

Networking and communicating research

By Andrew Chetley, Director, Exchange¹

When you put networking and communication in the same sentence, the usual connection is with wires and other technologies. For the purposes of this paper, I'm mainly talking about the human *process* of networking and communicating rather than the tools and technologies by which it might be carried out.

In this paper I want to explore three questions:

- Why is networking important in communication?
- Why is networking important in research?
- Is networking important in communicating research?

First, however, it is worth defining networking. Paul Starkey provides one of the best definitions¹:

Networking involves making contacts and encouraging reciprocal information exchange and voluntary collaboration.

He adds that the process of networking is more important than the development of a structured network. He also notes that not all information exchange or collaborative action is necessarily networking. Dissemination of information is not by itself networking. There needs to be some dialogue, some reciprocity, some mutual interaction.

This definition is reinforced by the work of Paul Engel, the current director of the European Centre for Development Policy and Management (ECDPM). He says that networking is more than simply working together, but includes achieving 'social synergy'. He says, 'networking adds a fundamentally new quality to human cooperation. It enhances inclusive thinking, creativity and dialogue.'²

Why is networking important in communication?

Networking is the essence of communication and is impossible without communication. Communication can be described as³:

a process for partnership and participation that is based on two-way dialogue, where there is an interactive interchange of information, ideas, techniques and knowledge between senders and receivers of information on an equal footing, leading to improved understanding, shared knowledge, greater consensus, and identification of possible effective action.

¹ Exchange is a networking and learning programme that promotes effective health communication. Established in 2000, it is financed by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and hosted by Healthlink Worldwide.

The similarity with the networking definition is clear. Effective communication relies on feedback, interaction, the quality of the relationship, the level of trust, and the degree of willingness to explore options and share understanding. So does effective networking.

Networking builds links and connections among people who have different perspectives – different takes on the world they see. When they start communicating about those perspectives, the opportunities to discover new insights, new ideas and to shape new approaches come to life. The example of networking and communicating by women’s groups around progress at the Conference on Global Knowledge illustrates the point (see box 1).

1. Using networking to communicate change

In June 1997, women used their established communication and networking powers to advocate for an important shift in thinking at the Conference on Global Knowledge held in Toronto, Canada. They were able to convince the conference that the new technologies have to be designed in order to incorporate and build on women’s knowledge and understanding of what women daily deliver.

Source: Harcourt, W. (n.d.) Women Creating Global Communication. Society for International Development Available at:

<http://www.sidint.org/programmes/knowledge/Womencreatingcomm.PDF>

Why is networking important in research?

Although it might be useful to try to define research, it is probably best to follow the lead set out in the DFID research policy paper and acknowledge that there is not a lot to be gained by doing so. Instead, the concept of thinking of the range of research activities that are possible as being part of a complex ‘knowledge system’ is likely to be more productive.⁴

As DFID points out:

networks and trust relationships between the various players are central to knowledge systems, primarily because they lower transaction costs and form the key communication channels between suppliers and users.

It is hard to imagine effective research on poverty issues being carried out in situations that are disconnected from the systems and environments that are being affected. A key issue in research and knowledge sharing is the relevancy of the findings to the local situation. The European Hub of the Global Development Network (GDN) has pointed out how important it is to generate local knowledge to share with local policy-makers to lead to the solution of local problems.⁵ Although it seems self-evident, as the GDN says: ‘The generation of local knowledge requires being in touch with local researchers’.

The Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) has noted recently that ‘often the most exciting developments in science arise from chance encounters between individuals struggling with the same issue from different

perspectives who, together, are able to solve big puzzles. The CIHR's challenge is to cultivate such encounters, making them happen routinely rather than by chance.⁶ In other words, stimulate the networking.

The benefits of networking in research are highlighted by the Commonwealth Science Council (CSC) in a review carried out in 1999 (see box 2). Indeed, the review identified the fundamental strength of the CSC to be its networking.⁷

2. Benefits of networking in research

Networking:

- Helps attract co-funding
- Enables sharing of capacity and strengthening of capacity
- Provides 'eyes and ears' for identifying national and regional needs
- Enables global challenges to be addressed more effectively
- Enhances innovation
- Encourages ownership and cooperation
- Stimulates new ways of communicating
- Helps match needs and solutions

Source: Commonwealth Science Council. 1999. Knowledge Networking for Development: Science and technology for the millennium. Report of the CSC Steering Group

So is networking important in communicating research?

Networking is fundamental to both doing and communicating research. When networking forms part of the process of doing research, a set of channels for disseminating and communicating the results of the research are already likely to be in place,

Communicating research is essential to getting the results of research used. Everything we know about communication tells us that the more involved the receivers of the communication are in helping to develop the content of the communication, the more likely they are to respond to it and act upon it.

Having a plan for communicating the learning that comes from research to those who most need to apply the learning is critical to achieving change. Box 3 describes the way the US Department of the Environment identified communication and networking as key elements in ensuring the benefits of a particular way of working was applied throughout the organisation at both headquarters and local level and among its external contractors and suppliers.

This illustrates the importance of the feedback loop in research. At its most basic, research is about asking questions. The answers to those questions are the first elements of feedback that helps to refine the questions, hone the relevancy of the investigation, and focus it more on practical application. As further results are communicated and applied, more feedback is generated, more questions generated, and a knowledge system begins to grow that both

identifies new research needs as helps to disseminate existing knowledge more widely.

Box 3: Networking communicates operational research

The US Department of the Environment's Enhanced Work Planning (EWP) initiative has been helping the DOE move from a reactive to a more pro-active set of approaches. Along the way, it has saved money, streamlined work practices, and led to greater ownership of key technical and process improvements as the DOE's approaches have been undergoing major changes. The DOE has found that 'communication is a critical link to navigating these changes'. It established a clear communication plan to enhance communication of the lessons learned in developing EWP. Improving the networking and communication among those involved in implementing EWP was a key goal in the plan. The DOE identified that informal networking was a critical element in the success of the take up of the EWP process and that its communication had to ensure that it continued to act as a catalyst to enable this networking to continue and to grow.

Source: US Department of the Environment. 1999. EWP Communication Plan.
<http://tis.eh.doe.gov/wpphm/ewp/complan.htm>

One of the tools, but certainly not the only one, for using networking to communicate research is via the Internet, as Peter Ballantyne describes in Box 4.

Box 4: Communities of interest share knowledge

Just as professional associations, journals and libraries cater for specific groups, users of the Internet are clustering in communities around issues and problems. Helping to sustain these 'communities of interest' is becoming one of the most productive uses of the Internet and organisations are linking their strategies with communities, in two main ways:

- *As a way to target knowledge.* Community members share certain characteristics and information-seeking behaviours, they communicate with one another, and they look for similar kinds of information. Thus, they can be reached through similar information resources and tools.
- *As a platform for joint action.* Organisations that want to share or disseminate information on similar issues are forming communities to better communicate their messages, to attract visitors, to maximise scarce resources, and to increase their impact and visibility.

Source: Ballantyne, P.G. 2000. Investing in Knowledge: Sharing Information Resources on the Web. Infobrief 3. Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management

One such community is the Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research. It emerged out of a recognition that a body was needed to act as an advocate for health policy and systems research (HPSR) at the international level, link with networks, countries and agencies involved in this field of research, promote capacity building, commission key pieces of research and the

development of tools and methodologies, and ensure widespread communication of research products.⁸ The increasing diversity of agencies involved in work relevant to HPSR at both international and national levels creates the specific need for a mechanism that is capable of networking flexibly and creatively with existing agencies and initiatives.

More generally, networking as means of communicating research is about ensuring that the spaces, time and opportunities are present to enable communication to take place. A large part of the design of future research needs to include networking and communication opportunities in order to be able to deal with the complexities that are faced in researching development issues.

¹ Starkey, P. 1998. *Networking for Development*. London: International Forum for Rural Transport and Development

² Engel, P. 1993. Quoted in: Karl, M. (ed). 1999. *Measuring the unmeasurable: Planning, monitoring and evaluation of networks*. New Delhi, Women's Feature Service

³ Exchange. 2001. Health Communication. Website:

[Hhttp://www.healthcomms.org/comms/index.html](http://www.healthcomms.org/comms/index.html)H

⁴ Surr, M. et al. 2002. *Research for poverty reduction: DFID research policy paper*. London: DFID

⁵ Anon. 2001. *Strengthening Networking in Development Research and Policy*. Bonn: European Hub of the Global Development Network

⁶ Hurley, J. et al. 1999. *Integrating Health Services Research into the CIHR*. Available at: [Hhttp://www.chsrf.ca/docs/finalrpts/HIDG/hurley.pdf](http://www.chsrf.ca/docs/finalrpts/HIDG/hurley.pdf)H

⁷ Commonwealth Science Council. 1999. *Knowledge Networking for Development: Science and technology for the millenium. Report of the CSC Steering Group*. London: CSC

⁸ Mills, A. 2000. The Alliance for Health Policy and Systems Research: its status, functions and plan of work. Available at:

[Hhttp://www.globalforumhealth.org/Non_compliant_pages/forum3/forum3doc311.htm](http://www.globalforumhealth.org/Non_compliant_pages/forum3/forum3doc311.htm)H