SPREADING THE WORD

Practical guidelines for research dissemination strategies

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Interim findings

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ISBN Paperback 0 906055 63 6

This document is an output from a project funded by the UK
Department for International Development (DFID)
for the benefit of developing countries.
The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

Designed and produced by WEDC

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Executive summary

- The purpose of Phase 1 of ENGKAR project R7127 is to understand current thinking and approaches to dissemination of research as adopted by sector based agencies both in the UK and internationally. This facilitates an initial analysis of common dissemination strategies used, problems and constraints experienced, and factors that aid effective dissemination. This in turn is used to provide tentative guidance for research contractors and DFID alike for dissemination of research projects.
- The report relied on a variety of methodological techniques to achieve its aims. A literature review of project reports, books, academic and professional journals, conference papers and grey literature sources provided insights into current thinking and the focus of work on dissemination. Case study analysis and semi-structured interviews with key informants posed questions about *how* and *why* various research contractors approached dissemination. Discussion and recommendations are presented in Part 5.
- An analysis of the literature on the need for improved dissemination indicates that the production of research outputs should not continue without a critical consideration of the value, usefulness and impact of those outputs. Attention to the effective dissemination of research in order to realize its true potential and benefits for fellow researchers, academics, policy makers and practitioners is therefore central to development. The conventional linear model of research dissemination (where information flows directly from source to recipient) is compared with more contemporary conceptualisations of the process which emphasise interactivity, feedback and a two way flow of information. A variety of dissemination media are considered, and the literature focuses particularly on the use of intermediaries as a way of communicating and interpreting research findings, especially at the community level.
- Constraints to effective dissemination focus around barriers which prevent the researcher from disseminating their work (time, resources, perception of dissemination) and barriers to the application of research (institutional disincentives, lack of interest from policy makers). Indicators of the impact of dissemination are briefly touched on, stressing the methodological problems involved.

More specifically, it is clear that the literature lacks sufficient depth with regard to three subject areas. The first relates to the user perspectives on dissemination of research. Little consideration is given to the perspective of NGO's, CBO's, government and other development organizations in the South concerning needs, problems, constraints and priorities regarding dissemination of research. Secondly, the impact and evaluation of the success of dissemination is rarely covered in depth. There is a need for more detailed comparisons between different dissemination pathways, the application of different dissemination media for different audiences and indicators of the impact of dissemination. Thirdly, ways of overcoming barriers to dissemination.

- Analysis of the case studies surveyed indicates a degree of consensus with regard to the approach to dissemination, particularly over the need for identification of target audiences for the research; through the decentralization of dissemination activities to intermediaries; and reliance on a variety of dissemination media to enhance exposure to findings.

  An important difference in approach can be identified between the two UK and two non-UK based contractors' experiences. In both instances, the non-UK contractors had developed (as part of project proposals) a framework and strategy to guide dissemination which underpinned the research project. This framework laid emphasis on factors such as analysing the information needs of target audiences; disaggregating dissemination activities according to the relative skills of project partners; and giving dissemination a high profile throughout the course of the research. The MANAGE project encapsulates this new conceptual approach. Here, dissemination is viewed as a dialogue with project partners and a stimulus to the process of mutual learning and capacity building. Moreover, in the second phase of the project, an active dissemination strategy is being developed for wider dissemination on community management of rural water supplies in developing countries. By contrast, with the UK contractors studied, dissemination emerged in an ad hoc, informal fashion, typically at the end of the project cycle.

  Emphasis is given to the use of a decentralised dissemination approach in most of the case studies, relying on intermediaries to reach end users, particulary at community level. Closely associated with this approach is the need for rigorous monitoring and evaluation of dissemination plans. The HEP example demonstrates that dissemination cannot be assumed to proceed as planned, even when a framework has been established.

- Much dissemination of research, as practised by UK based research contractors, fails to meet certain fundamental criteria (research cannot be used unless it is available to those who might best use it, at the time they need it, in a format they can use and with findings that are comprehensible and adaptable to local circumstances). Undue emphasis is still placed on the production of a single, often lengthy output for a homogenized audience. This may be attributable to several factors, including the perceived lack of legitimacy for dissemination, the orientation of contractors towards satisfying the client or career advancement rather than optimising dissemination of findings, and the limited consultation between information producers and users of research on the types of outputs and strategies required for dissemination.
- The recommendations arising from this report are divided between those specific to research contractors and those specific to research commissioners (in this case DFID). With the former, the emphasis is on developing a stronger strategic framework to guide dissemination activities (including dissemination plans, reference to planning checklists, disaggregating outputs according to audiences and seeking to incorporate dissemination throughout the project, rather than at the project end).

  For the latter, emphasis is placed on improving the monitoring of dissemination activities, and building a system of incentives into the research contract which will encourage researchers to give a higher profile to disseminating research results. To some extent, effective dissemination channels (supported by DFID) already exist; the challenge is to provide a framework in which research contractors use these pathways more regularly. The idea of a research liaison unit is suggested, which would act to (i) facilitate information exchange internally within DFID projects, and (ii) producing a database of research work.

Acknowledgements

The following people made valuable contributions to Phase 1 of this research:

Mansoor Ali ^	Water, Engineering & Development Centre
Astier Almedom * ^	London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
Erich Baumann ^	Swiss Centre for Development Cooperation in Technology & Management
Eveline Bolt * ^	International Water and Sanitation Centre
Jeremy Cain * ^	Institute of Hydrology
Richard Carter ^	Cranfield University at Silsoe
H M U Chularathna ^	SEVANATHA Urban Resource Centre
Frank Farquharson *	Institute of Hydrology
Henry Gunston *	Institute of Hydrology
Reid Harvey	Consultant
Gillian Lewando-Hundt * ^	London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
Stephen Hussey ^	Dabane Trust
Tricia Jackson ^	Water, Engineering & Development Centre
Dick de Jong * ^	International Water and Sanitation Centre
Ripin Kalra ^	Max Lock Centre, University of Westminster
Celia Kirby *	Institute of Hydrology
Peter Kolsky	London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
Duncan Mara * ^	University of Leeds
Stephen McCord	Consultant
Silvia Ndiaye	Swiss Centre for Development Cooperation in Technology & Management
Geoff Pearce * ^	HR Wallingford
John Pickford ^	Water, Engineering & Development Centre
Ines Restrepo Tarquino *	Instituto de Investigación y Desarrollo en Agua Potable, Saneamiento Básico y Conservación del Recurso Hídrico (CINARA)
Anne-Lies Risseeuw ^	WASTE Advisers on urban environment and development

Kevin Sansom ^	Water, Engineering & Development Centre
Mark Smith	Institute of Hydrology
Sean Tyrrel ^	Cranfield University at Silsoe
Mike Webster ^	Water, Engineering & Development Centre
Melvin Woodhouse ^	UNICEF-Tanzania
Virginia Yee ^	World Bank

* denotes those persons interviewed during the course of the research
^ denotes those persons acting as peer reviewers

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List of abbreviations

CBO	Community Based Organization
CINARA	Instituto de Investigación y Desarrollo en Agua Potable, Saneamiento Básico y Conservación del Recurso Hídrico
CLIC	Community Learning and Information Centre
DFID	Department for International Development
ELBS	English Language Book Society
ENGKAR	Engineering Knowledge and Research
GARNET	Global Applied Research Network
HEP	Hygiene Evaluation Procedure
ICID	International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage
IEC	Information, Education, Communication
IIED	International Institute of Environment and Development
IoH	Institute of Hydrology
IPTRID	International Programme for Technology Research in Irrigation and Drainage
IRC	International Water and Sanitation Centre
LSHTM	London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
TOT	Training of Trainers
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UWEP	Urban Waste Expertise Programme
WS&S	Water Supply and Sanitation
WSSCC	Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council