MOST Online Policy Research Tool
General presentation

The MOST-UNESCO programme is meant to produce effective links between research, policies and practice, in order to support a culture of public policies based on empirical data. To this end, the MOST-UNESCO programme provides an online tool for research, acquisition and comparison of knowledge: the "MOST-Tool". This tool builds a new bridge between researchers and the community of policy makers.

The "MOST-Tool" is a Web interface providing access to relevant knowledge and experiences in the fields related to social transformations and development at local, national and regional levels. Thus, the "MOST-Tool" aspires to become a knowledge platform to serve policy makers, governments and research teams engaged in public policy making.

In order to develop knowledge-sharing, to analyze experiences and to reinforce capacity building, the tool collects information drawn from the contents of *Policy papers* on public policy, from scientific reports as well as from reports on experiences in public policies.

Initially, this platform will integrate resources from UNESCO and will diffuse the knowledge, the advocacy positions and the experience acquired by the Organization on problems related to sustainable development, respect of Human Rights, elimination of poverty and social transformations. The tool will publish an increasing number of collections and will constantly be improved in order to provide the best support in decision making.

Although the "MOST-Tool" is mainly intended for policy makers, it is also adapted to various other needs such as those of researchers in the social sciences, university institutions and even an informed public.

Bases and potential

Origins

The principles and functions of the "MOST-Tool" were derived from the analysis of the top ten knowledge management systems in the field of development and public policy making. The initial research was conducted at MIT (2002-2004) within the framework of the "Global System of Sustainable Development" (GSSD) run by Prof. N. Choucri, President of the MOST-Phase 2 Scientific Advisory Committee (2004 – ongoing). This research is directly aimed at developing the foundations of next-generation tools for policymaking.

At this stage in its development, the basic innovation of the tool consists in a methodology for creating a network of knowledge, experiences and theoretical and empirical discussions.. As a prototype, the tool currently offers the following thematic collections:
- "Building linkages between social science research and policy"
- "Experiences in the strengthening of socio-economic capacities through Human Rights to eliminate poverty"
- "Analyses and proposals of measures to combat violence against women based on Human

Rights"
- "Experiences in the prevention of organized youth violence in Latin America"
- "Regional Integration" (under a cooperation agreement with the United Nations University's Comparative Regional Integration Studies Unit)

Every collection is built according to the policy making strategy, the broad lines of work involved, the type of answers given, the target populations and the protagonists involved.

Depending on the different types of variables combined by the user, the tool proposes a range of responses collected in the Policy Briefs. These policy briefs can be studied and compared according to the user's needs. Policy briefs are short texts comprising a generic policy analysis frame, experiences drawn from Policy papers and other relevant documents displayed as suggestions for policies in regard of the subject area or issue chosen.

Since it uses the combination of a generic template for policy analysis and dedicated frames for thematic analysis (knowledge mapping), it can virtually be applied to any domain of knowledge, issue in development or capacity building. The "MOST-Tool" can thus serve the needs of any type of research and policy community. As a technical product, the tool allows for flexibility in functionality design, modularity in any further developments ("plug-in" applications), and adaptability to target audiences and their needs.

Prototype

A first version of the prototype was launched on the UNESCO portal in November 2007, with basic functions and a first collection on "Knowledge for Higher Education and Research Policy" (50 documents) produced in cooperation with the UNESCO Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge. After the administration interface was implemented in February 2008, 40 more documents were added to the first collection.

Potential of the "MOST-Tool"

We can already measure the impact and the potential of the tool:

- **An attractive tool:**
  Basic server statistics account for 1000 visits for the month following the launching, an average 500 monthly visits over the following 3 months, and an average 350 monthly visits since then.
  With the appropriate broadcasting and publicizing campaign, the MOST could become a major reference tool.
- **A concept that is already sparking interest:**
  Several Member States of the Programme warmly expressed their enthusiasm after a demonstration of the "Most-Tool" at the Extra-Ordinary Session of the Intergovernmental Council in October 2007. Moreover, various important organisations have approached MOST with a strong interest in cooperation (UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, UNU, OECD, CLACSO[1], CIGI[2] -- among others).
  The "Most-Tool" already sparks lively interest which should grow with future steps.
- **An adaptable tool:**
  The MOST "Conference Reporting System" (a real-time reporting procedure based on the tool's underlying methodology) was successfully adapted in 2008 for two major meetings of the Ministerial Forum on Research for Health, a global initiative involving WHO, UNESCO, the World Bank, COHRED and various governments.
  Beyond its potential for further development, the tool offers a great adaptability to target audiences and their needs.
As the tool will be further developed, it will gain ever more potential.

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[1] Centro Latino Americano de Ciencias Sociales
[2] Center for International Governance Innovation

Tool status

- **5 new thematic collections are to be launched in September 2009:**
    - ✓ "Building linkages between social science research and policy" (starting with some 25 policy briefs produced on the basis of ongoing MOST theoretical and methodological research);
    - ✓ "Experiences in the strengthening of socio-economic capacities through Human Rights to eliminate poverty" (starting with some 30 policy briefs produced in UNESCO's Human Rights and Gender Division);
    - ✓ "Analyses and proposals of measures to combat violence against women based on Human Rights" (likewise starting with some 30 policy briefs, based on materials of the same origin);
    - ✓ "Experiences in the prevention of organized youth violence in Latin America" (with 30 policy briefs drawn on a special project including 4 Central-American countries);
    - ✓ "Regional Integration" (under a cooperation agreement with the United Nations University's Comparative Regional Integration Studies Unit)
- **New research functions:**
    - ✓ The possibilities of selecting and combining different categories have been improved in order to allow more precision in defining the search criteria.
    - ✓ The tool now offers several levels of geographical selections.
    - ✓ A new function including the notion AND/OR in the search criteria is currently being developed and tested. This function will enable a new degree of precision requested by users.
- **Improving the presentation of search results:**
    - ✓ The tool allows users to create personal collections from the documents resulting from the search and to choose the data to be compared between these documents.
    - ✓ A classification of the results by relevance in response to the search criteria is currently under development and is being tested.
    - ✓ A more user-friendly presentation of the results (Policy briefs) will be available from September.

Future steps

The project is to be further developed along 3 main lines: management and administration, content and functionality.

Management and administration

- A central unit should be in charge of project management and development. The role of this unit should be:
    - o To supervise the creation of new collections and to coordonate content development.
    - o To continue the technical and data-processing development of the platform.
    - o To promote and diffuse the tool to target audiences.
    - o To ensure the training and the assistance of users
- A decentralized online system for the collection of documents should be developed for contributors to directly participate and upload their Policy Briefs via a dedicated web interface..
- A function should be created to add new collections. Currently, a team of external software developers are working on this. It is to be noted however that the development of such a function constitutes, in terms of budget, a whole new project which is very expensive (a tool to produce the tool).

Development of new functions

In order to improve the usefulness and performance of the service, the functions of the tool will have to be optimized:

Functions of the tool:
- The tool currently works on individual, separate collections. A specific function will be developed that gives the ability to search and retrieve materials across all collections.
- The current search interface should be upgraded to a "dashboard" type interface displaying

useful contextual information (legal texts, news, reference links…) .
- A text function could be developed for users to directly type a question instead of checking boxes/clicking on maps or searching for keywords (a "question answering" system based on natural language processing).
- The next research and development activities for functionality enhancement will apply computer-based methods for the analysis and representation of social and policy systems and processes to help develop practical solutions. The resulting application shall allow to suggest possible policy measures based on stated aims and existing practices and then finally propose solutions for their implementation..

Interactive functions for users:
- A function will be developed for the users to comment and annotate the Policy Briefs (similar to Wikipedia)
- A discussion forum on the content, the knowledge models and the functions will be added to the tool ,
- The tool could also offer a space for research and policy watch (unexpected policy knowledge needs, emerging issues…) that would prove highly relevant especially at national and regional level.

Content development

Content development may be phased as indicated below.
- Phase 1: Publish the Policy Briefs from all SHS units.
- Phase 2: Open the tool to contributions from other UNESCO sectors.
- Phase 3: Open the tool to contributions from MOST Committee members, UNESCO Chairs/UNITWIN Networks, UNESCO Category II institutes, UN agencies and think tanks.

All the power of the tool lies in the active collaboration of all the institutions and organizations in order to multiply knowledge and share experiences.