Proving our worth: developing capacity for the monitoring and evaluation of communicating research in development

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An informal network composed of representatives from a number of UK organisations concerned about the impact of research on the reality of poverty[1] convened a workshop on 5-6 September 2006. The objectives of the workshop were to mobilise a wider group of organisations working in the field of research communication to explore and analyse the different models for monitoring and evaluating research communication.

The workshop was supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Over forty representatives from UK and international NGOs explored the subject of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) for Communicating Research. This included:

- looking at methodologies available for M&E of communication in general
- agreeing which methodologies are most appropriate to research communication
- finding ways of integrating effective M&E processes during the lifespan of the project and afterwards.

Further objectives were: to collect and collate a series of case studies demonstrating different methodologies used and the implications for assessing impact; to capture a profile of how different organisations are assessing the effectiveness of their research communication in diverse circumstances; what results they have had from these different approaches, and the relevance of these lessons for others.

The meeting was informed by a specially commissioned scoping study by Catherine Butcher and Gil Yaron[2] and the presentation of a number of case studies, which illuminated the technical challenges of this area of work.

Challenges in M&E of research communication

While there has been extensive research in a variety of development sectors from natural resources to governance many in the development community,

"Academic research does not translate into action on the ground. There has to be a link... Research is useless if it doesn't result in food on the tables of farmers."
Parkie Mbozi, Executive Director, Panos Southern Africa

including practitioners and policymakers, feel removed from this research work, feeling that it has little impact on the reality of poverty. There are an increasing number of initiatives attempting to bridge the information and cultural divide between the 'research community' and practicing development organisations including, significantly, those who work in communications.

The Central Research Department at DFID has prioritised communication as a cross-cutting theme within the institution's research and policy divisions. Ten per cent of DFID-funded research budgets is now directed to communication, underscoring an urgent need to ensure that this investment is having an impact, and that research is being communicated broadly and effectively. 'Scaling up' the impact of research, however, is tempered by significant gaps in the capacity to develop, monitor and assess communication strategies for research. Herein lies a challenge for the research community – 'to know if it's making a difference'.

At the workshop DFID pointed to the over reliance on structured reporting and monitoring activities rather than assessing impact. Additionally, there is a need for more knowledge sharing on M&E of communicating research.

To articulate the rationale for more learning in this area the following questions were formulated:

- What can we do differently to monitor communication of research?
- Is it enough to produce research and communicate it?
- What is good practice around research communication?

"There is increasing pressure on us to prove our worth, to a UK audience and to the international community."
Abigail Mulhall, Communications Team, Central Research Department, DFID

The scoping study

The scoping study functioned as a discussion paper for the event, providing an overview of key approaches and methods used in research communication. The paper presented four key findings about challenges facing the M&E of communicating research:

- the importance of having a sound conceptual framework for research communication programmes
- the difficulty of monitoring unexpected impacts of research communication programmes
- the challenge of defining potential stakeholders and audiences at an early stage
- the challenge of identifying long-term impact as opposed to 'snap-shots' of impact.

Case studies

A selection of case studies demonstrating the variety of M&E initiatives, and the range of learning that is being developed internationally, were presented by the workshop participants.[3] In addition, case studies in the scoping study further highlighted approaches used, and challenges faced by a number of practitioners in the field of research communications[4].

Key challenges identified from these case studies included:

- unidentified bias resulting from cultural factors or self-selection
- difficulties in establishing impact within the time scale of projects or programmes
- difficulties in attributing the impact of research communication to the project or programme activities themselves
- lack of strong analysis of project or programme stakeholders
- one size of M&E does not fit all and no single model or approach is likely to be appropriate for all (given that research impact can take very different forms).

Key findings of the scoping study

Conceptual frameworks

The most commonly used conceptual framework for M&E is the logical framework. However, the use of logical frameworks often presented difficulties in capturing 'network' aspects of communications. Alternative frameworks such as mapping of potential communication pathways are potentially more useful in monitoring the relationship between networks and research communications, but could also become unwieldy for complex projects involving many potential stakeholders and possible communication routes.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders, including target audiences and knowledge intermediaries, were often identified only in the broadest terms. Not enough is known about potential intermediaries, especially when it came to targeting policy makers as an audience for research communication. However, establishing an ongoing relationship with audiences and intermediaries could enhance the uptake of information and therefore act as a proxy indicator of impact.

M&E methods and tools

A range of methods and tools are currently in use, including a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative methods were more commonly used for ongoing monitoring. Semi-structured interviews were most frequently used in evaluations.

Abridged from The Scoping Study – Monitoring and Evaluation of Research Communications, by Catherine Butcher and Gil Yaron, August 2006.

Critical factors

Key considerations for effective M&E include:

- the need to collect better baseline data and engage dialogues that inform strategies
- the need for regular monitoring as well as evaluation
- the need for greater identification of audiences and pathways for the communication of research
- the need to build space for reflection and learning throughout the project cycle.

The workshop participants identified five key areas that need to be considered when thinking about effective M&E for communicating research.

1. Organisational learning

Discussion centered on the challenges involved in creating space for learning within organisations, and with partners and funders. The need for a more 'learning' approach to M&E rather than a judgment approach was emphasised. The balanced scorecard approach[5] and peer review processes were proposed as routes to gaining a more open and accepting M&E environment within individual organisations and the broader research communication community.

> **"We have to recognise that we also have a culture of 'spin' ourselves; we never seem to have problems, only challenges."**
> *Workshop participant*

2. M&E implementation tools

Existing toolkits were thought to be insufficient, with few practical examples of M&E for communicating research. Social mapping tools along with key theories and methods are essential for supporting M&E for communicating research. However, new technologies are now adding M&E options that should be publicised, for example, network analysis software and tracking electronic discussions groups.

> **"Indicators are still generally quite poor, focused at the activity level, ie publications, rather than outcomes."**
> *Workshop participant*

Another major area of discussion was the need for clear and vigorous indicators for M&E for communicating research (and for communication for development more broadly).

> **"We could be making more of the current tools being used if there was some network to bring together the learning, particularly in developing countries."**
> *Workshop participant*

However, tools and approaches were not considered necessarily key factors. Learning from others, and sharing case studies and best practice is the most vital factor in developing better M&E.

3. Stakeholder engagement

Identifying stakeholders should take place at the beginning of projects and M&E design, as well as engaging stakeholders in a participatory manner in the M&E activity.

> **"Effective communication between local community members, researchers, programmers and health ministry personnel is critical."**
> *Workshop participant*

4. Concepts and framework

Researchers and their partners need a broader choice of conceptual frameworks to engage with which should help them articulate the way they anticipate change will occur as a result of their work. Curently, there is a lack of convergence between communication theorists and evaluation theorists, and that the dominant use of the logical framework for project evaluation has advantages and disadvantages but many researchers and their stakeholders are lost for viable alternative structures to monitor and design programme work.

> **"There's no shortage of theories of how communications work. There's no shortage of how to do M&E, but there is a shortage in the intersection of these two areas."**
> *Workshop participant*

5. The audiences for M&E

Identifying the various audiences for different types of communication of research is essential; and consequently identifying audiences for the M&E of this communication. Different audiences require different communication strategies. The language of research needs to be adapted for different audiences such as policy makers, donors and institutional leaders; practitioners and fellow project and programme implementers; the research community; other audiences such as educational bodies and beneficiaries.

> **"The most important factor in M&E concerns the interests of the citizens, beneficiaries, and users of our projects. Who are we doing research for? Are we being accountable to them? These audiences are different and bring a set of tensions: striving for learning and reflection tends to be in tension with the need to be accountable."**
> *Workshop participant*

Implications

Four key next steps for the group in supporting M&E in communicating research.

1. To develop a structured peer review system for M&E initiatives.
2. To jointly work at country level across sectors, in order to maximise and learn from M&E activity in the field.
3. To share an online resource on M&E in communicating research which includes a database (with a view to sharing best practice, peer review thinking and outputs).
4. To further develop the initial scoping study, as a resource for both evaluators and researchers. This includes expanding the collection and analysis of case studies, placing emphasis on positioning M&E as a learning device and building capacity to identify intermediary indicators for research impact.

Other areas which the community of practitioners also resolved to explore include:

- the development of ethical guidelines for research communicators
- drawing on the experience from other sectors outside of development (methods, tools and approaches)
- unpacking the differences in types of research within the development sector
- identify opportunities to develop project collaboration, instead of isolated attempts and localized activities by individuals
- a lobby group to manage expectations within the development sector and raise the profile of this area of work
- training to support the development and dissemination of guidelines and engage with users.

Discussion guide

The Research Communication M&E Group put together questions which may help stakeholders engage with the issues discussed:

- What could the research community do differently to increase its impact on development practice?
- Does effective communication in research mean that findings are taken up as policy or practice?
- Do you know of any innovations in monitoring, evaluation and learning that could be useful for researchers to demonstrate their added value?

Footnotes

1 The group is a loose network of like-minded organisations and individuals working in the areas of research communications. Organisational members of the group include: The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Panos London, Healthlink Worldwide, International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), WRENmedia, SCIDEV Net, Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Development Studies Association (DSA).

2 Scoping Study – Monitoring and Evaluation of Research Communications, by Catherine Butcher and Gil Yaron, August 2006 (available upon request).

3 Panos London – case study of the RELAY programme, presented by Jo Carpenter; Bellanet Latin America – case study of developing an M&E tool with CSOs on the social impact of an ICT programme, presented by Kemley Comacho; Institute of Development Studies (IDS) – case study of documenting significant change amongst researchers, presented by Jo Wheeler; Network of Ugandan Researchers and research Users (NURRU) – case study of the research network, presented by David Obot; Gamos – case study of network analysis evaluation of the Catalyzing Access to Technology in Africa (CATIA) programme, presented by Simon Batchelor. (Powerpoint presentations available).

4 These case studies include the project ‘Shared Care’ in Health Services which was research conducted by the University of Heidelberg and the Ministry of Health in Burkina Faso; Participatory Action Research project on Fishing in Laos; Evaluation of World Wildlife Federation (WWF) People and Plants Initiative and the Science and Development Network (SciDev.Net).

5 Balanced scorecard approach: a set of different criteria to measure the institution or project against. It is a competency framework, moving from a not-so-good position to a better position. The idea is to get to a balanced situation within the organisation and the project. “It makes it normal to be not achieving everything on the spreadsheet” – Geoff Barnard, Institute of Development Studies.

For more information about the workshop, scoping study, case studies or the communicating research M&E group please contact Gabrielle Hurst on G.Hurst@ids.ac.uk; Nick Perkins on perkins.n@healthlink.org.uk; Liz Carlile on Liz.Carlile@iied.org, Joanne Carpenter on Joanne.Carpenter@panos.org.uk