

## Enhancing research uptake through communication, networking and capacity development



Research that involves local people provides greater value to them. Here, a community in Ghana shares local knowledge with local researchers about gender-related access to health services

The work of the Malaria Knowledge Programme (MKP) demonstrates excellent research practice and addresses a number of issues that are relevant to anyone undertaking research on development.

In 2003 the UK Department for International Development (DFID) produced a new research strategy that made key recommendations on development research. One of the strategy's most important points is that if development research is to have an impact, the way research is done should promote an enabling environment and make information accessible so that it is more likely to be adopted. This recognises that communication is an essential element of developing local capacity to generate and use good research.

Policy-making processes are complex and research is only one of many competing influences. The political and institutional context and relationships between different actors are central to the uptake of research. There are gaps in information flows between national and international researchers and policy makers. Different forms of communication are essential to making connections in a holistic and systemic way.

MKP's research programme demonstrates its commitment to strengthening information and communication flows, involving Southern researchers and institutions and creating international networks for the improvement of research communication. This work contributes to meeting the Millennium Development Goals of reducing child mortality (MDG 4), improving maternal health (MDG 5), combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases (MDG 6) and developing global partnerships for development (MDG 8).

The lessons drawn from the programme, as detailed in this paper, reflect many of the recommendations made by DFID and engage with the dynamics of research, policy making and practice.

### Key research lessons

Greater involvement between researchers, policy makers and end users in the whole research process leads to better management and use of knowledge, and to improved communication. Approaching development research communication in a holistic and systemic way is vital to engaging effectively with a wide range of audiences.

Research itself needs to help create an enabling environment for research uptake, through strengthening information flows, building relationships and strategic communication. Strengthening the capacity of Southern researchers and health workers through training and inclusion in research activities will have a direct impact on improving the quality of clinical practice.

Networking improves formal and informal opportunities to communicate research effectively and include different perspectives in the dialogue and analysis of the findings.



Provincial pharmacists learn about the administration of antimalarials in a rural village-based situation in Mozambique

## Lessons from the Malaria Knowledge Programme

### Translating and communicating findings is intrinsic to good research

Communication between academics, development policy makers, international media and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is generally weak. Very few developing countries have well connected research communities and many national researchers are cut off from international debates.

**Turning information and knowledge into action depends on translating and communicating research results quickly and clearly to all levels – policy makers, donors, health professionals and civil society – in the North and South.** Public access to research data is vital and the distribution of research results should be a central component of any research.

Different kinds of research require different kinds of communication approaches. The Malaria Knowledge Programme applies a variety of approaches to translate and communicate its multidisciplinary research, including establishing a 'common language' across the disciplines so that the translation of results comes about through shared understanding and is consistent. MKP disseminates its findings through journal articles, and through the mass media and web-based information services. Recently, Healthlink Worldwide has been working closely with MKP to repackage and disseminate research findings globally. Information sharing is easier between North-North networks but it is more of a challenge to reach Southern based practitioners and policy makers.

**Sharing research is, however, about more than just dissemination. Effective communication of research involves the construction of shared meaning and dialogue between different stakeholders.** This is why MKP also works to create environments where genuine discussion can take place. Forums where researchers can present findings and engage in a two-way dialogue with policy makers and donors are crucial to getting research into policy and practice.

Importantly, this includes local researchers sharing local knowledge with local policy makers. For example, district-level health workers in Ghana said they felt more confident to share research findings around gender-related use and access to health care for malaria with high-level government officials *after* they had carried out qualitative research at a local level.

### Networking improves opportunities to communicate research effectively

The environment in which research is communicated is critical and working in networks creates more promising opportunities – this can happen through chance encounters, sustained dialogue, establishing new ways of thinking and challenging assumptions.

A key message to come out of a recent high-level multinational meeting in London in which MKP participated, was that networking is a priority for strengthening capacity for research as it builds links and connections among people who have different perspectives. **Networking increases the capacity of people to share and communicate across regions and countries and encourages ownership and cooperation.** MKP has produced a model based on best practice that can be used to identify the main actors and processes needed for successful capacity-building programmes and to measure their impact. This is now being used by DFID and the Wellcome Trust.

A key outcome of a trans-disciplinary conference on Urban Malaria in Africa, convened by MKP in December 2004, was the creation of an Urban Malaria Network to encourage the continued sharing of research findings and identified gaps, experiences and opportunities. It is now likely that future work and

“Participation of local researchers in networks is an effective way of communicating results and including different perspectives”

progress around urban malaria will be shared more quickly and clearly through established channels of communication.

**Networking also makes communicating research more effective as channels for disseminating and communicating are already in place.** MKP communicates its own research findings through broader health and development networks. For example, a recent interactive lunchtime discussion hosted by Exchange, a networking and learning programme, addressed the social science and capacity-building aspects of MKP's work. Participants included policy makers, NGOs and scientists. The UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Malaria provides another already established forum for sharing findings and discussing the implications of MKP's research.

### Trans-disciplinary approaches are most effective in promoting enabling environments and for effective communication of results

A trans-disciplinary approach implies both natural and social scientists using scientific processes in combination with the participation of community representatives and local actors who have a role and stake in the solution of a particular problem.

In the case of malaria management, MKP has engaged a range of natural and social scientists, entomologists, laboratory clinicians, district-level health workers and community members in tackling the problem of malaria from a variety of perspectives. The various teams retain their specialised knowledge while building a common vision of malaria management. For example, MKP's entomology team looked at the breeding sites and behaviour of mosquitoes, considering technical ways to attack mosquito larvae and create a protective environment. A social science approach, meanwhile, looked at community-based understandings of how and if local people have the knowledge, resources and capacity to protect themselves against malaria.

**A key challenge when working across disciplines is to develop and adopt a common language across teams that allows for effective communication.** The various MKP teams have worked closely to understand each other's use of language and to refer to each other's work in those terms when necessary. This way of working allows for a unified communication of research results, and approaches the problem of malaria in a systemic way.

### Research that involves end users and that is relevant to local situations leads to better communication and uptake of research results

**Research that involves local people and that is relevant to their situation provides greater value to local people and shows greater success in identifying effective ways to improve their health.** One of the best predictors of translating research into practice is that practitioners and end users are linked to the research from the start. In Ghana, MKP trained and facilitated district-level health workers to take a central role in participatory and qualitative research of gender-related access and use of health care facilities for malaria. Using role play, drama, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, health workers and community members explored some of the main issues that prevent young children from receiving proper treatment. Initial signs are encouraging. In one village health care workers and community members worked together to set up a local health care insurance scheme to relieve some of the financial pressure on women, so that they may be more likely to take ill children for proper treatment.

Socio-economic determinants may be the most powerful influences on health and will vary according to each context, so each local situation must be dealt with according to its own experiences and influences. MKP research on local

“The programme made me realise that among my colleagues we had enormous experience and knowledge which when shared and channelled properly could be used for our utmost benefit”

Participant in the MKP research skills programme, Kumasi, Ghana



A local researcher in Mozambique interviews villagers to find out their reasons for attending formal health services

“The programme made me appreciate the central role that research plays in the daily management of our patients and the need to be abreast with current literature”

Participant in the MKP research skills programme, Kumasi, Ghana



A trained local community health educator in Mozambique teaches villagers how to take antimalarial tablets

“Looking back, the road has been turbulent but perseverance and the will to learn ... made the journey safe and enduring”

Participant in the MKP research skills programme, Kumasi, Ghana

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**www.healthlink.org.uk**  
Contact: Dr Imelda Bates  
Tel: +44 (0)151 705 3115  
Email: [ibates@liv.ac.uk](mailto:ibates@liv.ac.uk)

perceptions of the causes of pre-term labour in Malawi revealed that community members found formal health services difficult to access, unfriendly and ineffective in treating sexually transmitted infections. This led to many pregnant women treating their fevers and illnesses using traditional healers and remedies. The MKP research showed the need for locally relevant health communication in the community and at antenatal clinics that includes two-way dialogue on traditional concepts and treatment of illnesses. The research can provide guidelines for the Malawi government to be able to address these key issues.

### **An integral part of development research is strengthening Southern research capacity to set the agenda, carry out research, communicate and act on results.**

Southern research networks and Southern communities of practice need support to become stronger and more effective in defining their own research agenda, improve research knowledge management and use, and communicate results to policy makers, practitioners and civil society. **Facilitating the strengthening of Southern networks is also critical, so that Southern researchers, practitioners and policy makers share findings and challenge or reaffirm understandings.** This will contribute to the growth of an enabling environment, leading to better uptake of results.

MKP researchers integrate capacity building and training of staff at national, district and institutional level into all their programmes. For example, in Ghana, from 2000 to 2002 MKP facilitated a national training programme for laboratory staff and introduced a new way of looking after microscopes. Out of all 963 public sector technicians in all of Ghana's 205 public sector laboratories, 93% received training. This had a direct impact on practice. Within six months there were measurable improvements in the quality of test results.

A partnership between MKP and the teaching hospital in Kumasi, Ghana also helped facilitate the development of a critical mass of health professionals with research skills. In addition to identifying ways of improving clinical care, this programme has strengthened the research infrastructure in the hospital including establishing a very effective student-led peer-support group for researchers. And in a district-based project local workers carried out and analysed their own research, ultimately identifying and implementing strategies to improve women's access to malaria health care and treatment.

**These activities build the local-level research capacity that is critical if Southern institutions are to become effective in defining and executing their own research – an essential step in strengthening health systems.**