

Helping Southern research to reach a global audience

Media engagement helps share research from the Global South

Research can play a vital role in tackling the problems faced in the Global South and around the world. However, there is often a gap in knowledge about research amongst policymakers and the general public, especially of the research that is conducted in the Global South.

For the past three years INASP has been building on our work with researchers through the AuthorAID and Journals Online projects to help bring Southern research into the global and local media.

The world faces many challenges today, with climate change, health epidemics, changes in population distribution and violence. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight 17 far-reaching areas that need addressing.¹

Research - and policies and approaches built on research and evidence - can play an important



Women in Bangladesh are more empowered to seek healthcare for themselves and their children than they were in the past. This is the subject of one of the research press releases published by INASP as part of an initiative to increase the reach of Southern research.⁹

role in tackling the challenges faced by the world. However, much of the important research going on in the Global South is missing from discussions around the world and even from the countries that it takes place in.

It is important for researchers to know about other research from within a country, aligned with national priorities and needs and understanding of country context. This was one of the drivers beyond the development of the Journals Online (JOL) project,² which established eight regional

or national journal platforms for journals from the countries or regions (see box: The Journals Online project). Over the past two decades, these platforms have made a significant difference to the visibility of Southern researchers to other researchers around the world and also to their credibility.³

The need for wider reach

Beyond discovery by other researchers, however, there is a need to communicate research

“Thank you for your great works to develop the accessibility of NepJOL in UK, as well as other countries.”

- Geba Nath Nyaupane, TUCL, Nepal



findings to a wider audience, particularly in cases where the research has potentially important wider implications.⁴

This is a situation widely recognized by large journal publishers in the Global North and these publishers often invest in media relations staff to promote the research published in their journals. But small, scholar-led journals and Southern institutions do not have the same budgets to communicate research as large journals do and this is reflected in the level of coverage of research from around the world. Science journalists based in the UK, for example, report that it is much easier to discover the latest research from the US or from other countries in western Europe than it is to find interesting research stories from the Global South.⁵ The result is that good science going on in Africa, South Asia and Latin America is largely unreported and there can be an overall impression of little research going on in the Global South.

Recognizing the communication approaches of major, well-



A Media Interaction Session formed part of the Nepal Journals Online workshop that was held in Kathmandu in January 2016

resourced journal publishers and the resulting profile of the research communicated, in 2015 INASP embarked on a communications initiative to explore approaches to increasing media coverage of Southern research and share these approaches with partners.

This initiative took place in two stages, a year-long partnership with the media organization SciDev.Net and then two years working directly with JOL journals and local journalists.

Stage 1: Partnering with SciDev.Net

In 2015 INASP and SciDev.Net started a one-year collaboration to connect journalists from the media organization with relevant researchers from INASP's AuthorAID database (see box: The AuthorAID project). SciDev.Net has a large audience and high traffic and this work was intended to help bring Southern research from the AuthorAID network to a wider

The AuthorAID project

INASP's AuthorAID project is a global network that provides support, mentoring, resources and training for researchers in lower and middle income countries. INASP promotes equity by actively addressing the needs of both men and women across all our work and addressing issues of power within the research and knowledge system.

More information: www.authoraid.info

The Journals Online project

The Journals Online (JOL) project was established by INASP in the late 1990s to provide increased visibility, accessibility and quality of peer-reviewed journals published in developing countries so that the research outputs that are produced in these countries can be found, shared and used more effectively.

The first JOL platform was African Journals Online (AJOL), established as a pilot in 1998 and formally launched in 2000. Since 2005, AJOL has been managed independently by a team in South Africa and the platform now hosts over 500 journals. JOL platforms in Vietnam and the Philippines are also now managed locally. With the end of INASP's Strengthening Research and Knowledge Systems (SRKS) programme in March 2018, the JOLs in Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Central America and Mongolia are now also under local management.

More information: www.inasp.info/journalsonline



audience and also to increase awareness of AuthorAID itself in order to attract more mentors.

The project achieved several published articles featuring people from the AuthorAID network in SciDev.Net's "Spotlight" sections on the topics of climate change and mental health. [6] In addition, we jointly ran a competition that saw two researchers from the AuthorAID network trained in data journalism (see box: Visualizing

Uganda's best beans) and had input into several local events focused on aspects of research in Nepal, the Philippines and Nigeria.

However, there were several limitations to the impact of the collaboration with SciDev. The number of articles resulting from the collaboration was quite low and the project required significant time and resources from INASP. Probably due to the number of different people involved in the

two partner organizations and different expectations, the project resulted in specific outputs but not the wider changes in levels of contact with Southern researchers through AuthorAID as part of story gathering or in increased mentor numbers that we had envisaged at the start of this work.

Many of the stories that SciDev.Net were working on during this period had narrow remits (for example, the spotlight on climate

Visualizing Uganda's best beans

In 2012, Bruno Awai of Uganda's Makerere University teamed up with CGIAR, a global agriculture research partnership, to study how different bean varieties perform in different climatic conditions. He synthesized data from 358 farmers in two districts in Uganda. The two regions were nearly identical in terms of population, economies and their environment but with one crucial difference - rainfall.

The farmers in the two districts tracked the growth and harvest of 15 bean types over two growing seasons in terms of robustness, yield and marketability. They reported additional data on fertiliser use, weather conditions and bean sales. Farmers were also asked to mark the desirability of the beans and this was compared to scientific findings to rate the beans overall. Most importantly the bean was tested for its ability to prosper in the dramatically changing climate affecting the region.

In February 2016 Bruno, who knew INASP thanks to participating in an AuthorAID online research writing course, heard about the data visualization competition held by INASP in collaboration with SciDev.Net and realized that the bean datasets would benefit from visualization.

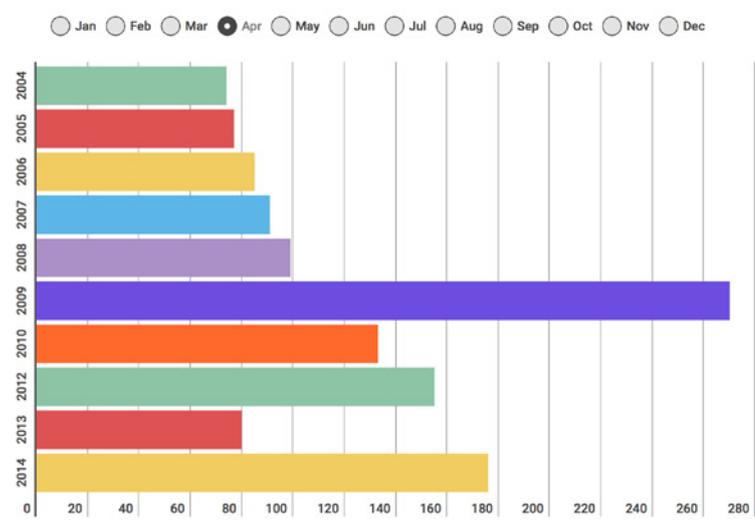
His data was chosen as one of the two datasets developed and visualized and the dataset was published on the SciDev.Net site in March 2016, attracting more than 9,000 unique page views.¹³

The findings of Bruno's research which have now been circulated worldwide, provide farmers in Uganda and elsewhere in the region with the technical information to decide which crops to grow rather than relying on price and market availability. Bruno hopes that the visualized dataset will demonstrate to the farmers how their input into the research has helped.

- In addition to Bruno's dataset, the SciDev.Net team also worked with Deependra Poul to apply data visualization techniques to his dataset relating to solar water heating in Bhutan. The visualized dataset¹⁴ attracted around 4,500 unique page views and his story is shared in an INASP Stories @ INASP article.¹⁵



Rainfall in Rakai district (in mm)





Journal editors and journalists made connections and shared information during a Media Interaction Session during a Nepal Journals Online workshop in Kathmandu in January 2016

change had a specific focus on “examples of science contributing to mitigation and/or adaptation in tandem with development challenges in Malawi, Nigeria or Sierra Leone”). This tight remit meant that it was relevant for only a handful of researchers on the AuthorAID network. In addition, many in the AuthorAID network are early-career researchers so have not published much and may not feel in a position to be interviewed as ‘experts’ on a topic.

Stage 2: Direct connections with local journalists

The project with SciDev.Net provided valuable insight for INASP in how to refine and develop media engagement in order to provide greater exposure to Southern research and increased connection with Southern partners. In particular, we recognized that the journals on the JOL platforms are more appropriate sources of research stories than individual researchers within the AuthorAID database.

In parallel with the SciDev.Net collaboration we had sporadically promoted published research in JOL journals to tie in with international themed days (see, for example, INASP blog posts summarizing recent Southern research into cancer⁷ and HIV⁸, with corresponding tweets providing more information about the research). We saw the opportunity to formalize this approach and replicate in a small way the media engagement activities of major publishers in the Global North.

Key to our approach in this second phase was the recruitment of local journalists as consultants, beginning in Nepal. In January 2016, as part of a wider training workshop for editors on the NepJOL platform we ran a media interaction session, where we invited Nepali journalists to meet with the journal editors and talk about how they gather stories and find out about the research being published in these journals. This interaction session was very successful and this led to a conclusion that there is a lack of

coordination between journalists and journal editors in which INASP can play a role in bringing them together.

Following this session, we recruited for a journalist based in Nepal to work with us as a consultant. The general approach was that he, along with the Communications Officer at INASP, looked through the latest issues of journals on the NepJOL platform and selected articles where the research could have broader appeal. He then interviewed the authors of those articles to create press releases, which, following checks and reviews, were distributed by INASP to journalists both directly⁹ and via the Alpha Galileo press release distribution service,¹⁰ where each press release is distributed to approximately 4,000 journalists. In addition, he translated the press releases into Nepali and distributed them to journalists within the country.

Following successful implementation in Nepal, we used a similar approach in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, initially

“I am so glad and happy to see my article as press release. Thank you so much for selecting my article.” Dr Manju Shrestha, Nepal



with the same journalist who we already worked with in Nepal but then making a connection with another journalist in Bangladesh. We also looked at overlap with another initiative to support communications activities of the JOL platforms.¹¹ This overlap is strongest in the case of Sri Lanka, where a new communications team at the National Science Foundation, which manages Sri Lanka Journals Online (SLJOL), will build on both these areas of work beyond the involvement of INASP.

In total, 37 research press releases have been written and disseminated as a result of the

press release work (21 Nepal, 10 Bangladesh, and six Sri Lanka). Together, these press releases have generated at least 150 articles in magazines, newspapers and websites worldwide. Topics covered have included air pollution from cooking techniques, tiger conservation and HIV risks for migrant workers (See box: Research snapshot).

Beyond the numbers showing the quantitative reach of these stories, we have seen positive feedback from authors and signs of wider engagement. For example, in response to an article about limitations in the

diagnosis of autism in Sri Lanka, we received an email from a parent of an autistic child in the country agreeing with the findings and interested to talk to the researchers. In response to research from Bangladesh about girls missing school during menstruation we saw social media discussions about similarities with situations in India. And a photojournalist from the internationally well-known National Geographic magazine contacted one environmental researcher in Nepal for inclusion in an in-depth feature as a result of seeing one of the press releases.

Research snapshot

Nepal on target to double tiger population by 2022

The wild tiger population in the world has declined by more than 98% in the past 200 years. However, a research article published in Nepal's forestry journal *Banko Janakari* shows that Nepal is on track to achieve its target of doubling its tiger population by 2022.

Nepal had only 121 tigers when it signed the 'St. Petersburg Declaration on Tiger Conservation' in 2010, according to Nepal's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. The 2013 Tiger Census, released in 2014, estimated that the tiger population was 198 in 2013.

"It is interesting and good news that the tiger population in [Bardia National Park] increased from 18 in 2009 to 50 in 2013," says Dr Jhamak Bahadur Karki, lead author of the research article and Associate Professor of Kathmandu Forestry College (KAFCOL), Kathmandu.

"Tiger conservation is very important both from an ecological and a national economic point of view. Tourist numbers can be increased and national economy supported if the tiger population is increased."



Slum children face high risk of diarrhoea in Nepal

Children living in the slums of Nepal's small hill towns are at significant risk of diarrhoea, according to research published in the *Journal of Lumbini Medical College*. Of the 450 children under five years of age living in the slums of the Tansen municipality in the Palpa district (250 kilometres west of Nepal's capital Kathmandu) 40% were found to have suffered from diarrhoea in the previous three months.

The research found that the risk of diarrhoea was much less for children who had been exclusively breast-fed for six months. Nutrition, the source and treatment of drinking water, hand washing practice and family income were other variables related to diarrhoea in the slums. Interestingly, the research found that children drinking natural-source spring water had a lower risk of diarrhoea than children drinking water from a Government-supplied source.



Research snapshot

Indoor air pollution puts women of rural Bangladesh at risk of pulmonary diseases

Medical research carried out in Bangladesh has linked the high prevalence of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) among women of rural Bangladesh to wide use of biomass for cooking in poorly ventilated kitchens.

The study looked at 250 women over 40 years of age living in five Upazillas (sub-districts) in Chittagong, Bangladesh. Most of the households in the study area used biomass, which included wood, cow dung and charcoal, for cooking while some used natural gas or LPG (liquefied petroleum gas). The prevalence of COPD among women using biomass was significantly higher (16.4%) than women using LPG (4%).



Traditional cooking burner (Chula) for biomassfuel in rural areas of Bangladesh

Research paints grim picture of domestic violence against women in Nepal's lowlands

Nepal has one of the highest rates of domestic violence against women in the world as it is just emerging from its strong patriarchal past.

Research, carried out by Shree Shyam Giri, Jitendra Kumar Singh, Radheshyam Giri, Lalan Kumar Jha and Sushil K Yadav, showed that alcohol abuse, a patriarchal mindset of the society, polygamy, sexual dissatisfaction and misunderstandings over dowry were the chief causes behind domestic violence against women.

“We are happy and grateful to you for picking up our research topic for such press release.” Prof. Nanda Bdr. Singh, Central Department of Zoology, Tribhuvan University, Nepal

Designing for potential continuation

As INASP's Strengthening Research and Knowledge Systems (SRKS) programme draws to a close in March 2018 and the JOL platforms become fully managed locally, this initiative is coming to an end. However, we hope that the relationships established

within countries between local journalists and the JOL managers and editors will remain. The INASP Handbook for Journal Editors¹² provides a complete section on promoting journals, including guidance on writing and sharing press releases, and INASP has developed slides for editors that share the process that we used in this initiative.

Looking to the future, there is potential to develop an online course module on the topic of communicating research to the media, which could form part of the work with researchers through AuthorAID and also ongoing engagement with journal editors on journal quality. INASP is also interested to explore other opportunities to build on this work in the future.

“Thank you and the author for the efforts in studying this and publishing [research into autism diagnosis]. We truly hope that your efforts will somehow enable many other children in Sri Lanka and the world over to cope with, improve and provide better services to children like ours. If there is any way we could contribute to your efforts we would be glad to assist while hoping for a better future for our son.” Parent, Sri Lanka



Lessons learnt:

- Producing press releases of Southern research increases exposure to this research
- Working with local journalists brings benefits for building local links; local journalists have much greater awareness of the media landscape in their country and can translate and distribute to local media and it could potentially be sustainable in-country beyond the lifetime of involvement of an organization such as INASP
- Use of a press release distribution service was highly effective at reaching around the world and takeup of stories was high, suggesting an appetite for greater availability of interesting research stories from the Global South
- The model for how to do this has been demonstrated and is being shared with JOL partners
- Clear expectations are important: much of the effectiveness of this type of work depends on the individuals and organizations involved and clear communication of goals
- More could have been done to improve the likelihood of effective handover of the work at the end of the initiative; the three countries involved in the second phase of this work are at different stages in their communications plans and also their budgets and other resources for future work
- Working with another international organization risks a low involvement of Southern voices and, in the case discussed here with SciDev.Net, did not result in a longer-term relationship with INASP's projects as a source of Southern research news

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