilitated knowledge sharing because line managers used mechanisms, such as informal communications, and involved more junior employees in most organizational activities: “It’s the attitude of managers that influences knowledge sharing, not the hierarchical structure” (H4). Future research ought to examine how hierarchical relations and management styles differ between profit and charitable organizational settings and their implications for the nature and degree of knowledge sharing.

Those adopting a more restrictive style used “communication rules to restrict knowledge sharing” (TA2). Instead of supporting knowledge sharing, they would “decide whether or not to pass the information down” (O3).Such an approach hindered international knowledge sharing because some line managers did not encourage interactions with or the participation of junior employees outside of formal structures: “Hierarchy affects knowledge sharing—not in the way we structure our organization, but it depends on how line managers cascade information” (TA2).

Our findings suggest that a supportive management style facilitated international knowledge sharing by moderating “hierarchical multi-layer structures” and de-emphasizing formal authority relationships, whereas a restrictive management style hindered knowledge sharing by emphasizing formal authority relationships. Thirty-nine of the participants were of the view that a supportive style contributed to enhanced knowledge integration and strategic effectiveness.

Local knowledge was shared informally through purposeful conversations, while spontaneous conversations built relationships. Thirty-seven informants stated that most knowledge sharing took place during purposeful conversations because this encouraged planned, repeated, and deep dialogue between knowledge providers and receivers.

Knowledge cannot be shared in initial conversations—only information can be shared in that context because I may not share my insights in a random conversation. For conversation to share knowledge, it must be purposeful, planned, and scheduled, and there must be repeated dialogue and follow up (D3).

These types of exchanges took place in informal reference groups, which were formed within the organization’s international hierarchy, sometimes bypassing formal hierarchies and/or moving laterally across the organization. It was commonplace for individuals with shared interests to come together as informal reference groups for a variety of purposes, including issues related to their work, personal, or social lives: “I like interacting with people [who share] a common view with me, similar personality types, and those I trust” (TA6).

Most informal reference group members held shared interests and had established trusting relationships. The flow of knowledge between these international group members was reportedly smooth, and they possessed influencing power: “We have something that we call ‘influencing without authority,’ in which some individuals informally share their views and perspectives with the directors to influence as well as inform decisions” (O1).

Individuals’ absorption capacities were influenced by the history of their relationships and the relevance of the shared knowledge. The participant data suggested that long-term relationships between knowledge providers and receivers facilitated knowledge absorption because trust was built on the reliability and credibility of the provider’s knowledge. “To take in the knowledge shared with me, I consider the source of the information and previous history of similar work” (H4). In short-term relationships, the reliability and credibility of the provider’s knowledge was less likely to be established, so shared knowledge was less absorbed.

If knowledge receivers considered the knowledge shared with them to be coherent with their existing knowledge and valuable to them, they would be likely to assimilate and absorb it. However, if they doubted the relevance and value of the knowledge, they might disregard it: “I am selective and would like to identify areas related to my programme work . . . and see where [the knowledge] fits”(H6).

Absorbed knowledge needs to be combined with existing knowledge. “Knowledge combination” refers to the assimilation and internalization of knowledge to broaden, extend, and reframe an individual receiver’s knowledge. The constructs discussed above influenced KI processes both independently and through their interrelationships. Therefore, we do not consider the impact of individual constructs separately, but instead the cumulative influences of these constructs on international KI and its application.

**4.2 Developing knowledge capabilities in the charity**

To achieve the organization’s vision, it built individual and organizational knowledge capabilities by emphasizing the conscious, accessible, sustainable, and effective use of available knowledge. As mentioned in the previous section, the participants considered knowledge to be interpreted and applied information featuring dynamic and continuously evolving attributes. Some of the informants viewed KI and application as a learning process involving initial individual learning (knowledge sharing) and actual individual learning (knowledge absorption): “Learning is as such a generation of knowledge, and sharing of knowledge is probably the first half of the learning process” (IP2).

When knowledge was shared, translated and absorbed, learning occurred and knowledge was created and recreated. At the same time, the organization developed an accessible knowledge base that reduced the time needed to generate and use knowledge, and consolidate the collective memories created in the organization for future use by the whole organization.

The data set revealed that the use of knowledge was embedded in the day-to-day international activities of the organization, as various initiatives such as communicative, consultative, and collaborative ways of working were used to encourage the flow of knowledge. As a result, the patterns and consistency of knowledge use in the organization became clearer, and knowledge was more accessible and used more consciously: “The interactive ways of working and the sharing and integration of knowledge helped us to [recognize] patterns of work in which the efficiency of our work improved over time” (D2).

Emphasis on the sustainable use of knowledge was evident in the participants’ accounts and referred to the continuous development and use of knowledge in the organization. “If we share knowledge with each other, we avoid learning and forgetting and keep information for [a] longer time, which is an asset . . .” (IP3).This supports the proposal that KM should keep knowledge productive over time to deliver continuing strategic value to an organization ([Zyngier & Burstein, 2012](#_ENREF_58" \o "Zyngier, 2012 #14)).

**4.3 The implications of this integration for SE**

The ultimate objective of the organization’s KM practices was to improve the effectiveness of its development aims. As indicated in Figure 2, the main dimensions to SE for the participants and charity were meeting the requirements set down in its mission and goals (foci or focus), achieving the best possible use of the limited knowledge resources available to achieve the greatest impact on poverty and powerlessness (efficiency), adapting to common and collective problems and tackling poverty under changing developments (flexibility), and accomplishing activities and outcomes that have on-going importance to their stakeholders (relevance). The data indicated that knowledge capabilities positively contributed to these four major aspects of SE for charities and third sector organizations.

“Foci” relates to an organization’s ability to link knowledge application to its strategy and the purposes of its interventions.Most of the interviewees viewed the outcome of their work as the extent to which they used their knowledge to meet the requirements set down in the organization’s mission and goals. We refer to this as the “conscious use of knowledge.” The data emphasized the importance of enhancing the conscious use of knowledge in terms of individuals’awareness of when, where, and how they use the knowledge they can access (e.g., identifying the expertise and knowledge used as a first response to international humanitarian emergencies). This supports Mahdavi et al’s (2014) contention that increased mindfulness in knowledge application positively affects the reliability of KM and impacts performance.

“Efficiency” refers to making the best possible use of limited knowledge resources to achieve the greatest impact on poverty and powerlessness. This could be achieved byreducing the time needed to generate and use knowledge that enhances knowledge accessibility (e.g., this capability reduced the time needed to generate and process information during emergency calls and improved the organization’s international response times, making it a leader in the sector in this regard).In addition, incorporating the practices and insights of partners in the field and other charities into project planning and implementation improved project completion times: “When team members go into the field, they find tangible information and knowledge and get a better understanding of the situations on the ground. This improves [the] performance of projects” (H3). Within the organization, the humanitarian team was deemed to make the most effective use of the knowledge available to it due to the speed and success of its responses. Its achievements were recognized internally by members of the organization as well as publicly by the UK’s ‘Department for International Development’. The participants attributed its success to the supportive rather than restrictive approach adopted by its managers and the KC of staff in the team.

“Flexibility” entails quickly adapting to changing international situations and environments. The interview and documentary data revealed that project successes and failures were shared internally through project evaluation reports, communities of practices, various learning forums, and field trip information. The case organization was not only reliant on its knowledge base, but it was always looking out for the perspectives of its partners in developing countries and other civil service organizations. It engaged in continuous knowledge creation, recreation, and retention for long-term use: “Knowledge integration is a different way of learning that includes learning from our users; it supports continuous creativity and innovation” (T2). To maintain the flexibility of its operations, the organization continuously identified and analysed the root causes of poverty and other emerging issues with partner organizations in developing countries: “In humanitarian emergency and development work, everything changes all the time—culture is always changing. You do not have a perfect model. For continuous improvement and adaptation, we need to have shared knowledge” (TA8). The capability to integrate and apply its available knowledge in a planned and sustainable way helped the organization to adapt to common and collective problems and to tackle poverty in the context of changing developments.

“Relevance” involves accomplishing activities and outcomes that have on-going importance to stakeholders. This includes using knowledge to affect organizational tasks and enhance conscious knowledge use or mindfulness. These activities and outcomes were of on-going importance to stakeholders, such as changing needs and tackling poverty in changing local conditions. Such knowledge capabilities support creativity and continuous innovation to meet the relevant stakeholder needs on an on-going basis: “the capability to use knowledge defines the parameters of engagement in any activities. For example, in drought appeals, we decide the level of response based on the shared and analysed information” (IP2).

The study’s findings support Chalmers and Balan-Vnuk’s (2012) argument that charities and third sector organizations have a unique mediating function in international social innovation by configuring internal and external absorptive capacity routines by combining user and technological knowledge flows. In the existing KM literature, knowledge is typically categorized as tacit or explicit at an individual and organizational level. Knowledge was viewed by the participants to be processed, interpreted, and applied information. This was because most knowledge was embedded in the organization’s processes and procedures and seen in relation to its interpretation and application. This suggests that knowledge in an organization is conceptualized as a holistic variable that is dynamic and continuously evolving. This is due to the interchangeability of the dimensions to knowledge (tacit and explicit) and categories (individual and organizational) ([Crane, 2013](#_ENREF_7); Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2019).

## **5. Discussion**

Drawing on our findings, we advance Figure 2 to illustrate the relationships identified through the study. It depicts our analysis of how KI processes, such as those identified in the organization fed into improved KC and SE at the charity drawing on the data gathered through the study. As an additional validity and reliability check, this diagram was presented to a sample of the participants for review to ensure that it accurately reflected their accounts and views.

[Figure 2 here]

As can be seen from the diagram, the KI process contributed to the case study’s KC first by synthesizing knowledge from various sources and consciously directing it toward the organization’s aims and objectives. Common understandings of knowledge in the organization helped to raise awareness of where and how to use accessible knowledge to support its strategic and operational activities. Second, it improved knowledge accessibility by incorporating the perspectives of partners and other charities and third sector organizations, enabling efficient information processing. Third, the knowledge base was developed, enriched, and retained through the continuous creation and recreation of new knowledge that enhanced sustainable use. Fourth, mindful knowledge use helped individuals and the organization to direct knowledge to a specific task. The knowledge was embedded into the organization’s processes and procedures, leading to usage consistency.

The figure also demonstrates how KC positively contributed to four aspects of SE, namely the focus, efficiency, flexibility andrelevance of its development interventions. The data analysis revealed that KC were augmented at each stage of the KI process, as illustrated by the white block arrows. For example, at the knowledge-sharing stage, individual learning and capabilities improved, while at the knowledge absorption stage, individual knowledge receivers assimilated the knowledge shared with them into their existing knowledge and developed new insights that improved the individual capabilities to apply their knowledge internationally (i.e., KC). In the case of knowledge absorption, deep learning took place through exploratory and transformative learning ([Zahra & George, 2002](#_ENREF_55)). The organization’s KC were positively related to the integration of knowledge, as shown by the black block arrow in Figure 2, as well as the KI process and stages shown by the white block arrows. When applying the model to other settings, appropriate contextualization would be required. For example, if applying the model to smaller charities.

### **5.1 Theoretical and practical implications**

Previous theoretical frameworks for KM including the KBV ([Grant, 2013](#_ENREF_19); [Rasula et al., 2012](#_ENREF_42)) have not adequately examined the relationship between KI and SE, particularly in charitable and third sector organizational settings. KI scholars argue that efﬁcient KI and application can be achieved by creating mechanisms that economize on learning ([Grant, 2013](#_ENREF_21)). In a charitable organization, there are fundamental differences in the way knowledge enhances performance (Haslam, Schafer & Beaudet, 2017; Kingsbury, McKay, Hunt, McGullivray & Clarke, 2016; Raymond et al., 2010). Hume and Hume (2012) contend that sensitivity to the relationship between KM and SE is important—otherwise, it could undermine the fundamental humanitarian ethos and voluntary nature of charities and third sector organizations. We argue that the link between KI and SE entails a complex process that involves different stages and intermediaries and demonstrates how KC moderates the relationship. This article contributes to theory development by shedding light on how KI contributes to SE in specific ways, as set out below.

In this study, KI and application were shown to be dynamic processes that involve knowledge sharing, absorption, and (re)combination. Our findings demonstrate that KI is not only influenced by organizational knowledge governance practices, but also by individual knowledge-sharing behaviours such as motives for recognition, knowledge triangulation, and power and influence as well as informal social interactions such as purposeful conversations and informal reference groups.

We specifically focused on understanding the essential elements of KC rather than individuals’ and organizations’ ability to integrate and reconfigure knowledge. This enabled us to show how knowledge improves KC. The essential elements of KC derived from the data are the conscious, accessible, effective and sustainable use of knowledge (See Figure 2).

Previous KI and SE studies claim a direct relationship between KI and SE ([Choi & Lee, 2003](#_ENREF_5); [Foss, 2007;](#_ENREF_12) [Rasula et al., 2012](#_ENREF_42)). Our findings suggest that the link between KI and SE is moderated by KC. As indicated in Figure 2, the essential foundations for knowledge capabilities (the conscious, accessible, effective, and sustainable use of knowledge), contribute to respective dimensions of SE, such as its focus, efficiency, flexibility, and relevance.

These findings provide managers with a better understanding of the attributes of knowledge capabilities and guidelines on how to manage knowledge use more effectively to build their knowledge capabilities and improve the SE of development interventions. Better understanding the relationship between KI, KC, and SE could help managers to design and implement their KM strategy, focusing on developing knowledge capabilities in order to get the most from the resources available to them.

**5.2 Limitations and directions for future research**

Like all studies, this study has a number of limitations. First, it involved a single case study of a large international development NGO. While our findings are limited to this specific context, we suggest that the methodological approach adopted here (a multilevel analytical approach) may be adapted to investigate the relationship between dynamic KI, KC, and SE in other settings. The study would be stronger if quantitative data analysis were carried out to test the relationships; however, this was not possible within the scope of the study and should be examined by future researchers. Second*,* although the framework in this analysis shows that KC moderates the relationship between KI and SE, we cannot conclude an absolutely linear relationship, because KI and KC are dynamic.

The model developed (Figure 2) provides insight into the relationship between KI, knowledge capabilities, and strategic effectiveness in the context of a large international development charity. On the basis of the relationships identified in the analysis of the case study data and the model generated, we advance the following five propositions for testing by future researchers in charitable and third sectors settings.

***P1: The development of coherent charitable foci in collaboration with a charity’s stakeholders positively contributes to the strategic effectiveness of charitable interventions***

***P2: The development of coherent foci enhances the efficiency and strategic effectiveness of charitable interventions***

***P3: Flexible knowledge integration and application contributes to more strategically effective interventions and outcomes***

***P4: The integration and application of relevant knowledge enhances the relevance of charitable interventions***

***P5: Coordinating the foci, efficiency, flexibility and relevance of integrated and applied knowledge enhances the strategic effectiveness of a charity and its interventions***

Future research should also examine the model in the context of smaller charities and the extent to which dynamic KI, KC, and SE are interrelated, and if the relationship is manifested in other contexts. For example, how the conscious use of knowledge shapes and refines an organization’s focus, and how the sustainable use of knowledge is related to organizational flexibility. There is also a need to investigate the changing behaviours and dynamics of KI, KC, and SE dependent variables through more long-term embedded research.

Finally, the relevance of developing KC is related to its impact on strategic effectiveness. To better derive value from knowledge, all organizations should be able to transform their knowledge resources into valuable products and services. From this perspective, a critical issue for organizations is how to actively share, absorb, combine, and apply their knowledge and assess their knowledge capabilities. Organizations can realize the full potential of their knowledge resources when they link knowledge to organizational outcomes. The model developed in this study may contribute to establishing how these linkages affect particular aspects of SE.

## **6. Conclusions**

We began our article by highlighting the importance of international KI to SE and have explained through the findings of this study how KI contributes to improvements in KC and SE in four specific ways in the case of charities and third sector organizations. In doing so, we have not only formulated a new map for the relationship between KI, KC, and SE, we have also connected disparate elements of previous work on how the application of knowledge can be enhanced to improve the effectiveness and sustainability of an organization’s interventions, which generate implications for future development research and practice.

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**Appendix 1: Interview Schedule**

1. What do you understand by the terms ‘information’ and ‘knowledge’? How do they relate?
2. Can you tell me why you share your knowledge with others?
3. What drives you to share your knowledge?
4. Under what conditions do you share your expertise? Can you give me an example?
5. Can you tell me what your organisation is doing to facilitate knowledge sharing?
6. How does the organisational structure and hierarchy impact on flows of knowledge in the organisation?
7. How does knowledge sharing take place in informal interactions and networks?
8. To what extent do you participate in these informal interactions and networks?
9. Can you give an example of when you received useful knowledge from these informal internal interactions?
10. How do you make sense of the information you receive from others?
11. What factors do you consider when interpreting and assimilating the knowledge shared with you?
12. How do knowledge-sharing practices bring together individual specialized knowledge?
13. In general, how is individual knowledge combined into group knowledge and then into organisational knowledge?
14. How is the organisation’s strategic position linked to a set of intellectual resources and capabilities?
15. Can you tell me how the organisation efficiently accesses and utilises the specialised knowledge of individuals?
16. Can you explain your understanding of organisational effectiveness or performance?
17. What are the key areas of effectiveness for your organisation?
18. Can you tell me how knowledge is related to the performance of the services you provide?
19. How do the organisation’s knowledge sharing systems enable the organisation to capture new and emerging knowledge, or reconfigure existing knowledge?
20. To what extent does the integrated knowledge add value to the services you provide?
21. Can you give me an example where integrated knowledge improved the services you provide?

Table 1. Data Sources and Characteristics

|  |
| --- |
| 1. Semi-structured interviews with key participants (n=42) |
| Organizational role  | Participant labels | Number of participants | Interview duration in minutes |
| Director of the organization | D1 | 1 | 50 |
| Division Directors | D2,----Dn | 5 | 221 |
| Program Heads | H1, H2,----Hn | 7 | 396 |
| Managers | M1, M2,----Mn | 5 | 314 |
| Technical Advisors | TA1, TA2,----TAn | 10 | 600 |
| Officers/Supporter Officers | O1, O2,----On | 6 | 310 |
| International Program Managers | IP1, IP2,----IPn | 6 | 321 |
| Volunteers | V1, V2,----Vn | 2 | 68 |
| Total |  | 42 | 2280 |
| Mean Average |  |  | 54 |
| 2. Documents (n=21)  |
| 3. Observation  |
| 1. Meeting and briefings (n=8)
* Attended six staff meetings with all levels of personnel (e.g. directors, program heads, managers, project managers, technical advisors, officers, support staff and volunteers).
* Attended two International Development (ID) briefings with ID professionals (e.g. ID Director, Regional Heads - Africa, Asia, Latin America & Middle East).
1. Shadowing of participants
* Program learning manager, international change manager, program partnership agreement performance manager and information & knowledge management advisor.
1. Follow up visits
* The first author followed up the research over a period of 2 years with progress monitored through regular visits (2 days per week involving regular contact and informal discussions with key informants).
 |

**Figure 1: Data (interviews, documentation & observation) and coding structure**

**Aggregated themes/codes**

**First order coding**

**Second order themes**

**Knowledge interpretation**

Understanding the concept of knowledge

Statements about what information and knowledge are and how they are dynamically interrelated i, d, o

Individual knowledge sharing behaviours

Statements about individual motives and interests for sharing information and knowledge i , d, o

Knowledge Integration & application

Descriptions of factors they consider important in assimilating knowledge shared with them (e.g. relationship history, trust, relevance, own judgement i, d, o)

Knowledge absorption capacities and processes

Informal social interaction behaviours of knowledge sharing

Descriptions of the role of informal social interactions in knowledge sharing (e.g. informal conversation, informal groups i ,d, o)

Descriptions of organisational initiatives to facilitate knowledge flows (e.g. smooth communication between managers and staff i , d, o).

**Knowledge capability**

Organisational knowledge sharing practices

Knowledge combination and application processes

Descriptions of how individuals coordinate and apply knowledge (e.g. assimilating, creating new meaning & insights & using for specific tasks i, d, o)

Targeted use of knowledge

Descriptions of when, where and how they use the information and knowledge they can access i, d, o

Knowledge synthesis

Statements about information generation & processing time, embedding knowledge in procedures and incorporating past learning and insights of partners into the knowledge base i, d.

**Knowledge capability**

Accessible knowledge

Descriptions of how knowledge is used towards the achievement of the organisation’s missions and objectives (e.g. to achieve certain outcome i, d)

Conscious use of knowledge

Statements of how processed knowledge can avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’ in accomplishing task (e.g. humanitarian emergencies i, d).

Reducing time to generate and use knowledge

**Efficient use of Knowledge**

**Effective use of knowledge**

Improving project completion time

Descriptions of how past learning and successful and unsuccessful practices were used in planning and implementation (e.g. monitoring and evaluation i, d).

**Knowledge capability**

Statements of how knowledge sharing helps to gain knowledge as well (e.g. balancing ideas with others i)

Enriching and developing knowledge

**Sustainable use of knowledge**

Extending existing capabilities to encompass new ones knowledge

Descriptions how local knowledge is used in improving humanitarian response (e.g. Awareness of what is happening in the area, changing characters of stakeholders and so on i, d).

Continuous learning & knowledge gain from practices

Descriptions of how learning and knowledge is created and recreated to expand existing knowledge i, d, o

**Correlates of KI, KC and organisational effectiveness**

Developing knowledge base

Descriptions of how learning and knowledge is used for short- and long-term activities of the organization i, d.

Descriptions of how using knowledge without loss contributed to cost savings & reduced project completion times i, d.

Descriptions of how humanitarian emergency responses improved i, d.

Foci and efficiency

Description of how the organization was able to adjust in changing internal and external environments i, d

Description of how the organization responded to the poorest and marginalised populations and survived over time by continuously being relevant to its stakeholders i, d.

Flexibility and relevance

i indicates data derived from the semi-structured interviews; ‘‘d’’ indicates derived from organizational documents; ‘‘o’’ indicates data derived from observation.

**Figure 2: A Systematic Framework for the Integration of Knowledge, Capabilities and Strategic Effectiveness for Charities and Third Sector Organizations**

**Stage 2: Knowledge Absorption**

* Relationship duration & history
* Relevance of knowledge
* Selective judgment

**Knowledge Capabilities (KC)**

***‘How the knowledge to be used?****’’*

* + Conscious use of knowledge
	+ Accessible use of knowledge
	+ Sustainable knowledge use
	+ Effective knowledge use

**Strategic Effectiveness**

* Foci
* Efficiency
* Flexibility
* Relevance

**Knowledge Integration**

**Stage 1: Knowledge Sharing**

* Individual KS behaviors & motives
* Knowledge governance practices and systems
* Informal interaction characteristics

**Stage 3: Knowledge Combination**

* Interaction of KS factors:
* Individual
* Organizational
* Informal interactions
* Cumulative impact

**Key**

 - Links of KI stages (Sharing, Absorption, and Combination) to KI - Links between KI stages (KI as a dynamic process)

 - Links of KI to KC to SE - Link of KI stages to KC - Direct Link of KI to SE

1. Focus or foci [↑](#footnote-ref-1)