Maximizing the benefits of water research to international development - What researchers can do

Good research practice ensures that the results are used by those who can benefit from them. However, in practice this rarely happens due to the gap that exists between researchers and potential research users, such as practitioners and policy makers. The reasons for this are:

- the value of research evidence is not fully recognized by practitioners and policy makers;
- practitioners and policy makers are not involved in the design and implementation of research, and so research often fails to meet their demands for knowledge; and
- research results are not communicated effectively.

This means that relevant new research findings may not be known, and therefore not applied in policy and practice.

This briefing note summarizes what researchers can do to bridge this gap, by coordinating research **partnerships**, implementing sound research management **processes** and getting the **products** of the research right.

Key messages

- Long term collaboration between stakeholders supports capacity development, networking and the social relevance of research

- Early involvement of research users in designing accessible and comprehensible products increases the uptake and impact of research

- Capacity development in research management increases scientific excellence and development impact

- Effective communication builds trust and bridges any divides of culture, discipline and language within a research partnership; monitoring and evaluation of this is a key activity

Main recommendations

Long term planning

Ensure long term planning for collaborative research partnerships as it lowers transaction costs within a research programme, encourages capacity development, strengthens networking, and improves the relevance of research.

Stakeholder involvement

Ensure equitable research partnerships, with clearly agreed responsibilities for planning, management, implementation and evaluation. Stakeholder engagement is essential to ensure that research responds to demand, that strong networks of interested parties are maintained, and that local intermediary dissemination mechanisms are exploited.

Capacity development

Provide capacity development in research management as it allows researchers to understand and routinely implement known good practice, and improves the quality of research for greater impact.

Effective communication

Implement a strategic dissemination strategy to minimize any divides of discipline, culture and language, and to agree working procedures and governance structures. Effective external dissemination produces accessible and comprehensible products to influence practice and policy.

Monitoring and evaluation

Track the effectiveness of research, measuring all aspects of research management using a range of indicators, from the level of stakeholder involvement to the appropriateness of communication activities.

Partnerships matter: Strengthening research networking

Building effective and equitable research partnerships, with shared responsibility for research planning, management and evaluation, is a worthwhile yet time consuming exercise. Researchers can improve this by:

- defining systematic criteria for stakeholder identification and involvement
- developing a strategic dissemination strategy, with adequate resources
- identifying the related capacity development needs of all researchers involved
- working towards long-term collaboration between research organizations, to lower transaction costs within a single programme, facilitate capacity development and strengthen networking of different users.

NETSSAF: Networking for Development Impact

NETSSAF (Network for the development of Sustainable Approaches for large scale implementation of Sanitation in Africa) is made up of sub-Saharan and European partners from a range of research, education, technology transfer and dissemination organizations and networks, having expertise related to the management of sanitation. All R&D centres carry out field work directly with the communities. Special attention is also given to technology transfer and dissemination institutions. Existing thematic international networks are integrated into the consortium, to strengthen synergies among actors in the region.
See: **http://www.netssaf.net**

Processes matter: Improving research management

SPLASH identified a serious lack of capacity in good research management practice by researchers. Research management training on programming, implementation and evaluation involves cooperation between partners to decide where these needs are greatest. A wide programme of activities is preferable to individual training events. Training should include research management instruments, - planning methods (e.g. Logical Framework Analysis), outcome mapping, communication and dissemination methods, as well as systematic monitoring and evaluation of the academic and non-academic impact of research.

Products matter: Ensuring development impact and outcomes

Improving research outputs can increase the uptake and impact of findings. Simply, if the products are accessible and comprehensible, they are more likely to be read, shared and used. The dissemination of research results should be a core activity for researchers:

- Involvement with national and international networks can optimize links with key users, intermediary institutions and the interested public. Research organizations can be an important link between researchers, users and funders. These links can increase development impact and set research agendas, taking into account existing research and meeting demand
- Analysis of the impact and uptake of research allows the researcher to measure the appropriateness of dissemination methods used, to ensure that high quality outputs reach the relevant users
- Researchers must recognise the importance of publication in both academic and more mainstream publications to maximize development impact. Research organizations should strengthen the incentives to encourage more diverse publication.

Dissemination check list

- Adopt a strategic approach to dissemination and review existing organizational practice
- Define your target users, working in collaboration with in-country partners
- Undertake a user information needs analysis
- Ensure a viable dissemination strategy, through planned activities at all stages of the project and beyond
- Plan to monitor and evaluate dissemination activities and outcomes