MOST Policy Research Tool 2009:
Project Summary, Status and Outline of Future Steps

Overview

MOST Policy Research Tool is piloting the provision of online access to policy-relevant comparative information. It is enabling users to obtain customized replies to trans-disciplinary questions by drawing on select content from original documents. The tool is modeled on classic legislative research services that perform policy-oriented information research, analysis, processing and custom writing. It constitutes an interactive one-stop-shop for policy-relevant knowledge delivered in a comparative context.

The goal is to tie knowledge to agency and to help share experiences across borders. Targeted primarily at government policy-makers and policy research teams, the Tool is also particularly relevant for civil society groups and social science researchers, academic institutions and the public at large. It is to highlight successful practices that have high potential for replication, as well as risks and drawbacks. The knowledge base of the tool comprises international policy-relevant information, including social science research reports and reports of policy experiences. A specific feature of the tool is its capacity to compare relevant contents while drawing on different resources.

Project history

Research and development

The MOST Tool principles and functionality were derived from the analysis of 10 major knowledge management systems in the area of international development, and of the study of briefing and information flows in 'classic' policy units and administration. The initial research conducted at MIT (2002-2004), within the framework of the "Global System of Sustainable Development" (GSSD) developed by Prof. N. Choucri, President of the MOST-Phase 2 Scientific Advisory Committee (2004 – ongoing). Research was directly aimed at providing

the foundations for a next-generation knowledge management strategy for policymaking.

The basic innovation of this Tool consists of a unique knowledge networking methodology based on the crossing of a policy analysis frame – a generic template for all documents ("Policy Briefs") -- with a thematic analysis frame – specific criteria describing each document. This methodology at once enables content customization (extracting and recombining select template items across various documents), knowledge contextualization and cross-comparison. The generic template was designed drawing from existing formats as well as from theoretical and educational materials, while the domain-sensitive criteria are developed for each theme.

Since it uses the complementarities of a generic policy analysis frame and dedicated thematic analysis frames (a knowledge mapping), it can virtually be applied to any domain, to serve the needs of any type of research and policy community. As a technical product, the Tool allows for flexibility in functionality design and for modularity in any further developments ("plug-in" applications). The platform is developed in open source software and is compatible with web 2.0 requirements.

Prototype

Launched on UNESCO portal in November 2007 with basic functionality (a proof of concept) and a first collection on "Knowledge for Higher Education and Research Policy" (50 initial 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.

Outreach

A general measure of impact is provided by server statistics, qualitative feedback and the number and nature of organisms expressing their interest in the project and in related MOST knowledge management activities.

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. These numbers have to be considered on a pure factual basis however, mainly since there is to date no reference against which measuring this data, and also since the promotion was first limited to the web-based resources of SHS (portal and mailing-lists) exclusively. More consequent promotion means are now to be engaged, which may in turn attract substantially more visitors.

Although there has been limited direct feedback from users (very few specific comments on content/functionality), spontaneous reactions on the overall project have been very encouraging -- from UNESCO Member States and partners, from UN agencies and from various other organisms (including regional research networks, governments, national research agencies and policy units, NGOs) and individuals. Member States of the Programme warmly expressed their enthusiasm after the demonstration of the Tool organized for its launching at the Extra-Ordinary Session of the Intergovernmental Council in October 2007.

Various important organisms have approached MOST with strong expressions of interest for cooperation (UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, UNU, OECD, CLACSO[1], CIGI[2] -- among others). It is also to be noted that 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.

Tool status

5 new thematic collections are to be launched in September 2009[3]:
- "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" (starting with 30 policy briefs and 100 more to come, under a cooperation agreement with the United Nations University's Comparative Regional Integration Studies Unit); and some 30 more to follow);

The search function and the presentation of results will be improved. In particular, optional modes for the selection and crossing of categories and keywords, an arrangement of the list of results according to geographical selections, and a "shortcut" function to directly build personal collections with all documents retrieved from searches will be added.

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

In view of this important step, consequent promotion means should be engaged, drawing on UNESCO-wide communication tools (both web and paper-based) and with partners relaying the information.

Future Steps

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

<u>Management and administration</u>

A central unit at Headquarters should be in charge of project management and development including the supervision of the collections, cooperation for content development, platform development, training and promotion. Decentralized content development mechanisms should be implemented for contributors to directly upload Briefs through dedicated web administration interfaces. Identified cooperation incentives for the development of collections by interested partners include online facilities for distributed peer review.

Evaluation metrics aiming at capturing the Tool's tool content, functionality, and communication have been proposed together with data collection methods. They should serve to evaluate progress towards the project's development goals and may be of use for external evaluators and auditors. Monitoring will provide feedback and accountability and serve for refining the tool, ultimately enhancing the user experience.

<u>Content development</u>

Content development may be phased as indicated below. Cooperation modalities including tasks distribution and workflow are defined in a short separate guideline document.

- Phase 1: Publish Briefs from all SHS units.
- Phase 2: Open to contributions from other UNESCO sectors.
- Phase 3: Open to contributions from MOST Committees, UNESCO Chairs/UNITWIN Networks, UNESCO Category II institutes, UN agencies, think tanks.

<u>Functionality upgrade</u>

In order to improve the usefulness and performance of the service, the Tool functionality shall be upgraded. Below we distinguish between access to knowledge (including aggregation of complementary materials) and "social" functionality for the participation of communities of practice in knowledge development. It is also to be noted that the administration interface has to be upgraded consequently.

Access to knowledge:

- The Tool currently works on individual, separate collections. A specific function should be implemented that gives the ability to search and retrieve materials across all collections from one single entry point.
- The Tool should provide contextual access to corresponding indicators, legal texts and news. Promising potentials have already been identified and should be tested with the collections "Regional Integration" and "Prevention of Youth Violence in Latin America".
- The current search interface should be upgraded to a "dashboard" type interface displaying useful content-related information and enabling immediate user action in a friendly fashion.
- Also, a text function could be implemented 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). Both this function and the above "dashboard" would help dramatically reduce cognitive cost and save on search time.
- The next research and development activities for functionality enhancement should apply existing field-tested computer-based methods for the analysis and representation of social and policy systems and processes to help address practical governance issues. The resulting application shall allow e.g. to suggest possible policy measures based on stated aims and existing practices and suggest possible adjustment paths for replication/transfer.

Knowledge development:

- A function could be designed for the users to comment and annotate the Briefs (similar the e.g. the Public Library of Science online, or Wikipedia); Discussion fora could be launched e.g. on the collections (content), the knowledge models, the Tool functionality. It is to be noted however that this entails to define usage modalities (open to content partners only, to registered users, etc.) and to have the capacity for related monitoring (moderation and follow-up).
- The Tool could also offer a space for research and policy watch (unattended policy knowledge needs, emerging issues) that would prove highly relevant especially at national and regional level.

Administration interface:

- A function should be implemented to add new collections. Currently, software developers are contracted to perform this task on an individual basis. It is to be noted however that developing such function constitutes, in terms of budget, a whole project (i.e. produce a tool to produce tools).
- Corresponding administration functions will have to be implemented for the above elements.

Reference Documents

- MOST Tool Development Plan (August 2008). Upon request
- MOST Tool Background, Design Methodology and Application (November 2007). Online
- Current Approaches to Science and Policy Review (2008). Circulated
- MOST Thematic Collections – General Operating Guidelines (2008) Circulated