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PERI Review 2001-2004: Executive Summary

Background

During 1999/2000 the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP) was asked by research partners and librarians from developing and transitional countries for assistance in information production, access and dissemination utilising information and communication technologies (ICTs). Following significant consultation, the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information (PERI) was created. The immediate objectives of the programme are to:

- facilitate the acquisition of international information and knowledge;
- improve dissemination of national and regional research;
- provide awareness or training in the use, evaluation and management of information and communication technologies;
- enhance skills in the preparation, production and management of journals.

These objectives are met through complementary activities including: delivering information, disseminating national and regional research, enhancing ICT skills, strengthening publishing, supporting country collaboration and networking, and engaging in research and development. A pilot was in place from November 2000–December 2001 with the full programme beginning in January 2002.

After three years of activity a review has been undertaken. It was not intended to consider the *impact* of PERI, but rather to:

- document and assess progress towards goals and objectives and so learn from the implementation and management of the programme;
- establish appropriate data and indicators for future monitoring and evaluation;
- help identify appropriate priorities and directions for the next phase of the programme;
- share information and learning with PERI stakeholders, funders and other interested organisations or individuals.

The review took a participatory, capacity strengthening approach and was designed and implemented by key

stakeholders, including those implementing the programme at country level, programme participants, programme funders and INASP staff.

Five areas were examined.

1. **Relevance.** Do PERI's current components meet the needs of the research community, and are they complementary, appropriate, relevant and effective?
2. **Usage.** Are PERI services and resources being used and why/how?
3. **Management.** Is PERI being managed and structured in an effective way? i.e. roles of and relationships among INASP, country programmes, stakeholders, funders, etc.
4. **Sharing.** Are experiences and lessons being shared and learned?
5. **Sustainability.** Are the activities currently supported by PERI becoming, or likely to become, sustainable within countries?

The review involved the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data via email questionnaires, interviews, country visits, in-country stakeholder meetings, observation, analysis of existing documentation and feedback at a global stakeholders review meeting.

Results

Relevance

The overwhelming impression is that PERI is very relevant in addressing the needs of the various stakeholders.

The feedback from the library community was particularly positive. They see that PERI has helped them to provide valuable and valued services. It has also helped raise morale and in some cases given direction and a sense of purpose to libraries that were struggling to be relevant in an electronic age. An emerging need among many of the libraries is to take the next steps in service provision and, using their newly strengthened influence, establish new and more demand-responsive roles in their research and scholarly environments.

As a group, the end-users—i.e. researchers—tended to talk as if they were very satisfied. However, closer examination of information seeking and communication behaviour revealed that some individual needs were less well catered for. In a world where information is increasingly multi- and cross-disciplinary in its nature, the sheer scope and size of the inter-disciplinary resources of PERI become daunting. Whether PERI should endeavour to provide thematic guides or whether this is more properly a skill central to the research process requires further investigation. However, while PERI is fully at home in general multi-disciplinary environments, the subject-specific initiatives of AGORA (FAO) and HINARI (WHO) are complementary and address the needs of specific disciplinary communities.

The good visibility of local and national research through African Journals OnLine (AJOL) has yet to be matched by similar services within Asia and relatively speaking the areas of PERI targeted to local publishing are poorly known. The current approach in which publishing training activities are organised on a regional basis has resulted in lower in-country visibility and direct involvement than are demanded. However, if the breadth of interest in AJOL (including journal titles from 21 countries with document delivery spanning 83 countries across the globe) could be matched by deeper and more extensive interventions in national dissemination, the results in this area could be far more significant.

The training facilitated via PERI and the mode of country travelling workshops was generally found to be very relevant to information managers and librarians. Everywhere, the request is for more and more training. There is an emerging and growing need to strengthen mechanisms to achieve locally led and sustainable local efforts, and many requests for support in basic research skills—scientific writing, information literacy, reading skills, presentation skills, and review techniques.

Usage

The review found that there have been significant successes in progress towards PERI's goals in terms of use, with researchers downloading hundreds of thousands of articles from scholarly journals, clear appreciation and use of the AJOL service, development and delivery of over 60 training modules in over 20 countries and marked improvement in the editing and publishing of locally produced journals.

There is no doubt that access to journals was problematic before PERI and similar access programmes. In most of the institutions surveyed, subscription to printed journals had stopped completely or had been reduced to a skeletal coverage of titles. Through PERI (and AGORA and HINARI) there is now almost total dependence on electronic journals and databases. Researchers observed the convenience of being able to access information from their offices or homes, and being able to search huge resources in a matter of minutes. Additionally, they reported that access to a wide range of up-to-date information enabled them to identify areas for further research and also to complete their work in a timely manner.

However, the use of the resources and services varied widely between and within countries and even within individual institutions and departments. It is also

important to note that lack of capacity at a local level to monitor usage of resources makes it difficult to provide hard empirical evidence to support feedback suggesting either heavy or limited use. Researchers reported a degree of information overload, and, as information through PERI is not presented in clearly identifiable discipline-specific ways, it is challenging to identify specialised information. This is a problem being faced by researchers globally and points to the need for greater service orientation in the information professions, and perhaps for more sophisticated interfaces or electronic information finders.

A second area of concern in use is the continued unstable or limited infrastructure. Although the position is changing rapidly, many institutions have a limited number of computers and often slow and expensive bandwidth. This leads to unequal access possibilities within a country. 'Technophobia' and traditional thinking also play a part in researchers exerting limited demands on the use of e-resources and services, especially where a culture of research is underdeveloped. Several different ways of changing the mind-set need to be employed concurrently, to include better marketing, clearer registration processes, enhanced training and familiarisation with content.

Management

The current management structure has allowed PERI to develop significantly over the first three years and has led to a great deal of activity in the countries involved. However, the programme is still in its initial phase and naturally several ideas for improvement emerged during the review. As a Director of Postgraduate Research observed: "Services emerged out of a genuine need, that need is there and it is being met. That must be made clear. But you have made a problem for yourselves by creating more demand."

The key lessons that have emerged are.

- representative coordinating teams seem to be the most effective and favoured form of in-country management;
- 'buy-in' from senior management/policy makers in the countries enhances effectiveness;
- getting national-level awareness of PERI is a difficult but necessary task;
- currently most PERI activities and the people running them are embedded in the library community; wider participation, especially of end-users, could enhance use and sustainability;
- growth of the programme, especially into additional countries, is currently limited by the human resources available in INASP and in the coordinating teams.

One crucial area to be determined is a clearer strategy of how PERI will be managed and implemented in the future. There are difficult decisions to make: should the number of countries participating be limited to enable increased depth and intensity of interventions? If additional countries are added, more effort needs to be given to implementing clearer 'exit' strategies by INASP from existing countries.

Sharing

Although sharing of experiences and ideas is not a key objective of PERI, it was concluded to be an effective

way of maximising the benefits of the programme and indeed to be a missed opportunity if it is not undertaken.

Feedback indicates that sharing of experience and knowledge is happening but in a mostly informal, unsystematic way and that this could be improved. The present channels of the coordinators' mail list, the annual coordinators' meetings, meetings of related/similar initiatives and professional associations, and the travelling workshop methodologies provide an 'added value' in terms of peer-to-peer exchange of views and experience and help to build personal and virtual networks among the countries. However, a more systematic approach to capturing knowledge and experience would be beneficial.

Sustainability

Although it is early days for PERI, some countries within the programme have made significant steps towards sustaining their access to the international resources and training activities. Collective purchase, with consortia being formed as a direct result of the drive to maintain access to resources currently enabled, resulted in 41% of the cost of resources and 25% of the cost of training being met in 2004 through in-country funds (albeit mostly through externally funded research or institution capacity-building projects).

However, as mentioned above, access to resources is just one part of the activity necessary for enhancing research information and there is still a long way to go before any of the countries become fully self-sustaining.

Conclusions and recommendations

PERI was created in response to demand from researchers. The review has shown that the activities it supports continue to meet the needs of its stakeholders and that a great deal of progress has been made since its inception. The review set out to learn from experiences and has therefore generated recommendations for improving the management and implementation during the next phase (2005–2008). These recommendations fall broadly into five categories.

1. Effectively embedding PERI within its wider community

One key area is to situate the Programme more effectively in its wider environment. It is recommended that PERI strengthens its links with the following.

Policy makers: working to ensure 'buy-in' and enhance the link between PERI activities and national and institutional research strategies, including help in identifying or mobilising the potential funding from government, institutions, faculty/departmental funded projects or sector-wide investments.

Enablers: working with information professionals to enhance nation-wide involvement and achieve greater sustainability in all areas. This could also include working with library schools to reinvigorate librarian education.

End users: investigate if PERI should directly engage with communities who use research information (but who may not be university-based or do not use libraries, or are not researchers or scholars in the traditional sense).

For example, non-governmental organisations, government agencies and ministries, research networks, national academies, scientific associations.

Sister organisations: closer collaboration and co-operation between PERI and similar initiatives could increase complementarity among the initiatives, and could assist all the initiatives to meet demand by mobilising needed capacities and resources in more effective and efficient ways.

It is recommended that PERI should support the following opportunities:

- country coordination by teams that are more representative of the various stakeholder groups;
- regular in-country meetings of stakeholders to guide management of the programme;
- a portal to provide information on and links to all information access opportunities for developing and transitional countries;
- peer exchange visits, e.g., between new and existing 'PERI countries', allowing coordinators to learn from their colleagues and help the programme to be implemented more effectively;
- meetings between publishers, library staff, researcher and development agencies encouraging a better understanding of the varying perspectives of programme stakeholder issues and providing a forum for problem solving.

2. Improving programme documentation

Many of the challenges reported during the review could be resolved by the provision of clearer documentation on the planning, implementation and evaluation of the programme. It is recommended that the following steps should be taken:

- development of an updated strategy document for PERI to include: key objectives, statement of programme elements, roles of country coordinators/coordinating teams, guidelines for participation of new countries, development of 'exit'-strategies of INASP from existing countries;
- improvement and simplification of all existing process documentation including contracts, MOUs, financial arrangements;
- joint development of a 'road map' with each participating country setting out goals, milestones, log frame, standards of practice, commitments, moves toward self-sustainability, etc.;
- sharing and archiving of case studies, best practice, ideas, etc., relevant to PERI activities.

3. Increasing use of PERI services and resources

Although there are areas of significant use of PERI activities and resources, there are many ways in which this uptake could be increased. Achieving this relies on two crucial factors. Firstly, better understanding the actual needs and information seeking behaviour of users and the reasons for under-utilisation of resources or services. Secondly, the capacities available to INASP and the country coordination teams and how these are best deployed.

It is recommended the following actions are undertaken:

- further study to investigate the reasons for under-utilisation of resources and services, in order to better understand how to overcome it;
- review options for managing or increasing staff capacity within INASP and within the countries.

In the meantime, the review also indicated some factors which have an impact on use and it is recommended that they are addressed by:

- supporting further promotion and awareness raising of activities, involving all stakeholders;
- minimising the impact of poor infrastructure by, e.g., encouraging optimum utilisation of the existing bandwidth;
- ensuring that recurring minor technical ('last click') problems such as changes in IP addresses and difficulties with passwords, do not prevent access to resources;
- building on existing local publishing / information dissemination and involve all countries in journal editor / publisher training through 'national' efforts, if possible adopting a training method that also builds pools of trainers;
- investigating whether developing additional services to support better subject-navigation would meet more needs and improve use.

4. Strengthening monitoring and evaluation

The need to enhance needs assessment, monitoring, and evaluation, in order to gain better insight into the use and effectiveness of the services offered and to identify emerging new needs was clearly demonstrated during the review process. The following actions are recommended:

- constitute a multi-stakeholder team from the wide PERI community to formulate appropriate indicators and measurement tools;
- encourage and support country efforts to measure usage and uses of PERI-supported activities. As part of this, disseminate existing studies and their methodologies so that such 'research' can begin.

5. Supporting progress towards sustainability

PERI is intended to provide initial support for countries to enhance research information, with the objective that the activities eventually become locally sustainable. In order to achieve this it is recommended that PERI:

- involves the research and scientific communities more strongly in the planning, implementation and assessment of PERI activities to ensure that they take more ownership;
- strengthens country capacities to develop a pool of local fund raisers, negotiators, advocates and trainers;
- where appropriate, PERI's current country-wide access policy is amended to accommodate a consortia paid access model.

Actions arising from the review

INASP will share the review report with the programme's stakeholders and consult with them in order to prioritise the recommendations. INASP and the country coordinating teams will then consider how these prioritised recommendations can best be addressed and will generate an action plan—including allocated responsibility for actions and implementation milestones—with the aim of maximising impact of the programme during its next phase.

About INASP

Enabling worldwide access to information and knowledge

The mission of INASP is to enable worldwide access to information and knowledge with particular emphasis on the needs of developing and transitional countries. Established in 1992, we work with partners around the world to encourage the creation and production of information, to promote sustainable and equitable access to information, to foster collaboration and networking and to strengthen local capacities to manage and use information and knowledge.

We act as an enabler, connecting worldwide information and expertise. Working through networks of partners, we aim to strengthen the ability of people in developing and transitional countries to access and contribute information, ideas and knowledge. In particular we seek to:

- improve access to scientific and scholarly information
- catalyse and support local publication and information exchange
- strengthen local capacities to manage and use information and knowledge
- foster in-country, regional and international cooperation and networking
- advise local organisations and agencies on ways to utilise information and publishing to achieve development goals.

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