Becoming Better Capacity Builders

What GDNet has learned about developing researchers' confidence and ability to communicate their research

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This is one of a series of short publications through which the GDNet team reflects on what it has learned about supporting Southern researchers to contribute and debate research in development thinking, policy and practice.

To many, GDNet was a portal - a knowledge hub that helped Southern researchers showcase their work more effectively so that policy debates could be better informed by outstanding policy-relevant research from the Global South. However, to nearly 250 Southern researchers who participated in one of GDNet's face-to-face workshops since January 2010, GDNet was a research communications capacity builder. What's the connection between the two?

Our five year strategy (2010-2014) was based on the premise that "good policy research, properly applied, can accelerate development and improve people's lives through informing better policy making." To support that, the GDNet portal gave researchers access to journals, data and funding news, and displayed their work to the world, but clearly this was not enough to guarantee that their research would be communicated effectively. Ensuring researchers have the confidence and ability to communicate within the research community and to policymakers is fundamental. Portal and Capacity Builder: the two go hand in hand.

Getting our own capacity built first

In the beginning our partners provided the main design and facilitation of the research communications training. GDNet's role was one of coordination between facilitators and regional network partners, with some involvement in the design of the workshop. Our intention was to become more hands-on but first we had to build our own capacity. Zeinab Sabet (the author) was recruited to the GDNet team in April 2010, to manage GDNet's Research Communications Capacity Building Programme (RCCBP). Zeinab received on-the-job training from the workshop facilitators in workshop design, on how to develop materials and deliver the workshops. By 2013, GDNet had its own staff member capable of running the programme.

Selecting participants

The GDNet RCCBP was originally designed to cover three regions with an annual workshop for GDN Awards and Medals Finalists at the GDN Conference. It quickly emerged that the greatest demand for GDNet-led workshops was in Africa. The workshops conducted for the African Economic Research Consortium (AERC), our main partner in the region, and with their researchers are therefore where we have learned the most about capacity building in research communications. Since 2010, two workshops per year have been conducted for African researchers, with AERC leading on participant selection. This was based on an assessment of researchers' needs, giving priority, for example, to those whose projects were nearing the point where they needed to plan their research dissemination. This approach brought with it a challenge: some researchers arrived at the workshop without knowing exactly why they were there. One important lesson learned from this experience is that the initial communication with participants about the workshop needs to come from the workshop facilitators who as designers of the workshop, are in the best position to communicate with researchers about the workshop objectives. Even then, not all participants engaged with our pre-workshop emails which is why we always opened a workshop with a discussion of its objectives.

How GDNet's workshop design evolved

Our first research communications capacity building workshop was a collaboration with the Overseas Development Institute and AERC and took place prior to the launch of the 2010-2014 phase of GDNet.

The Importance of Partnerships and Flexibility

Sherine Ghoneim, GDNet's Programme Director

"I attribute our capacity building work's success to two key factors: responsiveness and long-standing committed partnerships. GDNet's capacity building, for example, originally focused on information and knowledge management staff in developing country research institutes, in recognition of their role in making local research available for use in policy. With the development of the Theory of Change for the latest phase of the programme, Southern researchers became the central focus of all of our activities, and our RCCBP was created on the theory's assumption that researchers need to possess sufficient confidence and ability to communicate their own research. In this kind of work, you need partners that are well placed to enable researchers to engage with policymakers and who understand the need for this work. You also need the space to collaborate over several years so that capacity building can be adapted and relationships with partners can be strengthened."

It was designed in a way that looked at research communications as a whole, providing an overview of different research communications tools, how to develop a communications strategy, how to write policy briefs and press releases, how to write for the web, using the media to communicate research, etc. This was followed by a series of research-to-policy workshops designed and conducted in collaboration with CommsConsult, a team of experts with which GDNet has a long-standing relationship.

Originally these workshops covered two main aspects of research communications, namely how to write effective policy briefs, and how to communicate research through the media (including writing press releases and op-eds, and conducting interviews). While both areas are important, we realised that covering more than one research communication tool in a workshop is too ambitious and can be counterproductive. Looking at feedback from participants we have trained throughout the past four years, a two-day workshop focusing on one tool (theory and how to apply it in practice) proves to be more effective. We decided to focus on policy briefs and turned the training into a writeshop involving "policy brief surgeries" where resource people and training facilitators were assigned to a number of individual researchers and provided feedback on their policy briefs.

"a workshop will be different every time it is run as the objectives need to be tailored to meet the participants' needs."

From our experience, a workshop will be different every time it is run as the objectives need to be tailored to meet the participants' needs. To do this, you need information about the participants - their background, research, affiliated organisations, their familiarity with research communications, any tools they have used to communicate their research to policymakers in the past and whether this was successful. Running a survey prior to each workshop was one approach we used to develop our understanding of the participants. The other tactic was to be more flexible in the workshop outline, adapting the original design from day to day, if not session to session, as we got to know participants better.

What we did differently

Over time we introduced new elements to our workshops, such as the "surgeries" in the policy brief workshops. Participants found these particularly useful because they were tailored around messaging - what it takes to craft concise and memorable messages out of research findings. Based on participants' feedback, from June 2013, we decided to add a third day to our workshops, focusing on social media for research communications. This proved to be a very useful and successful addition, particularly in a region like Africa where social media are not yet commonly used, and certainly not for communicating research. The social media day took the form of hands-on training, where different tools were introduced

Mentoring is central to GDNet's capacity building

(e.g. Twitter, WordPress, Delicious), followed by tech labs in which participants set up their own accounts and could immediately put into practice their learning. Although a culture of using social media to reach policymakers is not yet established in Africa, we were keen for researchers to understand that social media do not necessarily have to be used to communicate research directly to policy. Instead, one can reach the media, civil society organizations and other intermediaries, who can themselves take research findings to policymakers.

Thinking about sustainability

We think the strongest part of our programme was the mentoring, a process which started at the workshop. During the policy brief surgeries participants got individual feedback from resource people who had analysed their policy briefs beforehand. This was followed with post-workshop assistance provided by the GDNet Helpdesk through which participants were given the opportunity to work on revised briefs and receive final feedback from us before they submitted them to AERC. The mentoring did not stop there: participants were contacted after the workshop as part of GDNet's Monitoring & Evaluation (M&E) framework to understand what happens when researchers try to apply their learning when back in the real world (see p.5). This has been our story with capacity building. We aimed high: "researchers better able to communicate their research to policy" but started small with coordination, only moving through to fully facilitating the training after building our own capacity. We have evolved throughout the process and so have our workshops, based on participants' feedback and needs. We believe that the key to our success has been flexibility in workshop design, underpinned by reliable and regular M&E.

Learning about the Southern policymaker's side of the research communication story

Like any story, research communication has two sides; the researchers' view and that of the policymakers. Our "policy panel" gave researchers the opportunity to learn about the practical challenges facing local policymakers in accessing and using research evidence for policymaking, including:

- research that is not customised to the local context,
- handling the information explosion,
- weak linkages with research organisations,
- determining the credibility of research organisations and the real motive behind the research,
- research organisations that prefer radical advocacy through the media rather than positive dialogue.

> "During a crisis, there is little time to gather evidence, analyse and obtain solutions to a problem. There is a tendency to act under pressure and therefore unless research is tailored to be fast and targeted to the issue at hand, policy formulation will move on."
> *Henry Rotich, GDNet Policy Panel Member*
> *(and Ministry of Finance, Kenya, at that time)*

After listening to several of these panels, some common messages emerge about what researchers can do to increase the chance of their research being used.

Researchers should:

- understand the political context and the policymaking process with its different phases;
- identify policymakers' needs: what are the policy gaps regarding emerging strategic issues?
- identify the key people within relevant ministries with whom they need to create (formal or informal) strategic alliances or partnerships;
- establish their credibility as sources of reliable research and build their reputation;
- involve policymakers in their research early on;
- ensure evidence is relevant and practically useful;
- think of timing: respond to policymakers' current needs and target a topical issue of national interest;
- offer constructive criticism and actionable policy recommendations;
- establish links with key stakeholders and intermediaries; work through existing networks and develop new ones;
- present their research in an appealing design and format;
- avoid technical jargon;
- make sure that dissemination is a key part of the research design and include regular monitoring;
- consider the policymakers' practical needs when developing their research questions;
- offer policy options that are supported by research evidence rather than based on their own opinions;
- offer contextualised (localised) policy options.

Learning from our partners' good practice

Collaboration is a central theme of the GDNet programme. Our workshop participants are not the only ones to benefit from our partners' expertise and experience. Here is some of the good practice we have learned from our capacity building partners:

You need to think about balance

Something CommsConsult taught us early on is that participants need to learn theory, but too much makes them sleepy. When it comes to research communications, researchers definitely need to hear about the decisionmaking process, its different phases and the actors and intermediaries involved, but they also need hands-on sessions so they can put into practice what they have learned. This is why we introduced policy brief surgeries to give researchers an opportunity to work individually or in peer groups on their own draft briefs and receive feedback from resource people.

Our partners helped us to build our own capacity.

Use a variety of tools to boost energy

Visual material, particularly videos and interviews, helps participants to engage with content and can trigger discussions during a workshop. We have also seen how group exercises and games (e.g. the "human spectrogram") help to keep participants involved throughout the workshop. To get the energy going from the start, it is good to open with a game that breaks the ice and helps participants and facilitators to get to know each other.

Draw on your partners to bring theory to life

A team member from one of GDNet's partner organisations, CIPPEC (a think tank based in Argentina) joined us for two of our AERC workshops. The African researchers were exposed to expertise and direct practical examples of where research had informed and influenced policymaking processes in Latin America.

Make time for your own learning

To improve the design of a workshop and come up with new approaches that fit researchers' needs, it is essential for the facilitators to spend time reviewing how the workshop went, for example by reviewing the level of interaction with, and engagement of, the participants. After Action Reviews are a great tool for this. A robust M&E framework that brings in feedback from participants can also help you to analyse what needs to be improved upon throughout the programme.

Online courses for researchers: different reach, different benefits and different challenges

Online courses represent a different approach to capacity building. Face-to-face training sessions can only reach a limited number and type of participants, but online courses give a broader spectrum of people the opportunity to benefit from the learning in a very cost-effective manner, and for GDNet, the chance to build the capacity of more researchers. Our partner in the Spaces for Engagement program, CIPPEC, had already developed and facilitated several online courses for researchers on influencing policy. From late 2012 to early 2013, we worked with CIPPEC to develop and facilitate a new course on research communications for 18 researchers and communication practitioners from Africa and Asia.

Online courses present their own challenges and opportunities: we found that by using varied communication channels to announce courses (websites, social media, newsletters, etc.), and inviting participants from different regions to participate simultaneously, attracts a great diversity of participants. By sharing their experiences, and success and failure stories from their different regions, the discussion is enriched and can uncover innovative approaches to research uptake. One reason behind the success of GDNet and CIPPEC's online course is that it was led by people who adopted a facilitating role, encouraging participants to learn from each other, rather than using a traditional one-way, teacher-to-student approach. While the facilitators are more familiar with the theoretical aspect of the course, such as recommended tools and channels for research communications, the participants are the experts of their own research and the regional and national contexts from which they come. Both are actors complementing each other in the online learning process.

"Success depends on participants' awareness of their responsibilities and their willingness to engage in discussions and share their experiences."

In our experience, participants who are shy about expressing their opinions in a face-to-face environment can be more confident when behind a computer screen, and a user-friendly platform can encourage them to respond to other participants' comments. In a way, participants begin to take on the role of facilitator themselves, however, this brings with it some challenges. In a workshop, a good facilitator leads the learning experience, energising participants and ensuring that rules and deadlines are respected; online courses are different. Once a module was launched, participants had a week to work through the material during which they were encouraged to take part in e-discussions. In this scenario, success depended upon participants' awareness of their responsibilities and their willingness to engage in discussions and share their experiences. Despite the course rules and recommendations, participants were independent and not under the pressure they may have felt when physically sitting in a workshop, under the eye of the facilitator. We have found that in these situations it helps if the facilitator posts lots of comments and questions, and extra credit is given for active participation. Another challenge of online courses is how to replicate the networking opportunities that a face-to-face workshop presents, which are essential in building or improving relationships between researchers. We found it difficult to allocate time to side discussions and questions - our equivalent of the informal conversations that are held over coffee breaks in workshops. From our experience, an online course is a cost-effective training method that allows people from across the globe to interact with each other and share their different experiences in a more "horizontal" (peer-to-peer) way. However, developing and facilitating such courses effectively, and responding to the opportunities and challenges they present, is an ongoing learning process in itself. Online courses are not replacements for face-to-face workshops; the two methods are complementary but we believe that both are necessary in order to build the capacity of as many researchers as possible.

GDNet's tips on designing and delivering capacity building workshops for Southern researchers

Establish a relationship with participants beforehand; social media tools are perfect for this purpose (we use a wiki to establish first contact and share workshop materials in advance). If participants are unfamiliar with social media you may want to include a session in your workshop so they can engage with the tools and materials afterwards.

Learn about your participants beforehand; pre-workshop surveys can be useful for this.

Be flexible; adapt the workshop to the participants' needs, particularly while it runs, as you get to know them better.

Encourage participants to pass it on: make resources available to help them share their learning with their peers.

Be prepared to give more assistance to researchers who are not affiliated to organisations, particularly when it comes to disseminating their work.

Remember the importance of South-South learning; avoid a purely North-South training approach, which might trigger hostility or resistance; call on Southern partners to share their experiences at workshops.

Use online and offline methods: If you want to reach as many researchers as possible, combine both approaches in your capacity building.

Follow up with participants. We used a mentoring help desk and asked participants to write pledges about how they intended to apply their learning. Several participants told us that our follow-up contact with them about their pledges encouraged them to redouble their efforts.

Make time for M&E. Develop a robust M&E mechanism that incorporates participants' feedback to improve the workshop design continuously.

Measuring the impact of our capacity building

- **Female researchers tended to come to our workshops with lower confidence than their male peers but had experienced much higher increases by the time they left.**
- **Some of our Policy Brief workshop participants were unable to meet their short-term research communication goals despite feeling more able and confident about doing research communication.**
- **Southern researchers are keen to learn about social media as part of dissemination.**
- **Writing concisely *and* convincingly for policymakers is difficult for many academics who are more comfortable with writing longer research articles.**

These are just a few of our findings from the M&E of GDNet's capacity building. Some confirmed our assumptions, others were a surprise and they have all been invaluable in helping us to adapt and improve our approach to capacity building. GDNet's capacity building has focused on research communications and communication has been a key element of our M&E approach. With the advice and help of Itad, GDNet's M&E advisors, we designed an M&E framework to measure the impact of our training on the participants as individuals, to learn how to improve the training and to examine the longer-term effects. The M&E of GDNet's capacity building draws heavily on the Kirkpatrick model of training evaluation which outlines four levels of outcome:

Level 1 - Reaction - how the participants felt about the training or learning experience.

Level 2 - Learning - measuring the participants' attitudes, knowledge and skills - before and after.

Level 3 - Behaviour - looking at the transfer of the knowledge, skills and attitude when back on the job.

Level 4 - Results - the effect that the training contributes to in the participant's organisation or wider environment.

Standard workshop evaluation forms and reflection activities such as the After Action Reviews undertaken by the facilitators, help GDNet to identify how participants felt about the training (Level 1). Self-assessment scores are useful to indicate changes in knowledge and attitude (level 2), and some form of practical test can be used to assess development of skills. The pledges and follow-up interviews used by GDNet established the extent to which learning could be applied in the researchers' native environment where factors beyond their control may constrain or support implementation (Levels 3 and 4).

The framework consisted of three main tools:
1) a **self-assessment questionnaire** used before and after workshops to measure researchers' views of their confidence and ability to communicate their research. The self-assessment questionnaire also helped us to collect personal feedback from researchers on the workshop, whether it met their expectations and what needed to be improved and how we might do so. From this, we were able to improve the design and delivery of our workshops continuously in order that our capacity building efforts met their expectations.

2) **External review of policy briefs** produced by workshop participants before and after the training (this method was introduced in 2013).

3) "**the pledge**" - participants were asked to commit to what they would do differently within the subsequent three months, as a result of attending the workshop. GDNet then contacted a selection of the "pledgers" to see how they got on. Initially this was after three months but we soon saw that there was value in following up after a full year (or even later) to learn about the longer-term changes that had been enabled by the training.

The pros and cons of self-assessment

As a subjective tool, data from the self-assessment questionnaire have their limitations: scores for ability before and after the workshop are the perceptions of participants themselves. This method, of course, is ideally suited for assessing confidence, as participants are best placed to judge this. They also tell you nothing about whether the training is applied when the researchers return home. For this reason, we valued the addition of the pledge method for assessing the long-term impact and sustainability of the training, using follow-up contact with a selection of participants at three months and one year intervals. This corresponds with Level 3 of the Kirkpatrick Model (Behaviour).

The model does not specify how long to leave it before following up with participants as this depends on the subject of the training and when participants will have the opportunity to apply what they have learned. We found that in some cases, three months was sufficient but in other cases researchers had not had the chance to put their new skills and knowledge into practice, which is why we also contacted them after a full year. By asking participants to write a pledge of what they intended doing in the next three months, we had a set of specific actions and behaviour to look for during the follow-up.

The very process of following up on the pledges allowed us to extend the capacity building effort: the researchers were given a "nudge" when the pledge follow-up contact was made. As a network-based program, the follow-up also gave GDNet the opportunity to maintain the relationship established with the researchers during the workshop, adding value to a potentially resource-heavy M&E method. During this follow-up GDNet asked researchers if they had successfully realised what they had pledged to do or how far they had progressed and what contribution their participation in the workshop had made to this progress. From these interactions we were able to develop a set of case studies from each training event.

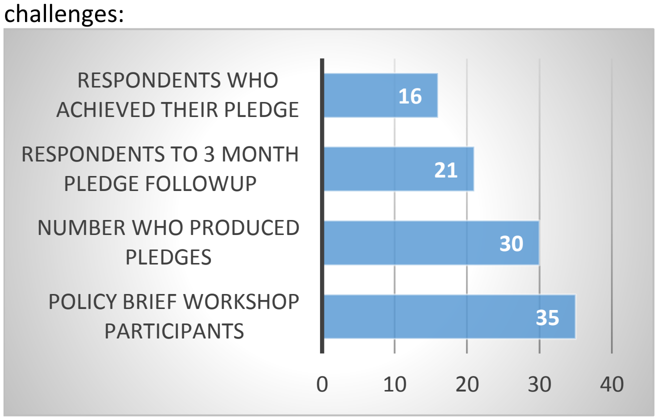
The pledge: a useful tool but not without its challenges

The pledge method was one of the most valuable and rewarding aspects of the M&E. The follow-up gave us a sense of whether researchers were actually applying their learning and it helped us to build and maintain relationships with researchers and to sustain the capacity building. We strongly recommend that other capacity building programmes consider introducing it. However, it does have its limitations and drawbacks:

The follow-up is time-consuming: inviting researchers to take part, chasing them up for a response, writing up telephone calls or email exchanges, and analysing the cases.

Participants need to be motivated to pledge and respond to follow-up: we have found that some people are not interested in, or lack the time for, filling out forms. It takes a long time, sometimes, to explain to participants why it is important.

Challenges with communication channels: Participants were given the option to communicate by telephone or email. The telephone was easier for some people and less effort than emailing, but the connection was not always good enough. The chart below illustrates the impact of some of these challenges:



Based on figures from two Policy Brief workshops in 2012

What makes a good pledge?

Participants were instructed to write a pledge that began "What will you do differently as a result of attending this workshop? In the next three months I will…" However, the resulting pledges made by participants ranged from those that were tightly-focused and easy to measure:

"Conduct a meeting with my other colleagues in [my organisation] under the GDN project and share with them what I learned from this workshop"

to pledges that needed more detail for an external reader to understand the extent of the activity which the participant was committing to undertake:

"Set up a network among stakeholders related to policymaking process."

We expected there to be a clear link between the pledge and the results, a precise pledge being more likely to be acted upon. To our surprise, this was not the case. From analysing the pledges and what was discovered through the follow-up emails and telephone calls, there was no predictable relationship between the quality of the pledge and the likelihood that a participant had made progress or even that they would respond to GDNet's invitation to provide information on their progress.

Behavioural research (e.g. Fishbein *et al*, 1995) suggest that the strength of the researcher's commitment (or intention) towards research communication will be a reliable predictor of their resulting behaviour, but this is not easy to assess from a workshop pledge. As our analysis of the follow-up shows (and behavioural theory argues), personal commitment is not enough. Many pledges involved action from other stakeholders, such as the media wanting to cover their research, or their organisation supporting them to organise a workshop. ***We recommend workshop organisers check that participants consider this when they are making their pledges.***

With a SMART pledge, it is easier for the researcher and the evaluator to assess the degree of progress. ***We recommend that others interested in introducing a "pledge" explain to participants how to write SMART pledges, with illustrative examples, and allow time within the workshop to giving feedback on pledges.***

What stops people from acting on their pledges?

'The GDNet Legacy' (our end of programme report) highlights many examples of changes at the level of the individual researcher or their organisation, which the participants credited to GDNet's training. However, our three-month and one-year follow-up of the researchers' pledges has also revealed some of the challenges commonly experienced by Southern researchers when they try to apply their learning about research communications:

Lack of time. Academic and administrative responsibilities sometimes prevent researchers from applying their new research communications skills, especially social media.

Lack of response. When organising dissemination workshops or policy labs to communicate their research findings and recommendations, researchers usually experience difficulties in getting policymakers to attend. Some researchers reported that developing contacts within the national print and broadcast media was an effective alternative way of reaching policymakers.

"*The greatest obstacle is really breaking the barriers to reach out to the intended research consumers, in particular those in [the] policy arena.*"

Insufficient resources and opportunities. Researchers who are unaffiliated to an institute tend to lack the necessary connections to make initial contact with their target audiences (policymakers, media practitioners, civil society organisations, etc.). They are also more likely to lack funding for media and policy dissemination workshops, although this challenge is experienced across the board.

Engaging with policymakers too late in the process. If policy engagement was not part of the original plan for a research project, it becomes difficult to engage with policymakers at a later stage.

"The policy round table was fine with the presence of actors mainly in the water sector. However I think that we did not have a large and varied audience as expected….also I observed that the actors have focused more on water issues instead of specific governance issues in water delivery, while this is a key aspect of the research project. It may be due to the fact we have not really engaged policy actors at the beginning of the research."

Busy policymakers. Even when involved in the research process early on, policymakers usually lack the time to participate throughout the process, or attend dissemination workshops where the results and recommendations are being communicated.

The value and challenges of the external testing of skills

In the final year of the GDNet programme, we were encouraged by DFID to introduce a more objective method to the M&E. Two external reviewers were given the 'before' and 'revised' policy briefs of 18 participants in the GDNet/AERC 2013 Policy Brief workshops. The reviewers were asked to agree a score out of six for each document based on a checklist of absolute (Yes/No) statements e.g. "Is the policy brief written for a non-specialist audience?" and provide qualitative comments to support the scores. The results provided a useful counterpoint to the self-assessment scores and uncovered some interesting findings about the complexity of writing effectively for policymakers. The average participant's skill in producing policy briefs increased by 64% but closer analysis of individual scores showed that participants struggled with the challenge of writing concisely (keeping their policy briefs brief!) and convincingly for a policy audience. A participant, for example, might improve their score for writing concisely but at the expense of supporting all their arguments with research evidence.

While the policy brief review exercise helped us to view the impact of our capacity building through a different lens, the reviewers and evaluation team identified some limitations of the method in its current form, such as the difficulty in assessing the appropriateness of a policy brief without knowing the intended audience. Some ideas to make it more rigorous include:

- Using short standardised exercises, e.g. all have the same piece of research from which to draw key messages.
- Allocating time for drafting the brief within the workshop, rather than asking participants to bring it with them so that they all have the same amount of time to produce their drafts.
- Asking participants to provide a rationale - who it is for, what they know about them and the policy context.

GDNet's Year 3 M&E report has more details of the policy brief review method and the reviewers' recommendations.

References and Related Resources

'The GDNet Legacy', GDNet's Baseline and M&E Framework 2010 and Year 3 M&E report are available to download from http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/Project/60734/

Information on the Kirkpatrick Model of Training Evaluation is available from www.kirkpatrickpartners.com

Developing Effective Behavior Change Interventions: Some Lessons Learned from Behavioral Research, Fishbein, M., NIDA Research Monograph 155, 1995, pp 246 to 261 http://dwb.unl.edu/Teacher/NSF/C10/C10Links/www.nida.nih.gov/pdf/monographs/download155.html

What's next for capacity building?

As we near the end of the programme, the GDNet team has had the opportunity to reflect on what have been its successes and challenges in capacity building and consider what approach others might adopt in the future. From our experience, any capacity building programme involving training workshops is limited in the sense that only a finite number of people get to benefit from the training [see p.4 *Online courses for researchers*].

For this reason, we maintained contact with participants after the workshop ended. We followed up with them on the pledges they had made about how they intended to apply their learning and encouraged them to transfer the learning to their peers. For us, the goal was to support a cycle where people use their own connections in their organisations and among their peers to transfer their knowledge; this is the only way that you can ensure a bigger outreach. Thanks to the pledges and our follow-up (part of our M&E mechanism for capacity building) we have been able to capture some evidence of this kind of knowledge transfer taking place.

"The training on policy briefs was more than useful to me and my department. When I returned, I shared the materials with my colleagues at the Economic Policy Analysis Unit of the ECOWAS Commission. I also made a presentation that helped them grasp the fundamental message from your training."
Mohamed Jalloh, participant in a GDNet-AERC Policy Brief workshop

The other limitation we have encountered relates to the environment surrounding the individual researchers. If researchers are affiliated to influential and well-resourced organisations, once trained, they can make use of the support provided by their respective organisations to kick-start dialogue with their target policymakers through policy labs and dissemination workshops, for example. However, some researchers, especially those working independently, lack these opportunities and tend to require assistance in putting their learning into practice. For these researchers, it would help if research communications workshops were followed by a dissemination workshop that brought together researchers and policymakers thus giving them the opportunity to make that all-important first contact.

In the future, we hope to see research communications capacity building programmes for Southern researchers that take groups of researchers on a long journey. Their voyage might start with training in research communications, move on to mentoring via a helpdesk, then one-to-one contact to follow up on pledges made, followed by assistance to help them share their learning with their peers and conclude with the provision of a space for the researchers to engage with policymakers.

Further Information:

M&E has been critical to GDNet's learning and to the success and improvement of the capacity building workshops.
See: 'Learning By Design: perspectives on monitoring and evaluating a Southern-focused knowledge service', by Sherine Ghoneim and Robbie Gregorowski, June 2014.

GDNet's series of research communications workshop handouts include 'Writing Policy Briefs', 'Using Media to Communicate Research Outputs' and 'Presentation Skills'.

'The GDNet Legacy: Reflecting on the achievements, outcomes and learning of the GDNet programme, 2010 to 2014', includes further analysis of the pledge follow-up.

All GDNet's publications are available to download from http://r4d.dfid.gov.uk/Project/60734/

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