Shaping solutions from learnings in PAIs: a Blueprint

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Shaping solutions from learnings in PAIs: a Blueprint

STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** The paper presents a blueprint of a portal that enables a learning interface. This is between experience sharers and solution seekers in the domain of Poverty Alleviation Interventions (PAIs). Practitioners working on PAIs are often confined to searching from within 'lessons learned' repositories, and also from within limited networks configured by aid agencies and consultancies. They do not, as of yet, have access to a comprehensive portal that explores the pool of knowledge carriers, and evaluates their efficacy in contributing to customised solutions.

**Design:** The paper critiques the sufficiency of existing processes for feedback generation and feed-forward thereof to support PAIs. We illustrate how the proposed internet enabled interface it can deliver to specific issues and problems across differing PAI contexts.

**Findings:** The SOLVER portal and its process map are configured and simulated using case vignettes present an interface environment between sharers and seekers for shaping customized solutions from past experiences for PAIs.

**Originality and Value:** Improving the performance of PAIs is crucial for societal goals of equitable living and access to opportunity spaces. PAIs practitioners are aware of the wealth of past experiences, but then, struggle to find a coherent and approachable portal that can churn these in response to their specific and contextual needs.

*Keywords:* feedback, seekers, sharers, facilitator, portal, poverty alleviation.

Article classification: General Review
Shaping solutions from learnings in PAIs: a Blueprint

Poverty alleviation interventions and performance

Performance narratives of poverty alleviation interventions remain much discussed and extensively archived. The emphasis on learning from poverty alleviation efforts to improve subsequent interventions is an omnipresent facet of policy and practice. In addition to helping improve the effective use of aid for poverty alleviation, pursuit of reducing disparity across human development indicators has always, and continues to, underpin key goals of individuals, communities, corporations and governments.

Aspirations of the relatively deprived to reduce distances with what they can see as better living conditions, and of the relatively affluent, to exist in a healthier society are symbiotic in nature. Individuals higher up on the living conditions ladder could have to contend with disparity driving the relatively deprived to forcefully acquire what systemic defects have refused them. The deprived on the other hand often stand exploited in a setting where they denied the choice to ‘functionings’ by compressing their capabilities set as articulated by Noble Laureate Amartya Sen (Sen, 2005). Corporations are concerned about quality of resources, the security of returns, and robustness of the market, usually compromised in an economy marked by huge disparities. For governments’ inclusion of the equitability premise has become ever more fundamental in shaping policies for ‘socio-economic’ development to complement the agenda of GDP growth (Ortrud, 2011; Lin, 2011).

Efforts towards improving the design and delivery of PAIs have been a function of constant debates and re-calibrations (Alsop et al., 2002; Saunders & Naidoo, 2009). These are oft manifested in macro level policy shifts and in aid orchestration, to ever ingenuous micro level
initiatives. The latter are often led in design and delivery by voluntary sector organisations and ‘grassroots’ development practitioners with small scale networks. The larger programs, in contrast, comprise projects with relatively complex stakeholder network of aid agencies, governments, local bodies, technology related domain support agencies, and of course the target beneficiary community themselves (Rafael & Boglio, 2008; Sharma, 2007). Despite this elaborate schema and generous repository of knowledge from a legacy of such interventions, the remarkable difficulty in seeing an intervention being successfully replicated, or more realistically learnings thereof providing focussed solutions to problems being faced in ongoing interventions, is rather confounding (e.g. Alvarez & Barney, 2013; Goel & Rishi, 2012).

Several success stories are heralded as shining stars, but interestingly, hardly any have been successfully taken forward in terms of matching up with the success of the first in the sequel. Numerous examples can be listed including Grameen Bank and Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) in Bangladesh (Economist, 2012); Social and Health Services Intervention in Argentina by United Nations development Fund (UNDP) (UNDP, 2014); Evergreen agriculture initiative in Eastern Africa (WAFC, 2014) and; Life-spring Hospitals in South India (BCAI, 2014), among others. These are but a few of several acclaimed interventions that can be found in listings on public portals of most aid agencies. There are well made case for insufficiency of appropriately feeding forward - learning from experience, of both failures and successes (Easterly, 2007; Tendler, 1989). In highlighting issues to do with smoothening out the process and enhancing outcomes from PAIs, it is only fair to highlight recent achievements. The 2013 Global monitoring report of the International Monetary fund claims that “....goal of cutting extreme income poverty in half by 2015 was
met ahead of time in 2010. The goal of halving the proportion of people without access to clean water and the goal of achieving a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020—were also achieved ahead of time in 2010....” (IMF, 2015)

Despite less than desirable levels of feed forward to inform design and delivery of PAIs, what ‘has been’ achieved underlines the potential of ‘what can be’ achieved, by enhancing the number of interventions that are successful. The answer to the question: How can the design and delivery of PAIs be better informed? Also has an answer for: how can ‘aid effectiveness’ be improved?

Feeding forward past experiences for enhancing performance

Attempts at taking forward lessons from both failures and successes for design and delivery of new interventions confront the much discussed Icarus Paradox (Miller, 1990). This paradox implies that success in particular often makes for the foundations of failure when it is taken to extremes. By extension, the ‘myopia’ this paradox seeks to caution us about includes being aware of the failings in trying to overtly worked lessons from post-hoc analyses seen as crucial for success of ‘what was’ (a superior performance) or ‘could have been’ (a lesser performance). By nature, and also as per the conventional understanding of projects, PAIs are very unique in context, their socio-political moorings, and in the orientation of the target beneficiary community, to pin a few factors that comprise uniqueness and present barriers to feeding forward lessons from prior interventions (Hess and Polednakova, 2013). There is a huge dossier of experiential narratives and lessons that can be found at the click of a button, in repositories of aid agencies and public sector organisations. These are indispensable as references when it comes to designing new interventions. This is despite the Icarus Paradox, and rightly so, because success and failures both have to be kept in perspective. It is
however the extremes to which they are taken in analysing performance and drawing applicable lessons thereof, that should be of concern.

Momentum of a PAI is often punctuated by issues and problems that require customised solutions. These need to be embedded in the specific context of what defines the problem within the ambits of the intervention. Practitioner networks and the biblical ‘lessons learned’ dossiers promise solutions but exist mostly as a useful ‘search’ portal. The search outcomes have to be churned and made sense of to yield useful inputs. These then require extensive customising to the issue or problem at hand by practitioners facing the problem. Solutions or a spread of solutions that align with the problem are of course useful once distilled. However, focussed solutions to alleviate issues need to be marked with a superior value proposition. These cannot always come from within captured lessons from repositories build on limited networks to scope solution search.

**Adequacy of knowledge resources and networks in the arena**

There exist initiatives like the Capacity for knowledge Management in Organisations (CKMO) of the World Bank Institute with an ‘informal advice’ component leading to ‘potential’ technical assistance (World Bank, 2014). Knowledge from the Bank’s interventions manifested in its experts’ experiences and lessons repositories remains a fundamental resource here. However, the CKMO does not outline any process rubrics to shape advice, or evidence of evaluating how suggestions have or have not worked. Initiatives on ‘knowledge sharing for development’ of the bank are analogous to what other agencies seem to be doing (World Bank, 2015). For instance, the UNDP’s knowledge management strategy recognises external networks but remains focused on a repository development and exchange approach: “…evidence collection, analysis, knowledge capture, generation and
exchange initiatives and engagement in policy debate, or indirectly by improving organizational effectiveness and efficiency and fostering a culture of learning and exchange...” (World Bank, 2014)

Such initiatives seek to bring together various agencies and grassroots organisation to enhance knowledge systems and create open source content for use alongside enhancing capabilities to use them. The Global Development Network (GDN) seeks to ‘produce structure and mobilize knowledge and networks extensively for enhancing development research capacity’ (UNDP, 2014, GDN, 2014; Larson et al., 2006). The focus is once again on the oft emphasised socio-technical schema to do with creation of knowledge and enhancing capabilities to search and synthesise for useful outcomes, with an ever increasing emphasis on networking (Coakes, 2006). However, they are not oriented towards design and delivery problems that need solutions at the time- a clear gap that is worth filling to enhance value from customised leveraging of knowledge and expertise.

**Foundations of the ‘SOLVER’ portal**

There are also a few independent online portals pitched as ‘design competitions’ with a collaborative interface like ‘Ashoka Changemakers’. These seek to promote novel approaches for fuelling innovation in how poverty alleviation initiatives are scoped and programmed. As the most elaborate of such portals, the Changemakers’ portal brings collaboration and competition in a very useful interface.

It seeks to help frame interventions, and develop community network to support novel ideas across a range of themes. A ‘fellowship’ mandate draws experts to create a global pool of support for bright ideas incubated and gestated at Changemakers’ (Changemakers, 2014).
Such online portals are also not focussed on providing a link between sharers and seekers to deal with ‘live’ problems. However, the networking premise that these have is in sync with the emphasis on knowledge creation and sharing in the wider development community. A highlight being – successful leveraging of the World Wide Web to reach out and connect. Dropping the gap articulated into this recipe i.e. “Lack of customised solutions for live problems facing ongoing interventions, and with some assurance for their quality and potential impact” - gives us the foundations for SOLVER.

In the proposed ‘SOLVER’ portal, the blueprint to which follows, sharers do not deposit experiences or create broad suggestions, but attempt to provide customised solutions that are evaluated in impact. Similar honing of sharer seeker interaction has been attempted in knowledge management interventions by corporations. Such attempts demonstrate harnessing of expertise to generate solutions, in a ‘project based’ way of functioning that dominates contemporary working of organisations (Shenhar, Dvir, Ofer & Maltz, 2001). Of course, developing such a template for informing sharing and seeking of solutions in poverty alleviation initiatives needs much caution. The external plane is much wider rather than being confined to a single organisation’s/ a niche network’s operations. The nature of stakeholders is also much more heterogeneous, and so is their ability to engage with such solution formulation. With these moderating aspects in mind, the paper can now present a blueprint for a solution focussed and internet enabled environment labelled the ‘SOLVER’.

**Blueprint for the SOLVER portal**

**INITIATION** as in seeding of the portal for the first year will require creating an initial pool of SHARERS through invitation to practitioners and/or experts. Some evaluation of profiles may be required for all SHARERS including for those that apply to enrol as such. The portal
will need to be heavily publicised for SEEKERS to register and post queries. Anyone will be able to register and log in as a SEEKER provided they submit valid identification scans. The FACILLITATOR portal – as core of the operational set up will be a team recruited with experience in development practice and oriented to work this online portal. Other set up requirements will include a small administration and portal management team, and a governing body of course (lead funding agencies to kind of underwrite). The table below shows the operating process that underpins the portal

| Insert Table 1 about here |

The initiation part of the SOLVER portal at inception is crucial like all virtual world engines and all initiatives that seek to evolve through networks as fundamental to their performance. Front end configuration of the portal is the first step, and cannot be emphasized more, as noted in the initiation note that preambles the blueprint. The operational outline - ‘A’, ‘B’, ‘C’ and the organiser block comprise a flow template marked by key components of the process in CAPS like ‘seekers’, ‘sharers’, ‘seek note’, ‘facilitators’, ‘expert’, ‘open’ and ‘leader boards’ that will require detailed design in embedment within the online portal (see blueprint above). Value proposition for key players in the schema is also built in. The incentives part is crucial as outlined in the organiser block -central to its sustainability and quality of solutions. Resource issues in configuring the portal are also implied in the initiation note, and will be reasonable particularly when benchmarked on the amount spend on networking efforts in contemporary times.
One more important differentiator is that the seekers’ knowledge and requirements are brought in as explicit expressions to orient sharer inputs. This transcends the gap between lessons learned very specific to their contexts and solutions that are required for problems in ongoing contexts. With the life span of PAIs (on an average) being considerably more than more conventional understanding of projects, ambitious time slots can also be revisited in the blueprint of the SOLVER portal. It could be altered to suit the ‘urgency’ of the seeker.

With success on the ‘leader board’, sharers in particular can get biased towards their past suggestions and be oriented to overtly replicate the basic premises for other solutions. This also stands moderated in the SOLVER – again by bringing the seeker perspective into evaluating utility, and also to some extent by maintaining the confidentiality of the sharers and their rankings at the time. The latter to prevents seeker’s bias in choosing the solution, apart from of course the influence of ‘expert’ and ‘open’ classifications that are send out along with solutions.

**Simulating scenarios of using SOLVER**

The paper has discussed the utility of the SOLVER portal and presented a blueprint. The portal enhances aspirations by proposing a focussed deployment of expertise and ideas to shape solutions for problems that ongoing interventions face. At this point musings are likely to be about if in time solutions through the SOLVER could have really enhanced the effectiveness of past PAIs. To help with these musings a few simulated scenarios might be of interest. These are narratives from direct experience of what actually transpired, and bring into discussion the role SOLVER could have played. What may have come through as lessons learned, could instead, have been pre-empted, and solved en-route the intervention to enhance its performance.
The first scenario is that of a reproductive and sexual health project in hilly regions in a cluster in South East Asia. The awareness campaign, invariably from a successful good practice template, included targeting the idea of multiple sexual partners as improper, and had a rather negative impact on the community’s uptake of the intervention. The reason was the practice of ‘polyandry’ in this region with was a sensitive socio-cultural aspect to confront so directly. Furthermore, as post-hoc analysis showed, even logically it seemed rather weak to do so. The reason was that small land holdings in hills meant that polyandry actually prevented fragmentation of land holdings. All brothers marrying the same women meant no fragmentation of land, keeping it viable to practice agriculture and animal husbandry. It thus prevented migration to the plains to seek new livelihoods. This could in turn also enhance sexually transmitted diseases, even if, somehow, inducing a single partner system reduced it on the other hand. The intervention in its life span had poor success in affecting the sexual and reproductive health indicators. Considerable resources were poured in to provide materials and awareness for promoting safe reproductive health sexual practices. Emphasis on increasing the ‘ability’ of the community to engage due to access issues and communication problems in hilly areas yielded less than desired results. This was because most of the community was not ‘willing’ to engage.

It thus became a lesson learned to take forward particularly for interventions in hilly regions, and for safe sexual practices. Of course this aid agency that led the intervention in partnership with local government and voluntary sector organisations, will not repeat the mistake in a very similar context. However, every other intervention they will be involved in is likely to bring multiple issues. Though these may include this particular aspect, but it will be alongside others, shaping a rather unique context.
A SOLVER portal posting on poor uptake of the intervention much earlier could have come from any stakeholder in delivery system and thereby may have broken the myopic bounds. If this issue was recognised, similar articulation from the portal would have provided validation of its importance and consequent uptake by others. ‘Exploitation’ as drawing on past certainties can very usefully meet ‘exploration’ (March, 1991) as potentially novel insights to consider, which the SOLVER will validate and ‘form’ as focussed solutions.

Let’s look at another scenario, very different in scoping of the problem/issue. This is that of a drinking water and sanitation initiative in a region that is marked by high water table, and instances of heavy floods. An intervention on the much smaller scale relative to the one described above was launched here by local NGOs supported by a relatively small and independent national level funding body. The intervention managed to change behaviours towards drinking water and sanitation over time. It also successfully introduced artefacts that were indigenously made and promoted ecological sanitation, including during floods. Indigenous ways of rain water harvesting and artefacts that allowed filtering of water also showed good uptake by the community after about four years of work.

However, for sustainability an increase in number of trained local artisans was required. These needed to be oriented towards making such artefacts, something that was very easily adaptable to their key skills of pottery, masonry and bamboo craft. Resource support was of course required for training Self Help Groups (SHGs) comprising these artisans. The goal was to sustainably support the drinking water and sanitation initiative by creating a mutually enabling interface with this sister micro-enterprise intervention. The NGOs partnering to deliver this intervention were facing issues in balancing expansion of supply with demand, and of assuring income levels to the artisans who came onboard. They tried generating seed
capital with very moderate success as plans showed the enterprise’s inability to create surpluses before four years. Funding for this sister initiative was outside the mandate of the local funding body. The promised support for five years to run the drinking water and sanitation campaign was also going to end soon.

The issue is thus very specific: *Ways to support artisans, and sustain the “main intervention” on drinking water and sanitation awareness for four more years. This is before surpluses could kick in and these two could come together in a mutually enabling interface.*

*SOLVER portal posting* would go out to micro-enterprise specialists and also specialists in creating hybrid multivariate interventions. Suggestions could scope solutions, for example:

To begin with a ‘seeding pattern’ can be created where a few groups of artisans are trained. Then each member goes out as a lead to train more artisans. Initial income (I = sales-material costs) would go towards paying significantly more to the lead artisan (say I *0.50) and also pay for the main intervention’s support (I*0.10), the rest being available for distribution amongst in training artisans say, numbering five in each SHG. Each subsequent group would create more trained members to become leads, and in time, support for seeking funding support at the level of the SHG from banks would be a help the NGOs facilitating the campaign would provide. ‘Micro-level’ loans would be easy to procure and will maintain growth in SHG production to meet demand that was generous and something the main interventions was already working on. The artisans are required to give some time to training and the SHG, while they work on their routine jobs in the remaining time. Reasonable accrual of income to an artisan may come as soon after he or she seeds a new group, rather than wait for the whole intervention to start making surpluses. The seeding pattern can be promoted till a certain stage to manage the supply and demand balance. The groups could also be helped
with management of funds and reworking what they give to the main intervention not as promoters but as an agency that drives demand. This is just a small take on a more elaborate outline of how the issue facing this intervention could be worked at with smaller funding support to buy in artisans’ involvement in a focussed manner. Of course this is just one practitioner articulating here, more breakthrough and complementary suggestions could combine for the ‘seeker’ through the portal.

Conclusions

We posit that the SOLVER is likely to enhance the motivation of practitioners in poverty alleviation initiatives by being a solution oriented port of call. It makes use of the experience and knowledge in networks to with a more applied perspective. This is about specifically and precisely targeting improvement in resource use and by extension aid effectiveness - as against creating ‘potentially’ useful repositories that may or may not be successfully searched for solutions, given the time and ability required to do so. Being on the virtual space means that a comprehensive range of development practitioners can be brought to deliver ‘solutions’, where they can seek both esteem and monetary benefits. The uptake of SOLVER that is at this point in time a concept being tabled in this paper will be contingent on how policy makers and aid agencies promote it, and how the Sharers and Seekers associate with it. The need to highlight and evaluate its functioning will not only amplify its reach – crucial for it to act beyond localised networks, i.e. as a global network generating solutions. The attitude in practice and of communities that comprise not only beneficiary communities but also other stakeholder communities like aid agencies and policy makers will become more explorative. This is of course while making for customization in context (solutions to specific problems)
and within the scope of a given particular PAI design - to control for sporadicness in
suggestions that are taken forward.

To quote Niels Bohr (Ottavani, 2004, p. 34): “There are trivial truths and the great truths. 
The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false. The opposite of a great truth is also true”. The
great truth here is that ‘lessons learned’ are useful for informing the performance of poverty
alleviation intervention. The opposite of this great truth is that they are not useful as
knowledge contextualised in past interventions, unless translated into solutions to problems
being faced on existing interventions. The trivial truth of course is that seeking solutions is
equally if not more important than drawing lessons – when the issue to hand is about
enhancing aid effectiveness.
References


GDN (2014), Profile and activities, available at:


IMF (2015), The IMF and the Millennium Development Goals, available at:


Lin, J.Y. (2011), Blog posting on development talk, available at:


UNDP (2014) UNDP’s Knowledge Management Strategy, available at:


Notes

1 Blog posting by the ex- World Bank Chief Economist, Justin Yifu Lin 2011

2 Led by Mohammad Yunus, the Grameen bank intervention. Grameen Bank and Yunus received the Nobel prize (2006) and other honours like the Congressional Gold Medal (U.S, 2010). BRAC is a strong a contender for the top accolades on its transformative impact on the country’s poverty levels despite macro level growth indicators being moderate.

3 Enhancing the management of public procurement in health services in Matanza, Argentina by the UNDP -partnering public sector and none governmental bodies. The project, helped refine procurement, resourcing and delivery processes. See: UNDP success stories.

4 World Agro forestry Centre’s Initiative reached over 1 million farmers at the close of 2013, with the intent of interfacing smallholder food production with perennially maintaining green cover over farmlands.


6 The issues with replicating the Grameen Bank microfinance experience are widely reported, as but one example of star legacies not being taken forward potentially due to too much focus on imitation in replication
Table 1: Blueprint of solver

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<tr>
<th><strong>A: SEEKING</strong></th>
<th><strong>B: SCOPING SOLUTIONS FROM SHARING</strong></th>
<th><strong>C: FEEDBACK &amp; VALIDATION OF IMPACT</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>A1.</strong> Contact the SOLVER portal by registering and logging in as SEEKER &amp; post an outline of issues and problems within 1000 words.</td>
<td><strong>B1.</strong> The FACILLITATOR team classifies the responses received as under: ‘EXPERT’ and ‘OPEN’ (A4).</td>
<td><strong>C1.</strong> FACILLITATOR contacts the SEEKER in 45 days to seek views on utility and evaluate how the suggestions appeal</td>
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<td><strong>A2.</strong> A FACILLITATOR gets back with clarifications on the outline <em>(within 2 days: Cumulative 2 days).</em></td>
<td><strong>B2.</strong> The FACILLITATOR TEAM goes through SHARER notes for clarity and coherence in expression (3 days of SEEKING closure for a post: cumulative time 22 days) and seeks clarifications if any (3 days: cumulative time 25 days)</td>
<td><strong>C2.</strong> FACILLITATOR contacts SEEKER in 120 days to seek views on utility and evaluate how the suggestions have worked/ how they met up with the promise /concerns articulated in C1.</td>
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<td><strong>A3.</strong> The SEEKER clarifies to finalise a SEEK NOTE and KEYWORDS that capture issues being faced <em>(within 3 days: Cumulative 5 days).</em> If unclear / not responded to then the problems posting is marked as ‘exited’ and requires reposting.</td>
<td><strong>B3.</strong> All SHARER notes are ranked on clarity and coherence and labelled</td>
<td><strong>C3.</strong> FACILLITATOR generates feedback note and rank the utility of</td>
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<td><strong>A4.</strong> SEEK NOTE* is posted on open share for SHARERS. Also, individuals emails are automatically</td>
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*SEEK NOTE*
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<td>6</td>
<td>send out to ‘expert’ SHARERS triggered by key words.</td>
<td>‘expert’ or ‘open’ by two FACILLITATORS to converge ranking. A maximum of 7 based on clarity and coherence are chosen. These are posted to the SEEKER as ‘shortlisted suggestions’. The SEEKER is separately send all other suggestions also as ‘other suggestions’ (3 days: Cumulative time to posting solution from ‘SEEKING POINT’: 28 days).</td>
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<td>A5. SHARERS are asked in the communication (by email -experts and others on open portal) to respond within 1000 words within 14 days of the communication: 1. the solution; 2. rationale for the solution [what they are drawing on and why they think it will work]; 3. Assumptions made; 4. Additional information they would like to have and additional resources that their suggestion may require (In that order: 14 days: Cumulative 19 days).</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>*Confidentiality between sharers and seekers is important and the ‘SEEK NOTE’, and communications thereafter will be mediated by FACILLITATORS will be tailored as far as possible for this. Consultancies and individuals working their business offerings as vested</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>B4. Any queries are fed back to SHARERS for clarifying and posting back via FACILLITATORS to SEEKERS. (Typical cycle 10 days from query) and typically 2 suggestions based on C1 and pins it to suggestions that were reflected upon.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>C4. FACILITATOR updates SHARER ratings and open vs. expert profiling. A good review on an open sharer will make him/her in the list of experts for the domain associated KEYWORDS. Poor review of an expert submission over three successive solutions will make the individual drop out of expert list for KEYWORDS.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>C5. Update “star sharers” and “value seekers”. SHARERS get scores based on utility marked by seekers and SEEKERS get scores based on feedback they provide for C1 and C2.</td>
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interest is a risk that such an approach seeks to mitigate iterations.

[ORGANISER BLOCK] O1: [From C4] update sharer ratings; O2: From D5 update “star sharers” and “value seeker” LEADER BOARDS;

O3: Value for those who engage: Annual Meeting of top 10: “star sharers” and “value seekers”; O4. Value seekers and Star Sharers get to network with key resource providers including aid agency personnel; O5 Star Sharers get monetary awards and public recognition.