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## Spreading the word further

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THIS PAPER OUTLINES the findings of a DFID funded Knowledge and Research (KAR) project aimed at improving the impact of KAR research through identifying and comparing appropriate dissemination strategies. It is written for those commissioned by DFID to carry out research in the water and sanitation sectors. However, it should have relevance to researchers in the wider development sector, to DFID personnel with interest in research and dissemination issues, non-DFID research contractors, and other commissioning donor agencies.

### Background to the research

A conceptual shift towards the recognition of effective dissemination of research in the development sector has taken place in recent years. This need is now acknowledged by donor agencies wanting value for money, researchers wanting the findings of their research to reach the widest possible audience and users of this knowledge for whom access to information may be problematic. Saywell and Cotton (1999) provide a useful overview of these developments and of recent calls for improved dissemination and knowledge sharing. Dissemination has also been highlighted by the World Bank (1998) and by DFID (1997) which links knowledge sharing to its aim of poverty alleviation.

It is against and out of these concerns that project R7127 *Enhancing TDR research: Practical guidance on research dissemination strategies* has developed. This project has been a two-phase study and this paper refers mainly to lessons learned in the second phase. The main output of phase one was the *Spreading the Word* publication (Saywell and Cotton, 1999). Its message is that the ongoing dissemination of research is a vital component of any project in the development sector. The essential difference between phases one and two is that the second phase explores this in consultation with Southern information users and providers.

The critical issues for phase two are to know more about the needs of Southern based information users, to understand the relative merits of different dissemination formats and pathways and to gather information on the potential indicators of the impact of dissemination.

### Phase two methodologies

The raft of methodologies included a literature review (Saywell, Woodfield and Cotton, 2000), which looked at the different dissemination pathways described in the lit-

erature and indicators of dissemination impact. The key points arising included:

- the use and usefulness of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) versus more traditional methods of knowledge transfer;
- the need to assess users' information use environments (IUEs) and
- the difficulty of identifying reliable indicators of impact.

A consultation round was undertaken with Southern-based users of Northern-based information provision and Southern-based providers of information. The project team carried out or commissioned partners (in Bangladesh, Columbia and South Africa) to undertake 24 key informant interviews, 17 case studies and eight in country workshops. Participants in workshops, case studies and key informant interviews were from a wide range of organisations: international donor agencies, national and local government, international and local NGOs, universities, research institutes, religious organisations and community based organisations. A broad range of professional roles was represented from directors, project managers and co-ordinators, sector specialists and consultants. The areas of expertise represented were water supply and sanitation service provision, sustainable development, and welfare and information management. The data collected was analysed using the *ATLAS.ti 4.2* qualitative data analysis programme. From this, it was possible to identify a number of critical themes and lessons learned, and in turn, to develop a set of guidelines.

### Lessons learned

Firstly, some general points. There is an expressed need for a peer group network of those involved in disseminating research, to share experience and learning in this area. After each consultation workshop that there was a strong general desire to continue communication with WEDC and with the other workshop attendees, to receive further documentation and outputs and to develop new initiatives. This suggests that Southern stakeholders and researchers feel isolated in this particular area of their work.

The need was also expressed for a tool that formalises what is known about best practice of each dissemination method, such as workshops, conferences, and different types of publications. This mirrors the findings of an evaluation of DFID's research dissemination (WEDC/ITAD

2002) that researchers may be specialists in their field but are less likely to be experts in knowledge management therefore require support.

Finally, the need for appropriate incentives for researchers to disseminate their research was raised. In the case of Latin America it was stated that the importance of dissemination is not widely recognised and there are few incentives to carry this out. In terms of KAR research, DFID has an important role to play in providing a supportive framework. Addressing points one and two above, could go part way to providing a solution to this lack of incentives.

## **Preliminary guidelines for research contractors**

### **Guideline one: Adopt a strategic approach to dissemination**

General thinking is towards an acceptance of the need for a strategic approach to dissemination rather than treating it on an ad hoc basis. Organisational dissemination strategies offer more than lots of individual strategies as there are potential benefits of sharing experience of reaching target audiences and of aggregating outputs for dissemination wherever possible. By bringing together different researchers and those interested in dissemination, an organisational dissemination framework can be developed based on what has been found to work. It should be noted that internal dissemination is a vital part of an effective overall strategy.

This more standardised institutional approach, where relevant, needs to be flexible enough to allow for adaptation to the circumstances, outputs and target audience needs and resources (information use environments IUEs) (Menou, 1993) related to each project. The project team and the steering committee together with its various stakeholders should take decisions about individual projects and beneficiaries, as it is they who are likely to possess the most accurate local knowledge.

### **Guideline two: Know your target audience**

The process of finding out about our users is time consuming and costly. However, to miss the target because the aim is wrong or to use an inappropriate tool to try to reach it, results in wasted effort and expense.

Awareness of socio-cultural factors is key to an understanding of target audience IUEs. Unless these are known, it is impossible to be sure of the appropriate content, format and pathway in which to send information. The fieldwork demonstrated that these factors will also vary significantly across regions and what is common practice in one location may not be useful elsewhere. It is also useful to examine traditional and mainstream information and communication channels for our own dissemination purposes, whilst not assuming that these will be the most effective vehicle. Another important aspect of assessing users' IUEs is to know about the level and types of resources at their

disposal. These factors have an important bearing on decisions made about formats in which information is presented and dissemination pathways used.

Disinterested users should not be forgotten although they may be hard to reach. Information needs to be locally relevant, possibly using an infomediary who is known to them to demonstrate the potential impact of the message.

### **Guideline three: Hitting the target**

The data suggests that a multi-channel approach to dissemination is most likely to reach the identified audience. This approach is also necessary to reach a variety of audiences and beneficiaries, since a single version of the content, presented in only one format and sent using only one dissemination channel is unlikely to have general relevance on any of these counts.

According to fieldwork evidence, as UK researchers, we need to stand back from our own conventional methods of disseminating research and to consider perhaps less conventional methods used by in-country agencies. We need to be creative and adventurous in our choice of dissemination pathways, within the limitations which project deadlines and budgets impose, and provided we have assessed the appropriateness of our method.

In order to reach a wide general audience, consider using the mass media. However, before tapping into this as a potential dissemination vehicle, check its cultural importance and reach in a particular location and ascertain what it is and is not effective for. There is some debate on the usefulness of information communication technologies (ICTs) (Heeks, 1999; World Bank, 1998) in low-income countries as this depends on the level of local and infrastructural resources. Our evidence suggests though that while we should be cautious in our use of these, ICTs do have an actual and growing potential in sometimes unlikely locations. Before discounting their use, we need to ascertain what the local situation is. Finally, the important role played by infomediaries cannot be underestimated. The local knowledge they possess of users IUEs and local information needs of organisations and communities, plus their perceived standing with target groups is invaluable. They can provide an entry point that may evade the researcher. Ideally, stakeholders who can act as infomediaries should be involved from the project outset to act as a constant dissemination channel.

### **Guideline four: Making dissemination sustainable**

Research dissemination is not a one-off event. Ideally it should involve initial announcements and awareness raising, plus interim and 'final' outputs. In order for a programme of dissemination to be sustainable, all associated costs should be itemised in the research proposal and agreed for these purposes.

One method of achieving sustainability that featured in the data is to take advantage of existing networking initiatives, to achieve a high and cost effective level of informa-

tion sharing with interested groups. Time should be spent identifying both regional and international networks relevant to the research as part of the dissemination strategy.

#### **Guideline five: What have we achieved?**

Despite the problems inherent in monitoring and evaluating the impact of our dissemination activities, it is important that it is attempted, so that we can adapt our practice according to what we learn. We can then share our success within our own organisation, or with other interested networks. A narrow range of methods has been suggested by participating organisations that have been shown to yield results including measuring the following: the frequency and nature of use of outputs; additional levels of demand for outputs from other sources; and awareness of outputs.

However, there is often confusion between whether we are measuring the results of message uptake or the use of an accurate dissemination pathway. We should first pilot our chosen indicator to confirm that we are sure about what it is we are measuring. Proxy measures of dissemination effectiveness are deliberately used and are seen to provide useful data that reflects dissemination success. Analysis of impact and uptake of research is key to any project and it is argued that efforts towards quantifying these factors can also be used to tell us something about whether we are getting dissemination right. If we combine this with more direct measures of dissemination effectiveness in the ways above suggested by our participants, we would have a combined rich source of data.

#### **Conclusions**

These guidelines are relatively broad and it has not been possible here to provide detailed examples in support of them (for further detail see Woodfield, Odhiambo and Cotton, 2002) But all the points made are taken directly from a large data set with a substantial number of organisations based in low-income countries and their employees. These provide important lessons to allow us to strengthen our own dissemination activities and to go beyond our conventional practice.

Some striking things have emerged from the consultation process, amongst them the huge enthusiasm and effort put into using a vast range of dissemination methods, some unexpected. Also surprising perhaps, is the seriousness with which this issue is perceived, and the strategies and processes that are in place. Finally and less positively, as information receivers, those consulted fare less well and this places a great responsibility on Northern based researchers to learn these lessons to improve our own dissemination practice.

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