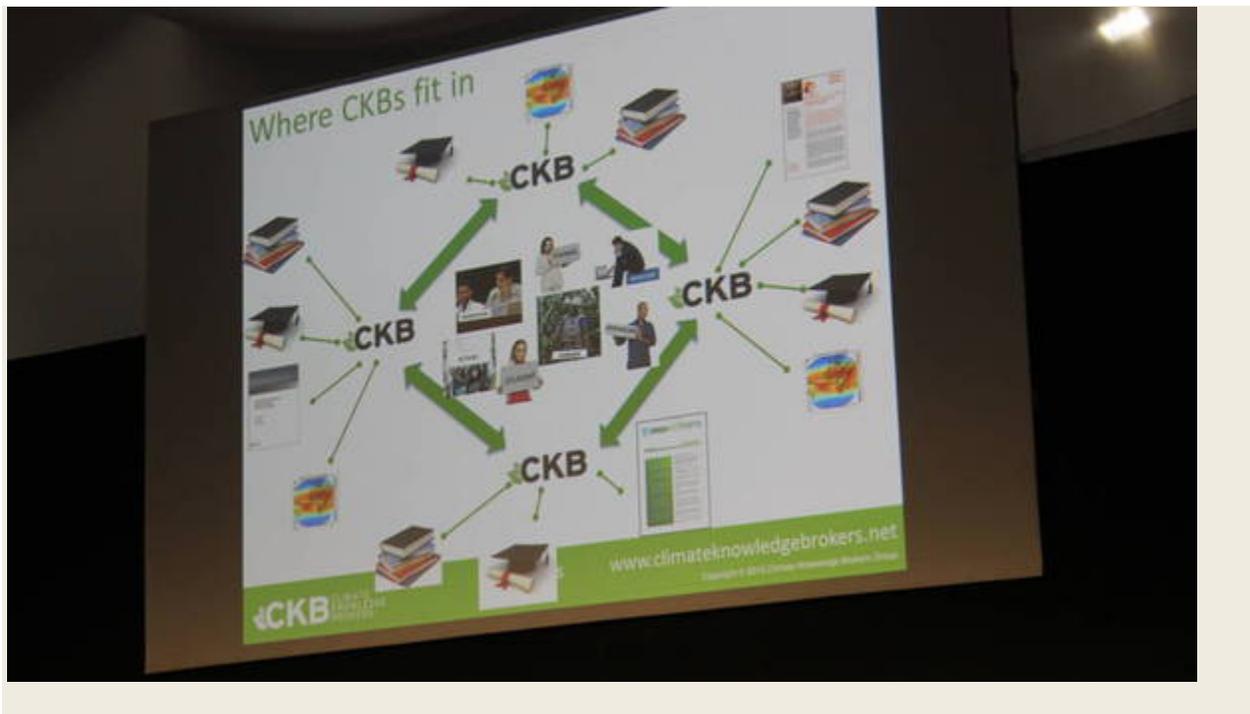


# HOW TO AVOID DROWNING IN A SEA OF CLIMATE DATA



One of the side events on the first afternoon at the UN's COP 20 climate summit tapped into my love-hate relationship with our age of information abundance (or is that overload?). More to the point, it made a case for getting to grips with this challenge in order to accelerate progress on climate adaptation — through marshalling what the speakers called 'climate knowledge brokers'.

The event was organised by the Climate Knowledge Brokers Group, an alliance of 50 organisations working to improve access to climate- and development-related information.

Martin Hiller, director-general of the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Partnership (REEEP), kicked off the session with the remark that, historically,

organising knowledge has been crucial to developing better understanding in every culture. He labelled knowledge brokers as “twenty-first century librarians”. And he later used more colourful metaphors to nice effect: the information highway isn’t a highway any more, he said, but more like a messy heap of spaghetti carbonara.

What we need, Hiller said, is a “smart knowledge grid” that — through shared tools — streamlines the sharing of information and steers knowledge to those who need it in a way that adapts to changing needs and technologies.

I found myself getting excited by the prospect of a world where it’s easier to find, filter and make sense of scientific information on climate and development — a sentiment later tempered by thoughts of the complexities of making this happen.

The global data-churning machine is not about to stop any time soon. So this is a promising initiative to watch.

- Anita Makri

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Geoff Barnard, chair of the Climate and Development Knowledge Network, continued the argument for why we need a climate knowledge grid. Two things that have changed since the UN’s 1992 sustainable development summit in Rio are the “information explosion” and the “internet revolution”, he said. But more data are not a good thing if you’re drowning in them; and having more information portals is not necessarily progress.

This is where climate knowledge brokers fit in, said Barnard. They would

connect data producers with users, using the internet as a tool — but not the only tool — for people to find, filter, discuss and make sense of information.

This year, the group set up a REEEP-hosted secretariat they call the Coordination Hub. Among other activities, this organises ‘knowledge clinics’ to facilitate personal interaction between members of the group and deploys online tools such as Climate Tagger, which aims to develop a standardised way of tagging and connecting climate information from various users. The vision is one where climate knowledge brokers, or CKBs, facilitate information sharing between sources and users, who are firmly placed at the centre of the grid.

The CKB principle has some enthusiastic early adopters. Karina Larsen of the Climate Technology Centre & Network (CTCN), a new organisation affiliated to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change that focuses on climate tech transfer and implementation, said that being part of the group has helped her organisation create a portal of data on climate vulnerabilities, access practical advice through knowledge clinics and — through Climate Tagger — collaborate with users for better technology transfer.

The India Environment Portal run by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) is another early adopter. But towards the end of her talk about the benefits of the portal, CSE’s Kiran Pandey raised a key challenge: how to ascertain the accuracy of data held by different parties.

The discussion that followed also raised questions over how to access data behind paywalls, or otherwise protected by those who hold them. And as the session progressed, I kept thinking back to my own and others’ attempts to tame this new

world of information overabundance by organising and consolidating. They are attempts that leave me with an aftertaste of futility. Perhaps because the pace of data production usually outpaces that of organising it; perhaps also because complex, dynamic and decentralised systems of data production are poorly suited to firm structures.

But the CKB group's focus on networks and personal interaction between brokers and users suggests that this could be a more agile system. One of the questions from the audience was about its impact, to which the speakers admitted to needing better information on the difference their activities have made. Setting up a monitoring and evaluation system for their work is one of their next steps, as is enlisting more partners.

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