

AFRICAN CAPACITY BUILDING FOUNDATION

The Paradox of Knowledge Systems and Hubs in the African Context

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Abstract

Africa produces knowledge. This is not in dispute. Over the past three decades, the continent has generated a substantial and growing corpus of research, policy analysis, capacity development insights, and practitioner-led documentation spanning virtually every domain of human development. What remains paradoxical is that this knowledge frequently fails to circulate, fails to inform decision-making, and fails to accumulate across institutional generations. The continent invests in knowledge hubs, repositories, and platforms with regularity, only to see them stagnate, fragment, or disappear within years of their establishment. This article interrogates that paradox directly.

Drawing on institutional theory, knowledge management literature, and the lived experience of knowledge infrastructure projects across sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa, this article argues that the crisis is not one of knowledge production but of knowledge architecture. African knowledge systems are frequently designed to receive rather than connect, to store rather than activate, and to display rather than embed. The result is a continent rich in knowledge artifacts and poor in knowledge flows. The article proposes a framework for rethinking African knowledge hubs as dynamic systems, grounded in interoperability, contextual legitimacy, and demand-side orientation, and draws lessons from both successful and failed platform experiments across the continent.

Keywords: knowledge management, Africa, knowledge hubs, capacity development, digital platforms, institutional knowledge, knowledge paradox, African Knowledge Hub, ACBF

1. Introduction: A Continent That Forgets

In 2003, the African Union adopted the Maputo Declaration committing member states to allocate at least ten percent of national budgets to agriculture and rural development. The policy rationale was well-documented, well-researched, and supported by substantial evidence drawn from across the continent. By 2022, fewer than a dozen of the fifty-five AU member states had met that commitment even once in a sustained manner (AU Commission, 2022). The gap was not primarily a resource gap. It was, in part, a knowledge-to-action gap: the research existed, the frameworks existed, but the institutional pathways to translate, communicate, and embed that knowledge in decision cycles did not.

This pattern is not unique to agriculture. It repeats across health policy, education reform, trade negotiation, and digital governance. Africa is a continent where the same lessons are learned repeatedly, in parallel, by organizations that cannot see each other's work. The same capacity gaps are diagnosed in consecutive donor-funded assessments. The same policy recommendations circulate in conference presentations and then disappear into institutional archives that nobody queries. This is the paradox at the center of African knowledge systems: knowledge is present, but it is not powerful.

Africa is not suffering from a knowledge deficit. It is suffering from a knowledge circulation deficit.

The paradox is sharpened by the continent's investment in knowledge infrastructure. Since the early 2000s, regional bodies, intergovernmental organizations, development partners, and national governments have launched scores of knowledge hubs, repositories, portals, and platforms aimed at capturing and sharing African expertise. The African Development Bank's Open Data Portal, IDRC-supported research networks, IGAD's policy knowledge bases, and dozens of sector-specific repositories represent significant financial and institutional investment. Yet utilization rates remain low, sustainability challenges are endemic, and the cumulative effect on policy quality is difficult to trace (Adeya, 2021; Cummings and van Zee, 2016).

This article does not argue that these efforts have been wasted. Rather, it argues that they have been built on a set of architectural assumptions that are fundamentally misaligned with how knowledge actually moves through African institutional ecosystems. To understand the paradox, we need to disaggregate it: separating the failure of platforms from the failure of systems, the failure of technology from the failure of incentives, and the failure of design from the failure of governance.

2. Mapping the Architecture of Failure

2.1 The Repository Trap

The dominant model for African knowledge hubs has been what we might call the repository model: a centralized platform designed to collect, catalog, and display knowledge assets. The logic is intuitive. If knowledge exists but is fragmented across institutions, the solution is aggregation. Build a platform, upload documents, make them searchable, and knowledge will flow.

The evidence suggests otherwise. Research on knowledge management in low- and middle-income country contexts consistently finds that repository-centric approaches suffer from three compounding failure modes (Carlile, 2004; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Wenger, 1998).

First, the supply problem. Repositories depend on contributors, and contribution requires organizational incentives, technical capability, and time. In African institutional contexts where staff turnover is high, technical capacity is uneven, and the direct personal benefit of uploading a document to a shared system is invisible, contribution rates are predictably low. Studies of knowledge management platform adoption in East and West African public sector contexts have found that platforms launched with initial content from project teams frequently stagnate within twelve to eighteen months as project cycles close and contributing staff move on (Lwoga, 2011; Bwalya, 2009).

Second, the relevance problem. Documents uploaded to repositories are frequently disconnected from the decision cycles they purport to serve. A policy brief uploaded in the final quarter of a fiscal year, after budget allocations have been made, has zero chance of influencing that year's spending decisions regardless of its quality. Knowledge systems that are not synchronized with the rhythms of institutional decision-making produce archives, not inputs (Court and Young, 2003).

Third, the trust problem. African policymakers and practitioners often view externally hosted or donor-funded knowledge platforms with a degree of institutional skepticism that is entirely rational. When the provenance of a document is unclear, when it has been produced under conditions the reader cannot assess, and when the platform itself may cease to exist if funding cycles change, the willingness to rely on it as a credible source for high-stakes decisions is understandably limited (Carden, 2009).

2.2 The Platform Graveyard

Sub-Saharan Africa has accumulated an extensive catalog of defunct knowledge platforms. The African Virtual University's early content repositories, the Eldis partner country portals, numerous national agricultural knowledge portals established under World Bank and FAO programs, and dozens of sector-specific databases established under regional economic community initiatives have all followed a broadly similar trajectory: launch with external funding, achieve limited uptake, fail to secure domestic institutional hosting or recurrent budget allocations, and disappear at the end of the project cycle (Kigotho, 2015; IFAD, 2019).

This is not primarily a technology failure. The platforms themselves were often technically functional. It is a sustainability failure rooted in three structural conditions that are relatively constant across the African institutional landscape: the project funding model of most knowledge infrastructure initiatives; the absence of recurrent domestic budget allocations for knowledge management functions; and the separation of knowledge platform management from operational institutional mandates.

A platform that stores knowledge nobody uses is not a knowledge system. It is an expensive archive.

The project funding model is particularly corrosive. When a knowledge platform is funded as a discrete project with a defined start and end date, its institutional DNA is oriented toward delivery metrics rather than utilization outcomes. Success is measured by number of documents uploaded, number of users registered, and number of partner organizations connected, not by the quality of decisions informed or the problems solved. This incentive structure produces platforms that are large and empty: extensive catalogs of material that nobody is asking for, organized around taxonomies that reflect donor program logic rather than practitioner search behavior (Young and Quinn, 2012).

2.3 The Interoperability Void

Even where individual knowledge platforms have survived, they have rarely connected. The African knowledge landscape is characterized by what might be described as institutional silos at continental scale. The Economic Community of West African States maintains knowledge systems that do not speak to those of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. The African Development Bank's research databases are not interoperable with those of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa. National statistical offices, whose data underpins much policy-relevant knowledge production, maintain systems built on incompatible standards that resist aggregation (AfDB, 2020; UNECA, 2021).

This interoperability void has several causes. Technical incompatibility is the most visible but least important: it is solvable with adequate resources and political will. More fundamental are the incentive misalignments that make institutions reluctant to share in the first instance. Knowledge, in institutional contexts, is power. Exclusive possession of a dataset, a registry, or an analytical capability is a source of organizational influence. Sharing that knowledge through interoperable systems requires trust in recipient institutions and confidence that the sharing organization will not lose competitive advantage without gaining something in return (Willinsky, 2006; Hearn et al., 2009).

3. Why African Knowledge Systems Are Different

3.1 The Oral-Institutional Interface

Any serious account of African knowledge systems must grapple with the continent's deep traditions of oral knowledge transmission. This is not an argument for romanticizing pre-colonial knowledge structures or treating them as obstacles to modernization. It is an argument that formal digital knowledge platforms have largely been designed without reference to the communicative cultures in which they are expected to operate.

In contexts where institutional knowledge has historically traveled through networks of trusted intermediaries, through professional associations, through conference corridors, and through the informal channels that connect practitioners to decision-makers, a platform that asks users to submit a query to a search box and read a PDF is asking them to abandon their most effective knowledge-seeking behavior (Shillington, 2005; Nabudere, 2011). The question is not whether digital platforms can work in African institutional contexts. They demonstrably can. The question is whether they are designed with sufficient sensitivity to the social and communicative architecture within which they must function.

3.2 Multilingualism and the French-English Fracture

Africa's linguistic diversity presents a knowledge system challenge that is almost entirely unacknowledged in the design of most continental knowledge platforms. The continent has over two thousand distinct languages, five colonial language blocs with formal institutional presence, and numerous lingua francas with significant regional reach. The practical consequence for knowledge infrastructure is that a platform operating primarily in English is invisible to the majority of French-speaking practitioners in West and Central Africa, and vice versa.

This is not merely a translation problem. It is an epistemological problem. Research produced in French for Francophone West African policy audiences carries different analytical assumptions, cites different theoretical traditions, and addresses different institutional audiences than equivalent research produced in English for Anglophone East African contexts. A continental knowledge system that does not actively bridge this divide does not merely fail to include Francophone content: it fails to create the conditions for cross-regional learning that is the entire point of continental knowledge infrastructure (Zezeza, 2009; Diallo, 2018).

The ACBF's own programming reflects this challenge. With a mandate covering all fifty-four African Union member states and an institutional presence in both Anglophone and Francophone contexts, the organization's knowledge products must navigate linguistic and cultural boundaries that formal classification systems and search algorithms are poorly equipped to handle. The African Knowledge Hub, currently under redesign, represents one institutional attempt to address this challenge systematically.

3.3 The Capacity-Knowledge Feedback Loop

There is a recursive quality to the relationship between knowledge systems and capacity in the African context that makes the problem particularly resistant to simple interventions. Organizations with low institutional capacity are less able to produce, organize, and utilize knowledge effectively. Low knowledge utilization means that capacity development investments are less likely to be informed by evidence of what works. This produces a feedback loop in which the organizations that most need good knowledge systems are the least equipped to build and sustain them (Grindle and Hilderbrand, 1995; Morgan, 2006).

This feedback loop has been recognized in the capacity development literature, but its implications for knowledge system design have not been adequately drawn out. If the primary users of a continental knowledge hub are organizations with limited knowledge management capacity, then the hub must be designed to compensate for that limitation rather than assuming it away. This means simpler contribution workflows, active curation by dedicated staff rather than reliance on self-service uploading, and deliberate outreach rather than passive discoverability.

4. Toward a New Architecture: The Activated Knowledge Hub

4.1 From Storage to Flow

The conceptual shift required in African knowledge system design is from a storage metaphor to a flow metaphor. Storage systems ask: how do we capture what we know? Flow systems ask: how do we get the right knowledge to the right decision-maker at the right moment? The difference in design implications is substantial.

A flow-oriented knowledge hub is built around use cases rather than content types. It starts by mapping the actual decision cycles of its target users: the budget preparation processes, the program design phases, the evaluation moments, the policy review windows in which knowledge can be absorbed and acted upon. It then designs contribution, curation, and dissemination workflows that align with those cycles (Nutley et al., 2007; Shaxson, 2005).

This is not a radical idea. Knowledge management practitioners in corporate and public sector contexts in Europe and North America have been applying demand-side design principles for decades. What is required is the consistent application of these principles in African institutional contexts, with adequate attention to the specific structural conditions that make implementation challenging.

4.2 Interoperability as a First Principle

The next generation of African knowledge infrastructure must treat interoperability not as a technical feature to be added later but as a first design principle. This means adopting open metadata standards, building application programming interfaces that allow other systems to query and

retrieve content, and designing contribution workflows that allow material to be submitted once and discoverable across multiple platforms (Salo, 2008; Auer et al., 2007).

The African Union's Data Policy Framework, adopted in 2022, provides a normative foundation for this shift. Its provisions on data interoperability, cross-border data flows, and common data standards, if consistently implemented, could substantially reduce the technical barriers to knowledge platform integration. What is still missing is the institutional architecture to translate these normative commitments into operational platform standards (AU Commission, 2022).

4.3 Contextual Legitimacy and the Peer Review Question

One of the most consequential design decisions for an African knowledge hub is how it handles quality and provenance. The instinct in many platform designs is to impose a formal peer review process modeled on academic journal publishing. The intention is to ensure quality. The effect, in practice, is frequently to exclude the most policy-relevant knowledge: practitioner-generated case studies, government evaluation reports, and community-developed toolkits that carry no academic imprimatur but contain the most directly applicable insights (Davies, 2004; Carden, 2009).

A more sophisticated approach distinguishes between different types of quality for different types of knowledge. Peer-reviewed research is valuable for establishing causal relationships and testing theoretical frameworks. Practitioner documentation is valuable for operational guidance and contextual grounding. Policy briefs are valuable for synthesizing implications for specific decision contexts. A knowledge hub that imposes a single quality standard across all three categories will end up with a collection dominated by the knowledge type easiest to produce under that standard, which is typically formal research, and correspondingly underrepresented in practitioner insight.

4.4 Sustainability Through Institutional Embedding

No platform design addresses the fundamental sustainability challenge of African knowledge hubs without confronting the question of institutional embedding. A knowledge hub that is sustained by a discrete project grant is structurally vulnerable. A knowledge hub that is embedded within an organization's operational mandate, funded from recurrent budget allocations, and staffed by people whose professional role includes knowledge curation, is structurally sustainable.

This requires a shift in how intergovernmental organizations, regional bodies, and national governments think about knowledge management. Rather than treating knowledge platforms as communications projects, they must be treated as core institutional infrastructure, in the same category as human resource management systems or financial management platforms. This reframing has budget implications: knowledge management requires dedicated professional capacity, recurrent investment in platform maintenance, and active leadership commitment to utilization (AfDB, 2020; Hearn et al., 2009).

The platform is not the product. The institutional behavior change it enables is the product.

5. The ACBF Experience and the AKH Vision

The African Capacity Building Foundation has operated at the intersection of knowledge and capacity development for over three decades. Its institutional mandate, to enhance human and institutional capacity in Africa to achieve sustainable development and poverty reduction, places knowledge management at the center of its operational logic. The organization has produced a significant volume of research, evaluation, and policy analysis through its Africa Capacity Report series, its country capacity assessments, and its program evaluations. It has also learned, through successive platform iterations, some of the hardest lessons about what makes continental knowledge infrastructure work and what makes it fail.

The current redesign of the ACBF Knowledge Platform as the African Knowledge Hub (AKH) represents an attempt to apply those lessons systematically. The AKH is being built around four navigational principles that reflect the conceptual shift from storage to flow: Discover, Connect, Collaborate, and Learn. These are not merely menu labels. They represent a deliberate architecture of use: the platform is designed to support a user journey that moves from finding relevant knowledge, to connecting with the people and organizations who produced it, to collaborating on its application, to learning from shared experience.

The AKH's integration with the ACBF's Dynamics 365 operational platform reflects another important design choice: knowledge should not be separated from the institutional processes it serves. When a program officer designs a capacity development intervention, the AKH should surface relevant evaluations, similar programs, and applicable toolkits as part of the program design workflow rather than as a separate research exercise. This integration of knowledge access into operational workflows is one of the most powerful levers for improving knowledge utilization rates.

The challenge ahead for the AKH, and for any comparable African knowledge hub, is the transition from design intent to operational reality. The architectural choices described here require sustained institutional commitment, adequate resourcing, and active leadership. They also require a willingness to measure success in terms of knowledge utilization and decision quality rather than document counts and user registrations. That shift in measurement orientation may ultimately be the hardest change of all.

6. Conclusion: Resolving the Paradox

The paradox of African knowledge systems is not that Africa lacks knowledge. It is that the institutional infrastructure built to manage knowledge has been systematically misaligned with the

conditions under which knowledge can be effective. Repository designs that assume contribution without incentives, sustainability models that assume domestic budget absorption without institutional preparation, quality frameworks that exclude practitioner knowledge, and platform architectures that ignore interoperability have collectively produced an ecosystem of impressive platforms with modest impact.

Resolving the paradox requires thinking about knowledge hubs not as platforms but as systems. A platform is a technology. A knowledge system is a social and institutional arrangement that uses technology to connect knowledge producers with knowledge users in ways that improve the quality of decisions. Building better platforms is necessary but not sufficient. Building better knowledge systems requires addressing the incentive structures, governance arrangements, capacity conditions, and cultural contexts that determine whether knowledge actually moves.

Africa's development challenges are too urgent and too complex for the continent to keep relearning the same lessons. The infrastructure for a different approach exists. The organizational experience is accumulating. What is needed is the political and institutional will to treat knowledge management as a core governance function rather than a communications project, and to invest in it accordingly. That shift, more than any particular platform design, is what will determine whether Africa's knowledge systems finally begin to live up to their promise.

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