OPINION
World Summit on Sustainable Development
2002

iied
International Institute for Environment and Development

The Ring alliance of policy research organisations

Effective Communications & Engagement:
Research Partnerships for Sustainable Development

Heather Creech *IISD*

Communications and engagement strategies are essential. From the beginning, research partners must build relationships with those they seek to inform, influence, and work together with for change. Partners must constantly look at how they will move their knowledge not just outward to broad audiences, but directly into practice.

The rationale for communications and engagement is well understood by research partners:

- Decision makers are more likely to consider seriously the recommendations from a research network if they have been consulted and involved at various stages in the research process.

- Building awareness in the public leads to both advocacy for and receptivity to policy changes.

However, while most individuals and organisations working in partnership recognise the importance of external communications and engagement, actual planning and implementation of strategies appears to be sporadic at best. We suggest here a number of steps to strengthen communications and engagement in research partnerships.

1. Focus on the following key elements in communications strategies

- There needs to be a compelling motive to get messages out. The passion for communications and engagement must emanate from the goal of the research network itself. If the goal is action-oriented or change oriented, then it is more likely that attention will be paid to communications. If the network is not clear on and passionate about the end purpose of its research, then members will not be compelled to do much beyond posting their findings on a website.

- Communications and engagement strategies should be planned at the research concept/proposal stage. Execution of strategies should flow throughout the research cycle:

  — **Problem definition stage:** for example, provide state of the issue information to key actors; engage them in setting the research agenda.

  — **Solution development/design stage:** for example, communicate preliminary findings to other experts in the field and to key actors. Use electronic fora to elicit views.

  — **Recommendation of solutions for implementation:** for example, establish training courses for key actors; publish findings to target audiences in position to influence key actors (get ideas into circulation); use media to build public awareness of solutions recommended in order to build base of public support.

  — **Management over the long term:** continue to provide key actors with current information on the issue.

- Audience identification must be specific, even personal (targeting individuals). Communications planning which describes target audiences in broad terms such as "decision makers in business and civil society" is ineffective.

- Even though the research may deal with a narrow and highly specialised issue, with a limited number of key actors targeted in communications and engagement strategies, nevertheless, plan for some measure of public education and awareness raising on the issue. Networks need to find ways to broaden the community of concern for the issues they are addressing.

KEY CHALLENGES:

- **Communications and engagement strategies should be planned at the research concept/ proposal stage. Execution of strategies should flow throughout the research cycle.**

- **Audience identification must be specific, even personal (targeting individuals).**

- **Messages must be communicated by a variety of voices, through a variety of communications vehicles.**

- **Global public policy networks have taught us that networks should be concerned not just with their efficiency and effectiveness but also with legitimacy.**

- **Communications and engagement strategies should be planned jointly with partners.**

2. Networks and partnership arrangements can strengthen communications and engagement on research findings

- In this day and age, a single organisation will find it increasingly difficult to be heard. Messages must be communicated by a variety of voices, through a variety of communications vehicles. This is particularly significant for research networks: the power of the network to communicate findings and recommendations lies in the multiplicity of organisations involved in the network supporting the findings and broadcasting the results.

- Global public policy networks have taught us that networks should be concerned not just with their efficiency and effectiveness but also with legitimacy. Research networks are stronger when north/south interests are incorporated, and/or local level actors involved. This increases the legitimacy of the research findings beyond what a single institution might be able to achieve.

- Networks often subdivide, branch out, or expand into regional and local networks. This ability to metamorphose helps to spread ideas further.

- Web gateways and hubs for network communications are proving to be useful mechanisms to promote not only the research coming out of the network as a whole, but also promotion of the work of individual network members. E-conferencing is proving to be a flexible tool for engaging actors and experts in short consultations to review research. Networks have more convening power for these consultations than an individual institution usually does.

- Young researchers in particular benefit from being involved in research networks. The online forums offered by networks like the Global Development Network (GDN) provide the space for young researchers to present new ideas and approaches, and to have influence with more senior network members.

3. Co-management of the communications and engagement tasks in a network is a critical success factor for the overall strategy

- Network practitioners recommend a sharing of communications tasks throughout the network, overseen and co-ordinated by the network manager.

- In particular, communications and engagement strategies should be planned jointly with partners. Partners must agree early in their work on which tools they will use, building the capacity of those partners who are not as equally prepared in terms of familiarity and infrastructure as others.

- Work with communications professionals. If a network or group of partners does not have the capacity or appropriate personnel to build and execute communications and engagement strategies, find other organisations to ally with which have those skills.

- Contract communications and engagement tasks to specialist network support groups (for example, the Sustainable Development Communications Network or the APC).

- Ally with advocacy networks, utilising the strengths of the latter to raise levels of awareness on a given issue.

4. Evaluation of outcomes is needed to determine what changes have been effected through research and communications partnerships

While there may be methodologies available to assess outcomes and results of international development assistance, little exists at present that will help networks not only to assess individual activities but to provide some means for identifying changes as a result of their collaborative work. And there is a real demand for one. Practitioners consulted in this study set only a few parameters:

- an evaluation methodology should be simple and executable by staff who are not evaluation specialists;

- evaluation should not draw excessively on resources needed for other network tasks;

- a few generic indicators should be developed, of two types: process oriented; and outcome oriented.

Recommendations for future work

1. There is a need for basic awareness raising and training among researchers in networks on the role of communications and engagement strategies in their work, and the options available to them.

2. Methodologies for i) communications and engagement strategies, and ii) evaluation of outcomes of those strategies, need to be developed and tested with research networks.

3. Donors should receive more assistance in understanding how to fund and support networks. In particular, donors should be briefed to look for communications and engagement components in network proposals, provide realistic levels of support to those tasks, and insist on implementation of those tasks rather than permitting budget variations that draw resources away from communications. ●

About the Poverty and Environment Initiative

The Poverty and Environment Initiative (PEI) aims to help countries strengthen their own capacities to fight poverty through sound and equitable environmental management. By building partnerships and supporting learning and knowledge-sharing at local, national and global levels, PEI focuses on promoting more effective ways to integrate the environmental priorities of the poor into national strategies and policy processes for poverty eradication and sustainable development. In collaboration with country-level and international partners, PEI support focuses on three broad areas:

(1) participatory research and analysis of poverty-environment linkages and their cross-sectoral relationships;

(2) multi-stakeholder processes for policy dialogue and design; and

(3) indicators and monitoring of poverty-environment trends and policy outcomes.

PEI is co-ordinated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Directorate General for Development of the European Commission.