Parallel working group: Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing: a global challenge

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Abstract

While there remains a huge concentration of knowledge production activities in the developed countries, the last twenty years have seen a major shift in worldwide access to codified knowledge. The role of information and communication technologies has been instrumental here, as has been that of more capital and organisational embedded forms of technology transfer such as foreign direct investment. Today one of the most important enabling features for development is knowledge access. Access is, however, not required to knowledge under such codified or capital embedded forms alone, but also to the tools and (legal) ability to replicate and improve upon knowledge. For developing countries it is no longer access to knowledge as passive producers/consumers which fitted well with the old development model where developing countries would be treated as consumers who would not have the ability to innovate or, if more industrially advanced, would imitate production methods developed elsewhere. The cases reviewed in the paper show that while access to codified knowledge may build skills through passive absorption (e.g. through textbooks), access to technology in a form that can be shared and modified without entry barriers can build advanced skills and compensate for the absence of formal training. While access to knowledge as a passive process is politically framed within the language of development aid, access to technology as a way of providing the right and ability of participation is analogous to the arguments favouring free trade: developing countries can then be seen as providing a resource of potential innovators, rather than merely using existing innovations from the developed world.

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